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THE CHALLENGES OF CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN FICTION: THE TROPE OF
FAILURE

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Abstract

My study challenges the understanding of postmodernism as a socially disengaged practice by examining the category of failure in contemporary American fiction. Failure resonates with poststructural theory, evokes historical traumas, and confronts dominant cultural, aesthetic, and political discourses. Failure is essential—although thus far unrecognized in American literary theory—to American culture and letters as much as is the American Dream. Failure, in other words, is sometimes useful. The fiction of “failure” is characterized by seemingly happy endings that reintroduce the simmering problems typical for the U.S. cultural and political space but also announce a possibility of renewal. The dissertation shows that the recent critical discussion about the “death of postmodernism” stems from an attempt to reach a historical closure—especially in the period following the Cold War and 9/11—and from understanding postmodernism as a practice disinterested in the social, political, and cultural. To investigate that theoretical premise, I pay particular attention to the works of Kathy Acker, Junot Díaz, Don DeLillo, and Jonathan Franzen.

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Introduction: Failure as a Redemptive Force

My study challenges the understanding of postmodernism as a socially disengaged practice by examining the category of failure in contemporary American fiction. Failure resonates with poststructural theory, evokes historical traumas, and confronts dominant cultural, aesthetic, and political discourses. Failure is essential—although thus far unrecognized in American literary theory—to American culture and letters as much as is the American Dream. Failure, in other words, is sometimes useful. The fiction of “failure” is characterized by seemingly happy endings that reintroduce the simmering problems typical for the U.S. cultural and political space but also announce a possibility of renewal. The dissertation shows that the recent critical discussion about the “death of postmodernism” stems from an attempt to reach a historical closure—especially after the Cold War and 9/11—and from understanding postmodernism as a practice disinterested in the social, political, and cultural. To investigate that theoretical premise, I pay particular attention to the works of Kathy Acker, Junot Díaz, Don DeLillo, and Jonathan Franzen.

Such a literary approach is particularly informed by my Eastern European upbringing and education that allow me to understand American literature and culture from a unique perspective of, as I call it, the inside-outsider position. I have always liked the literature of my native country, and even more the work of Dostoyevsky, Chekhov, and Harms, whose intellect, lyricism, and wit made me mope around in an effort to resolve human unhappiness. I was a good enough reader of the Russians and the Slavs to understand that such an ambition was futile, which did not particularly upset me until I discovered American literature and started to pay

more attention to Hollywood movies. The first book I have ever read in English was J.D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye*. I did not understand any of the slang, but since I was 13, the book spoke to me emotionally and, more importantly, mesmerized me with its ending. It was hard to imagine sensitive Holden at the psychiatric ward, but there was a promise of a better future, and he hinted he believed in it. After all, it was the adults and their compromised world that almost broke Holden. When he gets out, he will change everything. There is still a happy ending, even though it is projected into the future. The movies I watched were also full of hope, always ended happily and, equally important, had a strong minded heroine (Katherine Hepburn, Bette Davis, Audrey Hepburn). Even *Gone with the Wind*, which I did not particularly like and never saw in its entirety because of its length, culminates in a triumphant promise of hope and a bright future. Unlike the Slavic authors who made me worried, American artists were pragmatic; they knew how one should make sense of his life and break the circle of the social, political, and cultural restrictions. Therefore, I came to the U.S. to study American literature.

But somehow in the process of achieving my own American Dream, I realized that the U.S. is far from the promised country of Rocky Balboa, that not all Americans are tall, blond, and beautiful, that it does matter that my English is accented and that I am a woman, and that there is quite a good reason why the only film I saw back home with an African American actor was Sidney Poitier's British production of *To Sir, With Love*. Behind every success story I discovered a history of failure that, frequently, had nothing to do with personal traits of the person's failure. The combination of politics, history, and social circumstances led to failure more often than to success. And yet, my American acquaintances, friends, and professors rarely acknowledged failure, masking it with the rhetoric about the expected, and almost needed, problems one must encounter on his path to individual and professional achievement. And that,

to me, was as interesting as reading the happy ending of *The Catcher in the Rye* more than a decade earlier. I saw failure embodied in American culture and literature, and made it the subject of my professional study.

Failure is a fracture of a structure; it is associated with catastrophic outcomes, and encapsulates in itself both a danger and an assessment. Failure expresses in itself a critique (how can things be improved?) but also a danger of an imminent disaster (everything will go wrong!). Unlike critics of American literature who in the 1960s and the 1970s saw in failure an aesthetic and ethical assessment category and therefore measured literary works by the level of their literary accomplishment, I am interested in failure as a category that allows me to examine the relationship between literature and historical, social, and political contexts. In other words, although “failure” has been discussed in American literary theory, its discussion has been limited to evaluative judgments of individual authors and characterizations of entire movements or periods as failures. For example, Andre Bleikasten, who titled his study from 1976 *The Sound and the Fury: The Most Splendid Failure*, refers to Faulkner’s evaluation of his novel. Faulkner mentioned in an interview, when asked to name his best book, that *The Sound and the Fury* was his “splendid failure” on which he worked the hardest but also failed “the most tragically.” Bleikasten analyzes the novel he admires highly in light of the author’s remark, and suggests that its complexity and formal and linguistic experimentation, although aesthetically accomplished, might seem to Faulkner as a “humanistic” failure. Jacob Slatoff in his *Quest for Failure: A Study of William Faulkner* introduces a similar idea. Edward Brunner in *Splendid Failure: Hart Crane and the Making of the Bridge* writes about Crane’s literary failure regarding his *oeuvre* and suggests that Crane’s unaccomplished poems can be credited as much to Crane’s hectic life as to his overly ambitious poetic goals. Andrew Ross, in *The Failure of Modernism*, recognizes a

philosophical flaw of the period. He argues that “the theoretical will of modernism failed because it dismantled notions of transcendental self, but still clung to totalitarian models of authority” (Palattella 182). While the modernist poets dismantled the language, and therefore the self expressed within it, authors such as T.S. Eliot, Charles Olson, and John Ashbery embraced reactionary politics. My dissertation recognizes this history, but with a postmodern and poststructuralist difference that allows me to see failure as a category that reveals the dominant concerns and problems of contemporary American society.¹

Failure has not been of interest for historians either. Scott Sandage writes that as late as 1975, renowned business scholar Alfred D. Chandler, Jr. claimed that studying failure would not be a successful enterprise. Social historians pay attention mostly to businessmen and the ways in which they effectively accumulate wealth, while cultural historians analyze consumerism instead of the American inability to act in accordance with the capitalist expectations. Sandage, on the contrary, writes a history of born losers, “the misfits of capitalism” (5), and analyses a century and a half long process during which the term that designated specifically a financial bankruptcy turned into a personal identity category. Sandage claims that “in early America, fear of failure loomed largest on Sunday. Monday morning dawned about the year 1800” (11). Those who were born losers could not act upon the American Dream because of their character flaws: “men who were failures simply lacked ability, ambition, or both; what had once been said of the captives of slavery now belittled the misfits of capitalism” (18). By the end of the Civil War, failure became

¹ For more about failure understood as an evaluative category see: Patricia Rae. *Modernism and Mourning*. Bucknell UP, 2007.; Katherine Hume. *American Dream, American Nightmare: Fiction since 1960*. Urbana: U of Illinois Press, 2000.; Berry Chabot. *Writers for the Nation: American Literary Modernism*. Tuscaloosa: U of Alabama P, 1997.; Jon Auerbach. *The Romance of Failure: First-Person Fictions of Poe, Hawthorne, and James*. Cambridge: Oxford UP, 1989.; Richard Weisberg. *The Failure of the Word: The Protagonist as Lawyer in Modern Fiction*. Yale UP, 1984.; Carolyn Jane. *Patrick White's Fiction: the Paradox of Fortunate Failure*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1986.

a shameful characteristic that indicated both financial and personal inability. However, failure now marked both women and African Americans, and not exclusively white businessmen. The democratization of the U.S. society expanded, in a rather negative context, the applicability of the category. The term that in the early American days had a strictly religious connotation and referred to one's fall out of God's grace became a horrifying personal trait that nowadays resonates in the sentence "I am a failure." The Puritans understood success as "evidence of God's giving of justification to mankind through Christ's virtue, as well as proof of men's sanctification of that gift through their virtuous thoughts and deeds" (Banta 178), while 19th century Americans identified failure as a personal characteristic that is an outcome of a financial collapse. To be a failure means not only not to succeed in the accumulation of capital, but also to be unworthy of such an accomplishment. Therefore Sandage argues—and this is the point that overlaps with my study—that failure is a foundation of the American Dream, not its dark side. Failure can help us understand the essence of American history and identity.

More recently, John Michael in *Identity and the Failure of America* introduced a rather grim argument regarding failure and American identity politics. For him, identity politics have been marked by failure since the establishment of the Republic, and continue to be compromised by the contemporary government's presence in countries such as Afghanistan and Iraq. The country that Jefferson defined as an empire for liberty developed into an imperialistic power, without resolving its basic conflict. The discrepancy between the foundational ideals of the U.S. and the practice of those standards brings about failure whose end Michael cannot foresee. He writes that:

In discourse, at least, the United States remains the land of opportunity, the home of the free, the world's greatest democracy. In reality, the history and legacy of exclusion,

oppression, and disenfranchisement of blacks, women, and the poor indicate the nation's failure to fulfill its promise. The peculiarity of identity in the United States emerges in the contestations between those prescribed identities, the injustices they have born, and a national identity promising justice to all. (3)

Such a pessimistic outcome, according to Michael, is a consequence of the nation's claims to universalism and the claims to particular identities that, in fact, represent the U.S.'s failure to realize its foundational principles. Michael points out that the U.S. is not the only country that did not succeed in reaching the ideals of justice and equality, although it is unique in the fact that the failure of those goals defines its national identity: "for no other nation does that failure to negotiate just relationships with diverse identities entail a crisis on the most fundamental level of the national identity itself" (13). Michael recognizes in the history of the U.S. an unsolvable clash between the communal and the individual, between the outcasts who are supposedly given the absolute rights in the country that even today tries to banish them. Although he refuses to discuss the American Dream, the defining element of the American identity is actually the attempt to reconcile the American Dream and its failure. For my analysis, that is the starting point. Unlike Michael, who is utterly pessimistic about both the history and the U.S. role in contemporary society, I acknowledge that despite all the flaws, the U.S. is still one of the most desired immigrant countries, and the world super-power. As I understand it, failure in American literature and culture coexists with success inscribed in the American Dream, while the novels I analyze are written in an effort to expose the failed practices and suggest the ways in which the betterment of the entire society can be achieved. The novels culminate in happy endings which, although do not challenge the status quo of the narrative world, reveal the authors' desire for a U.S. defined exclusively by success.

The trope of failure is paradoxical; it is ahistorical and yet it is always associated with certain historical periods, events, and movements, or even attempts of social revolutions. It is also characterized by something that I call a “temporal conflict”; since failure contains in itself a critique and a danger, it is simultaneously concerned with the past and with the future. Therefore, it is possible to use the trope in order to conduct synchronic and chronological readings of literature as well as cross-national and cross-cultural analysis, which I demonstrate analyzing (in chronological order of their publishing dates): *Empire of the Senseless* (1988) by Acker, *Underworld* (1997) by DeLillo, *The Corrections* (2001) by Franzen, and *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* (2007) by Díaz.

The books I analyze are not approached as examples of failure—and especially not as examples of aesthetic or ethical failure—but as texts that represent and discuss a failure. My intention is as well to analyze failure regarding postmodernism, using these novels as examples. I contend that failure is central to American postmodernism, as well as to American culture. Moreover, my analysis shows that postmodernism is not—contrary to the prevalent theoretical assumption—a socially disengaged practice. Addressing the political, social, and cultural failures typical for the U.S., postmodern authors position themselves as critics of the contemporary times. Consequently, with their texts, the authors participate in the public debate about pressing issues such as racism, feminism, and immigration.

Postmodernism has been, supposedly, dead for more than two decades. It died because of its seemingly purposeless stylistic plays and a lack of social engagement. In 1990, Andy Grundberg wrote for the *New York Times* that “As It Must to All, Death Comes to Post-Modernism.” This death was induced by artists and dealers (!) who were “bemoaning a lack of clear direction and purpose in contemporary art” (par 2). A year later, Frederick Jameson

recognized in postmodernism a bleak death of the individual subject, which, in fact, “means the end of much more—the end, for example, of style, in the sense of the unique and the personal, the end of the distinctive individual brush stroke (as symbolized by the emergent primacy of mechanical reproduction)” (15). In *Politics of Postmodern*, Linda Hutcheon declared that “it’s over” (166), even though “its discursive strategies and its ideological critique continue to live on—as do those of modernism—in our contemporary twenty-first century world” (181). Furthermore, Robert Rebein in his *Hicks, Tribes, and Dirty Realists: American Fiction After Postmodernism* argues that not only was postmodernism’s “primary home . . . the university” because of its metaphysical fiction that presupposes an extremely educated reader, but also that postmodernism was defined by its essential passivity, “its impotence in the act of representation, its failure to engage social conditions, its escape into the metaphysical” (11). Realism, expectedly, takes postmodernism’s place. Josh Toth and Neil Brooks, in their introduction to the collection *The Mourning After: Attending the Wake of Postmodernism*, recognize postmodernism as failure as well. They note that postmodernism failed for two reasons: because of its celebration of individualism, and because of its “socially irresponsible cultural trend” (8). On the one hand, its demise is caused by “its self-affirmation as an anti-ideological discourse, a discourse that privileged individualism and solipsism over the illusion of communal bonds, religious faith, and the possibility of communication” (Toth and Brooks 6). Postmodernism “marked a withdrawal from public and/or social discourse” (Toth and Brooks 6), as well as “a vacuous and in-effectual aesthetic of the elite. It is, after all, the ‘elitism’ of postmodernism that most critics identify as its most glaring failure” (Toth and Brooks 7). Although similar to Hutcheon, the authors of the collection recognize the historical legacy of postmodernism that cannot be denied, and they claim that the wake of postmodernism actually suggests a “work of

getting over the apparent hegemony of postmodernism” (7). A new step, therefore, they recognize in neo-realism, the only style that can successfully respond to the times of “rampant fundamentalism, moral righteousness, and political conservatism” (11).

Their harsh statements about the failure of postmodernism are confusing for at least three reasons. To acknowledge that postmodernism has never been a hegemonic practice, one should remember Raymond Carver’s stories, or Amy Tan’s writing. Postmodernism might have been the most visible practice but it hardly reached the status of cultural hegemony. The lists of the fiction Pulitzer Prize and National Books Critics Circle winners include rather traditional authors, whose postmodern strategies most often do not exceed a broken narrative or a non-linear time-line. Moreover, it is problematic to assume that postmodernism provided a utopian view in the time before the fall of the Berlin Wall and the end of the Cold War, but that it cannot equally successfully combat the post-Cold War reality. It is not clear why a book written in the manner of Robert Coover’s *Public Burning*—which is, it must be added, an extremely political book—could not provide a powerful commentary on the current politics and culture. Finally, the author’s assumption about the contemporary moment as the ultimate apocalyptic times that need harsher literary representations is as much inaccurate as it is nostalgic. The U.S. has always been (at least according to historical records) marked by her religious fundamentalism, racism, and xenophobia, which Michael at length discusses in his monograph. What Toth and Brooks oversee is the change in political emphasis: if in the 1970s and 1980s the NATO/Warsaw Pact dichotomy marked American politics and helped form the American identity, in the 1990s and 2000s it became apparent that the U.S. refocused on its domestic issues, mostly because the pressing international issues had been solved. Once communism died, and the world’s binary opposition was dismantled, the U.S. was seemingly left alone to reclaim its dominance in the

contemporary world. The change on the international scene, although desired for decades, was received somewhat reluctantly and it is doubtful that issues with the new, national identity and the fundamental crisis can be either attributed to or solved by postmodernism (or realism) solely.

Andrew Hoberek recently said that “declarations of postmodernism’s demise have become a critical commonplace” (233). The title of his essay recalls the title of Rebein’s book, “After Postmodernism.” And yet, postmodernism continues to live. Authors such as Jonathan Safran Foer, Don DeLillo, Sherman Alexi, Aleksandar Hemon, Jonathan Lethem, Michael Chabon, Toni Morrison, and David Foster Wallace continue to write within postmodern poetics. Hoberek recognizes in this discrepancy between literary practice and theory three interwoven problems. First, he claims, to insist on the demise of postmodernism is to perpetuate the hierarchical view of culture “that confuses aesthetic questions about literary form with sociological ones about the constituency for such form” (233). Second, that view reveals the assumption, introduced in modernism and carried over to postmodernism, that serious literature needs to be stylistically innovative. Since, for instance, Jonathan Franzen and John Updike revisit realism, their books must signal the end of postmodernism. Third, adds Hoberek, the supposed end of postmodernism signals the “inherently progressive and conflictual” (234) understanding of literary history, which obscures the circumstances of postmodernists’ emergence and the state of contemporary fiction. According to Hoberek, scholars who favor pre- and modernist writing to postmodern, root their argument in the historical periodization of literature. But, by doing so, they also unintentionally show that their models are “now-outmoded predecessors” (Hoberek 234) of postmodernism.

Hoberek does not question the waning influence of postmodernism, and makes an effort to explain the theoretical reasons behind such an understanding of the contemporary moment. On the contrary, I would say that postmodernism has not died; it is a literary practice that exists parallel with (neo)realism. If in the 1970s and 1980s it was a dominant literary practice, in the last two decades it lost its novelty which in literary criticism, somewhat overstated, is recognized as its end. Even the very fact that our present is marked by the simultaneous existence of different literary poetics points back to postmodernity. It seems that the critics who recognize in the contemporary moment the death of postmodernism actually combine three different understandings of postmodernism, which allows them to reach such a conclusion. Those three discussions are interconnected, although sometimes contradictory. The first one refers to postmodernism as epistemological, and is focused on the history of ideas and the history of Western thought (Jacques Derrida, Jürgen Habermas, Jean-François Lyotard). The second one sees postmodernism as a socio-political occurrence typical for the period after the Second World War (Jameson, Huyssen, Andrew Ross); while the third discussion understands postmodernism as an aesthetic typical for the post-1945 period, recognizable in all the art disciplines (Barbara Kruger, Cindy Sherman, Thomas Pynchon, Kurt Vonnegut).² Since the advocates of the death of postmodernism do not find the theoretical understandings of postmodernism pertinent to the

² These three approaches to postmodernism examines in detail Amy Elias. For more details, see: Amy Elias. *The Sublime Desire: History and Post-1960 Fiction*. Baltimore: The John Hopkins UP, 2001. xvii-xxvii. For more about postmodernism, see: Stephen Baker. *The Fiction of Postmodernity*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2000.; Mark Bevir, ed at al. *Histories of Postmodernism*. London: Routledge, 2007. Michael Berube. "Teaching Postmodern Fiction Without Being Sure that the Genre Exists." *Chronicle of Higher Education* 19 May 2000: B4-5.; Bill Brown. "The Dark Wood of Postmodernity (Space, Faith, Allegory)." *PMLA* 120.3 (2005): 734-50. Gerhard Hoffmann. *From Modernism to Postmodernism: Concepts and Strategies of Postmodern American Fiction*. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2005.; Kathryn Hume. *American Dream, American Nightmare: Fiction since 1960*. Urbana: U of Illinois P, 2000.; Linda Hutcheon. *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction*. New York: Routledge, 1988.; Brian McHale. *Postmodern Fiction*. London: Routledge, 1987.; Helen Boweb Raddeker. *Sceptical History: Feminist and Postmodern Approaches in Practice*. London: Routledge, 2007.; Klaus Stierstorfer. *Beyond Postmodernism: Reassessments in Literature, Theory, and Culture*. Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2003.; Bernhard Hoffmann. *From Modernism to Postmodernism: Concepts and Strategies of Postmodern American Fiction*. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2005.

moment, they recognize the diminishing of postmodernism as a style, despite the obvious presence of works that are written in the postmodern manner (e.g. Safran Foer). I, however, understand postmodernism as a period, whose beginning is marked by the end of the World War II.

More importantly for this project, I contend that postmodernism has not been a socially disengaged practice. Such an understanding of postmodernism stems from Jameson's claim about its lost historicity, as well as from his recognition of pastiche as the quintessential postmodern characteristic. For Jameson, unlike irony that contains in itself a critique of the mimicked element, pastiche is "devoid of laughter and of any conviction . . . it is thus blank parody, a statue with blind eyeballs" (18). Since postmodernism is marked by pastiche, it is, therefore, socially and culturally indifferent. And since we live in the moment that requires our immediate positioning toward political and cultural issues, postmodernism and postmodern writing is unable to provide a template for any social engagement. That is, however, not accurate. More than two decades ago, Andreas Huyssen noted the postmodern interest in ecology, feminism, and non-European, non-Western cultures. American fiction after the Second World War expanded to include the ethnic and gender complexity of the U.S. (e.g. Tan, Erdrich, Morrison, Maya Angelou, Chang-Rae Lee, Maxine Hong Kingston). One also needs to remember that in Eastern Europe during the 1960s and 1970s, postmodern writing was an alternative to the dominant soc-realism poetics and it was extremely political. For instance, Danilo Kiš, who became a part of the *The New York Review of Books* circle and Susan Sontag's protégé, was forced into exile from his native Yugoslavia. Not only was his work recognized as plagiarism because he appropriated historical texts and archival materials, but he was also seen

as a dangerous “element” who undermined the values of the social revolution.³ Postmodernism, in other words, is and can be politically and socially engaged. I support that claim in the dissertation by examining the category of failure that reveals the authors’ concerns for contemporary politics and culture.

The category of failure is especially productive for criticism and theory because it a) challenges the distinction between national and ethnic literatures (e.g. problems of immigration assimilation), b) destabilizes the established notions of historical periods (e.g., modernism and postmodernism), c) problematizes genre classifications and, d) encourages interdisciplinary studies. Although American literary criticism about failure has been plentiful, so far only John Ochoa and Ewa Plonowska Ziarek have been interested in examining the connection between failure and literature, and failure and theory respectively. Ochoa examines failure in relationship with Mexican identity. While he insists on texts that contain the precise moment of failure, and therefore are “surprised by their own failure” (Ochoa 7), I find particularly interesting texts that reminisce about failure and reveal, for instance, historical traumas or challenge the dominant cultural myths. Also, Ochoa insists that failure, since it embodies in itself both a critique of a particular event and a catastrophe, opens a possibility for reinvention and renewal. My analysis will show that American post-World War II fiction offers no possibility for such a renewal but in the future, which is why the analyzed novels culminate in happy endings.

Ziarek, on the other hand, in her *Rhetoric of Failure: Deconstruction of Skepticism, Reinvention of Modernism*, discusses the reinterpretation of skepticism in the works of Stanley

³ See, for instance: Andrew Wachtel. “The Legacy of Danilo Kis in Post-Yugoslav Literature.” *Slavic and East European Journal* 50:1(2006): 135-49.; Vladimir Zoric: “The Poetics of Legend: The Paradigmatic Approach to Legend in Danilo Kis’s A Tomb for Boris Davidovich.” *Modern Language Review* 100:1 (2005):161-184.; Svetlana Boym. “Conspiracy Theories and Literary Ethics: Umberto Eco, Danilo Kis and The Protocols of Zion.” *Comparative Literature* 51:2 (1999): 97-122.; Susan Sontag. “Danilo Kis.” *Partisan Review* 62:3 (1999): 372-75. In 1994, the special issue of *The Review of Contemporary Fiction* (14:1) was dedicated to Kiš.

Cavell, Ludwig Wittgenstein, Jacques Derrida, and Emmanuel Levinas. She also traces the affinity between poststructuralist discourse and modern aesthetics, especially in the works of Franz Kafka, Samuel Beckett, and Witold Gombrowicz. She claims that her focus on the critical revision of skepticism in poststructuralism makes it “possible to move past the endless discussions of the impasse of postmodernity” (Ziarek 7). Moreover, “the reconceptualization of skepticism in poststructuralist discourse is not just motivated by a failure of knowledge and representation; rather, it is intertwined with a critique of subject-centered reason and with subsequent conceptualization of language beyond the ‘exhausted’ paradigm of the subject” (Ziarek 7). Ziarek notes that the focus on the deconstruction of skepticism severs the bond between the failure of the specific claim to knowledge and the conclusion about the impossibility of knowledge. Paying a particular attention to rhetoric, she reveals “a shift from the negative epistemological consequences of linguistic inabilities to the emphatic affirmation of the other of reason and the other of the subject” (Ziarek 3). I, however, point out the theoretical potential of the trope of failure, with the help of poststructuralist theory and associate it with the concept of postmodernism.

Michel Foucault, in particular, showed the interconnectedness between the text and the structures of political and social power inscribed in it. The concept of the panopticon, which he introduced in *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, I find extremely useful when analyzing failure in the contemporary American novel. Foucault argues that the panopticon “makes any apparatus of power more intense: it assures its efficacy by its preventive character, its continuous functioning and its automatic mechanisms” (206). The novels I analyze are written in an attempt to challenge such “exercise of power” (Foucault 209) and expose its flaws. In addition, Deleuze and Guattari’s rhizomes, “an acentered, nonhierarchical, nonsignifying system

without a General and without an organizing memory or central automaton, defined solely by a circulation of states” (21), demonstrate that knowledge is multiple and non-hierarchical. Since rhizome always pertains to a map that “has multiple entryways and exits and its own lines of flight” (21), it helps me draw *my* map of the contemporary American novel despite analyzing novels whose poetics are often divergent.

In an attempt to scrutinize the trope of failure and its theoretical importance, I analyze the consequences of failure and not its precise moment, while considering the novels’ attempts to represent such failure (for instance, the failure of the Reconstruction, the Second Wave feminism, the American Dream). I also address questions such as: Why do we introduce nostalgia and utopia when we are faced with historical or political failure? Does failure lead to transformation? What are the possible implications of this trope both to our understanding of, for example, literary history and theory? Is there a theory of failure? Why do American contemporary authors see in failure an instance of knowledge, almost a humanist concept that can bring us to a better understanding of the world’s complexity?

In the first chapter, I discuss the trope of failure in the narrative of Kathy Acker’s *Empire of the Senseless*. Acker defines her own writing as failure because her fiction cannot, as she argues, substantially change the social and political structure of the U.S., in which she recognizes a symbol of failed social practices. *Empire* is considered both by Acker and her critics a turning point of her corpus. In *Empire*, Acker openly declares the failure to destroy the gendered “empire of language” because language itself points back both to itself and to the institutions she criticizes. Therefore, she propagates in *Empire* a need for a revolutionary change that will, ultimately, cause a political transformation; writing about distrust in the corporate institutions and patriarchy should cause such a change. Acker introduces a seemingly new aesthetic, rooted

in avant-garde practices and, most remarkably, she is interested in the position of outcasts in contemporary times. The novel closes with a tattoo, which reads “politics and anarchy,” Acker’s ultimate suggestion that revolutionary events should take place. Unfortunately, Acker’s novel represents a failure regarding the effort for a political change. Its aesthetics points out the hierarchy of the political and the social, while anarchy is an unsuccessful alternative for the neo-colonial world Acker criticizes.

In the second chapter, I discuss DeLillo’s *Underworld*, the novel that “celebrates” the collapse of the Cold War and the historical Giants-Dodgers 1952 baseball game, as an example of the U.S. failure to adjust to the changed political circumstances. In *Underworld*, history is most often analyzed through tropes of commodification or paranoia in the U.S. context of the 1950s and the Cold War, while the elements of apocalypse and nostalgia have not been in the center of critical attention even though they were associated with the questions of historical memory and the fear induced by the Cold War. I argue that a focus upon nostalgia and apocalypse provides a new insight into the novel and the historical moment upon which it concentrates. Importantly, too, these melancholic and catastrophic elements of the novel are not projected into the past or the future, but instead they exist within the present. History in the novel is seen as a tension between nostalgia and apocalypse and in that conflict is an attempt to understand the present. Namely, the characters yearn for the moment when history was horrifying, because the fear of the apocalypse modeled the world of their existence. There is a nostalgic longing to restore the time of threatening terror, and a self-destructive fear of the present that is informed both by the future and the past. Even more importantly, nostalgia and apocalypse reveal the characters’ discomfort in their own present; the characters long for the moments when history was horrifying. They are nostalgic—despite all of the attempts of

denial—because the approaching end of the world seemingly stabilizes in their view the global order. However, an attempt at the end of the novel to reconcile the political conflicts and historical discrepancies within the World Wide Web (WWW), as well as the character's identity dilemmas—announced by the world *peace*— is not successful. The final paragraphs of *Underworld* do not point to peace and coexistence in WWW, but to nostalgia for a more structured world. In that sense, the failure of *Underworld*'s final paragraphs is almost epiphanic, especially if analyzed in the context of the Cold War literature that insists on the loser/winner paradigm and the Manichean split of the world on the East and the West.

Franzen's novel *The Corrections*, in the third chapter, is approached as an example of a novel that fails to engage with the multilayered and multiethnic American society. It has been said that *The Corrections* “offers a critical image of contemporary and economic conditions” (Annesley par. 1), mainly American middle class. However, its potential subversiveness is masked by middle class angst—middle-class uneasiness expressed within its own class—while the identity quandaries of Franzen's characters are facilitated and cushioned by their middle class status. The book opens as a parody of an apocalypse whose fiscal language sets up the ironic tone of the novel. The final chapter circularly closes the novel and yet Franzen's concerns are not initially directed at his characters but rather at the financial conditions of their environment, as if the market boom of the 1990s solely made them re-consider their identities and the position within the family.

The novel, a combination of postmodern and traditional storytelling, exposes through two generations of Lamberts the discomfort of the characters who embody their class ideology or feel restrained by it. The characters readily express what they are not and what they do not want to become. Moreover, all of the foreigners or non-white persons are removed from the narrative

except Chip's wife who represents the ultimate American stereotype of middle-classness (Jewish doctor), and none of the characters lose their middle class positions. In the end, the order that seemed to be subverted is regained again. Therefore, *The Corrections* fails as a subversive novel although it raises an ethical question regarding capital and humanity. In my approach to *The Corrections*, I also discuss Franzen's credo to write non-political, non-ideological prose as well as his highly publicized conflict with a media-mogul Oprah Winfrey. Franzen claims that the novel is not a part of the consumer culture because of its nature that resists the market regulations and sees in it a high-art product whose main characteristic is the subversiveness of the dominant literary market.

In the forth chapter, I focus on Junot Díaz's novel *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* and the problems of immigration as well as the contemporary Latino community in the U.S. In the novel, which is critically appraised and casued Díaz to be recognized as one of the new voices in American literature, failure is inscribed in the narrative as a critique of the European colonial politics as well as Dominican politics that permanently harm its citizens. While novels with the same theme (such as Julia Alvarez's *How the Garcia Girls Lost their Accents*), have been focused on Trujillo's dictatorship and the down-class mobility that was associated with exile, Díaz is more interested in the correlation of race, machismo, and history. Namely, the narrator explicitly mentions that because of fukú—the curse—that is not only associated with Oscar Wao's family history and character but also with the political and historical "Curse and the Doom of the New World" brought by Christopher Columbus in 1492, the protagonist's fate is destined to be tragic. Díaz's narrator refers to Columbus only as the Admiral since uttering his name brings bad luck. Fukú also reveals the tightly interwoven family history with the political history of the Dominican Republic and its dictator Rafael Leónidas Trujillo. Oscar's social

awkwardness and love problems are credited to fukú but, more importantly, Wao's personal problems are attributed to his *Dominicaness*: his race and ethnicity. If Franzen's novel is about middle class angst, Díaz's is about immigrant angst and, consequently, about the failure of immigration in the North American context. Therefore, Díaz's novel is also analyzed in the context of North American contemporary immigration and Latino/a literature.

Chapter 1: The People Who Did Not Succeed: Kathy Acker's *Empire of the Senseless*

Kathy Acker (1947?-1997) gained literary visibility in the 1980s. She established herself as a prominent experimental writer who produced fiction that is “aesthetically outrageous, unrepentantly political, and singularly offensive” (Hawkins 637). She also insisted on the image of an emotionally unstable girl who comes from the city’s slums and does not have a family, while, in fact, she was “a privileged rebellious New York City poor little rich girl, private-schooled” (Friedman 12). Starting with her first novel, *Politics* (1972) to the last one, *Pussy, King of the Pirates* (1997), Acker insists on violence, rape, incest, and pain in the world that is marked by the physical and patriarchal subjugation of women. She appropriates canonical Western texts in all of her sixteen fiction books. *Great Expectations* (1983) is a rewritten Dickens book; *Don Quixote* (1986) is an effort to modify the first modern novel, while in *Blood and Guts in High School* Acker combines her own drawings with rewritten theoretical sections of Jean Genet, Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, pornography, and radical feminism texts. In other novels Acker appropriates, among others, Georges Bataille, the Brontes, T.S. Eliot, William Faulkner, Nathaniel Hawthorne, John Keats, Arthur Rimbaud, Marquis de Sade, as well as her contemporaries William Gibson and Harold Robbins, elements of her own journals, and sections of historical letters.⁴ Urban in their nature, Acker’s texts require an educated and patient reader

⁴ Harold Robbins’ publisher threatened to sue Acker over an incorporated scene from his *Pirates* into her text “Young Lust.” In the interviews included in the movie, *Who’s Afraid of Kathy Acker?*, Acker bitterly implies that neither Robbins nor his publisher understood the refined literary game. In fact, the legal problems with Robbins caused Acker to apologize in an open letter, which she did not take well and which supposedly announced the soon end of her literary celebrity. Disheartened by the fact that her English publisher did not support her, she decided to leave England, where she was for a few years a literary star, and move back to New York.

who is able to appreciate her non-linear narratives, unprovoked violence, and references from ancient Greece to contemporary political philosophy.

A decade after she gained literary visibility, she emerged “as an icon of dissident postmodern culture” (Schlichter par. 1) even though her interests have not broadened and her style turned into a recognizable pattern. More than a decade after her death, Acker is still a literary oddity as much she is praised for continuing the tradition of experimental writing. Experimental authors such as Stewart Home, Anna Joy Springer, Charu Nivedita, and Noah Cicero recognize her as their literary predecessor. Even a member of Sonic Youth, the only active New York avant-garde band formed in the 1980s, Kim Gordon, associates her own art with Acker’s aesthetics and politics. However, Acker’s work is rarely taught outside of feminist or experimental writing classes and, very often, to students’ polarized reaction: disgust or absolute desensitization toward violence and abuse. It seems that Acker should rightfully be included in the canon but then one is not entirely sure how to justify violence from which Acker, proudly, never allows an ironic distance: “The English view of the novel is that there should be irony. Irony is this distance, so you set up a very fine cool style . . . And I’ve always hated that. I never wanted that kind of distance” (“Devoured by Myths” 14).

Her prose is commonly understood with the help of poststructuralist theory, mostly Roland Barthes (death of the author), Michel Foucault (power structures), and Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari (schizophrenia and rhizomes). Acker’s books are also analyzed in the context of experimental writing, postmodernism, and feminism⁵ (Luce Irigaray, Helen Cixous, and Julia

⁵ See, for instance: Jeffrey Ebbeson. *The Fiction of Ishmael Reed, Kathy Acker and Don DeLillo*. New York: Routledge, 2006.; Nicola Pitchford. *Tactical Readings: Feminist Postmodernism in the Novels of Kathy Acker and Angela Carter*. Lewisburg: Bucknell UP, 2002.; Laura Hinton and Cynthia Hogue: *We Who Love to Be Astonished: Experimental Women's Writing and Performance Poetics*. Tuscaloosa: U of Alabama P, 2002.; Joseph M. Conte. *Design and Debris: Chaotics of Postmodern Fiction*. Tuscaloosa: U of Alabama P, 2002.; Ellen Friedman and

Kristeva), while her critics position themselves as either unconditional supporters of her rape- and incest-marked prose, or use her fiction as an argument against pornography.⁶ She states that “my best critics are feminists. That’s simply where I would locate myself” (“Devoured by Myths” 18). The reception of her work vacillates from ecstatic to appalled. Her critics, as Acker does, ask the audiences both to position themselves toward her prose and the culture that produced them. To pleurably read Acker is an act of political disobedience inscribed in a nuanced cultural and literary understanding; to dismiss her equals a reactionary action. Consequently, scholarship about Acker’s work is somewhat repetitive, focused on the attempt to justify, or dismiss, her experimental prose. Such a reception is rooted in Acker’s recurring motifs (e.g. incest, suicide, rape, AIDS, drugs, prostitution), avant-garde patterns (aphoristic style but surrealistic narrative), her own identification of the theoretical influences, as well as the marketing of Acker’s fiction heavily based on her avant-garde and radical liberal political views.

In this chapter, however, I explore Acker’s politics in *Empire of the Senseless* (1988) that has not been in the center of critical attention despite the author’s own proclamations about the political nature of her text. After all, it is easy to overlook the political element of Acker’s fiction that is overpowered with erections, menstrual blood, self-induced injuries, pornographic elements, and statements such as “God: [is] A despot who needs a constant increase of His Power in order to survive” (ES 45). Since Acker is obsessed with failure, and categorizes her own writings as such, I pay particular attention to her understanding of failure, and failure present in the narrative of *Empire*. If her fiction is read *behind* the purposely shocking details, it

Miriam Fuchs, eds. *Breaking the Sequence: Women's Experimental Fiction*. Princeton UP, 1989.; Carla Marie Oleska. *This is My Body Which Will Not Be Given Up For You: The Postmodern Feminist Avant-Garde and the Female Body*. Ann Arbor: UMI, 1994.

⁶ For more details about the debate see Nicola Pitchford. *Tactical Readings: Feminist Postmodernism in the Novels of Kathy Acker and Angela Carter*. Lewisburg: Bucknell UP, 2002. Pitchford argues that Acker’s novels are central to the contemporary practice (postmodernism) of rereading culture.

is easy to recognize Acker's pressing concern for contemporary politics. She reveals her disagreement with the structure of the Western, neo-colonial policies, as well as with the U.S. in which she recognizes a historical example of the problematic social practices.⁷ Since she insists that her texts, although written in a resistance toward the mainstream political principles and literary poetics, actually reflect the culture in which they are written, they—consequently—fail to bring about any revolutionary change. The analysis, therefore, is focused on Acker's failed attempts to politicize both literature and contemporary American culture by introducing the motifs of the Algerian resistance in Paris and the pirate life in her writing, while it also reveals the complexity of her prose that has forced her critics to vehemently choose sides.

I Am a Failure

Arthur F. Redding is one of the harshest Acker's critics. He writes in the conclusion of his essay about *Empire* that:

Acker's writing remains a failure, naturally enough, a shambles, a mess: brash, shrill, petulant, and incoherent; as dreary and repetitive as any conventional pornography: naïve and sentimental whenever it finds cause to celebrate. Even the endless adventure of disgust becomes wearing. So discipline and anarchy persist in their wrongdoing, and this is a process we mislabel cynical to our own peril. (301-302)

⁷ By neo-colonialism, I understand the attempt of former colonies to perpetuate and extend their dominance over underdeveloped countries by economic and political means.

If Acker had a chance to respond to this criticism, she would agree with it. (At least, theoretically because she insisted on the literary importance of her works.) She defines her writing as failure and her texts as incapable of communicating the message she includes in them. In doing so, she assumes a very rare position of an author who purposely inscribes a political message in her writings but insists on its futility in the socio-political context. While in Franzen's, DeLillo's, and Díaz's work failure is incorporated—and often even masked—in the narratives only to reveal the complexity of American history and culture, Acker explicitly defines her literary works as doomed and insignificant. Although she claims that her books should challenge the current political and artistic scene, sexism, and traditional gender hierarchies, she is convinced that her literature is nothing but a failed attempt to change those structures. In "A Few Notes on Two of My Books," she writes:

I was aware that writing changes nothing on the larger political scale. One reason for this, of course, is that those who are most oppressed are often either illiterate or rarely read. Literature, especially novels, is written by and for the owning or the educated populace. Here is one reason why the novel is one of the most conservative art forms in our century. (31)

She returns to this argument in all of her interviews. In a conversation from the '80s incorporated into a documentary *Who's Afraid of Kathy Acker?* (2008), Acker explains that she writes about sex, violence, and politics in order to provide a "vocabulary of fractured culture," as well as to fight "the rigidity of meaning, meaning that doesn't fluctuate." She adds with a coy smile directed to the camera that her fight is not politically overt or effective, and that she attempts to change the system "in some stupid way by writing books, which is not the most direct way of writing." This position she, interestingly, uses to justify her experimental writing techniques that

are recognized in scholarship as Acker's plagiarism, as well as an argument that successfully ties her works to the avant-garde tradition. She claims that "if writing cannot and writing must change things, . . . writing *will* change things. So: I will take one text, New York City, the life of my friends, and change this text by placing another text on top of it" ("A Few Notes" 32). Acker, therefore, reasons that if her texts cannot substantially change the political and cultural reality in which they are produced, they, at least, should challenge the traditional way of writing that she associates with a centralized, linear, and original narrative. She locates origins of such textual challenges in the European avant-garde, and claims that "Whether [mine] it's good or bad writing by academic standards doesn't interest me. It never has. What is, simply is as it is. Of course I'm interested in learning, . . . and in this is the 'MAKE IT NEW' that Pound meant, then I subscribe to that tradition" ("A Few Notes" 36). In the same manner, Acker refuses to be associated with radical feminism, as much as she repeatedly expresses her contempt for hippies. According to Acker, the crucial problems of both movements—which she recognizes as similar because of their failed political agenda—are their "utopian" expectations and the inability to comprehend the political reality. She says:

[I'm not advocating any kind of radical feminist approach] Because the hippie line, and the hippie line hasn't worked. . . . You can't separate yourself from society at large. . . . Which doesn't mean that you can't change things slowly, or on a person-to-person basis. But a model based on separatism just doesn't work. I don't think the '60s generally worked. . . . And I certainly don't find the general dislike of power, which you find among some feminists, as being at all satisfying. ("A Few Notes" 96)

Acker is harshly criticized for her refusal to associate herself with radical feminism. The woman who experiments with her own sexuality in her private life and performances, is excessively tattooed and pierced, and makes her fiction sexually explicit, was expected to promote a radical approach not only to feminism but to politics in general. And yet she refuses, pointing out the uselessness and impracticality of any attempt for a change in society while living and advocating the life at the margins. Such a contradiction reveals, contrary to expectations, a purist *art pour l'art* approach. In “A Few Notes,” she argues that “the artist, though politically and socially powerless, marginalized, must find the ways for all of our survival” (34) and that the method through which she will find her existence is “supremely, politically important” (34). Her explanation is surprising because it reinstates the tradition which she supposedly undermines and it embodies the very logic of American consumerism and the American Dream against which Acker positions herself: happiness. She says that “the novelist who writes about the poor Cambridge vicar who can’t deal with her sexuality is giving no tools for survival. Whereas William Burroughs’s writing methods, his uses of psychic research, are weapons in the fight with our own happiness” (34).

On the other hand, she recognizes a lack of theoretical, or as she calls it, conceptual, background for her works: “I just did what I did but had no way of telling anybody about it, or talking about it. And then when I read ANTI-OEDIPUS and Foucault’s work, suddenly I had this whole language at my disposal” (“Devoured by Myths” 10). Foucault gave Acker a theoretical frame with which she was able to justify both her aggressive literary technique and—more importantly—to represent her work as an example of failure only because it is produced within the power-system that is impossible either to escape or change. In another interview, she repeats the same idea even more bluntly: “All I can say is that back then (and I’m very aware that in

talking about what was *now*, I'm applying a theory to a past act) I honestly did not understand why I was doing what I was doing. I knew I was very angry. I knew I did not want centralized meaning" (McCaffery 90).

At the same time, Acker's negative representation of her own prose is tied to continental feminist theory by which she is deeply influenced. She confesses that "Feminists made me realize why one would want to decentralize a father, take the father and tear him apart. I had some theory behind it" (1991; 18). The theories of Cixous, Irigaray, and Kristeva have been repeatedly associated with Acker's work, particularly because of her exploration of the female body (Cixous) and the language that pertains not only to women but attempts to dismantle the dominant patriarchy hierarchy (Kristeva, Irigaray).⁸ They, nevertheless, convinced her that such an effort might be in vain, limited to the theoretical discussions. But she is not either attracted to the American, more pragmatic version of the second wave feminism that insisted on the inclusion of women in the public and political discourse that is not restricted to women's right to vote. And she also, which must not be forgotten, openly despises radical feminism. Although such a preference is easily explained by Acker's personal inclinations, it adds to the contradictory nature of her fiction, as well as its ideological underdevelopment. Acker readily articulates her dislike for a theory or a concept, but when she has a chance to talk about her prose, Acker prefers mystifications and statements that are knowledgeable enough to make one believe that she is familiar with contemporary theory but are, at the same time, unusually opaque and general. In the interview with Sylvère Lotringer, Acker directly addresses her interviewer,

⁸ See: Gabrielle, Dane. "Hysteria as a Feminist Protest: Dora, Cixous, and Acker." *Women's Studies* 23 (1994): 231-256.; Christina Milletti. "Violent Acts, Volatile Words: Kathy Acker's Terrorist Aesthetic." *Studies in the Novel* 36.3 (2004). 352-372.; Rod Phillips. "Purloined Letters: The Scarlet Letter in Kathy Acker's Blood and Guts in High School." *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* 35.3 (1994): 173-180.; Martina Sciolino. "Kathy Acker and the Postmodern Subject of Feminism." *College English* 52.4 (1990): 437-445.

claiming that “you changed me a lot because by introducing me to the French philosophers, you gave me a way of verbalizing what I had been doing in language” (“Devoured by Myths” 10). Since Acker fails to either explain or mention particular books or concepts of the authors that influenced her, one is challenged to conclude that the “introduction” does not surpass an erudite, performative lecture. In the 1970s, Lotringer saw in Acker’s art, as well as, for instance, in John Cage’s, Burroughs’, and Jack Smith’s, the American equivalents of the French structuralist philosophers.⁹ Lotringer, on the other hand, was a character in Acker’s *Great Expectations* and *Mother, My Demonology*, as well as emotionally involved with her. In yet another interview, she summarizes her influences: “Sylvère introduced me to the work of Felix Guattari, Giles Deleuze, and (somewhat) Foucault. Those were the main ones for me. Derrida was never as important. And I never took to Baudrillard’s work. But it was only then [around 1976] that I began to find a language for what I was doing” (McCaferry 89).

While Acker supposedly admires French feminists and philosophers, she is actually conflicted about the possibility to provide a political change within her texts. In the interview with Lotringer, she explains that in myths—as she calls narratives—she likes “fate and fate is unknown. You are allowed to just move, you’re allowed to wander. I’ve always envied men this and I can never travel being a woman” (23). This remark is puzzling, especially in light of Acker’s biography and her writing in which she insists on, if not annulling, then destabilizing the traditional notions of politics, sex, and gender. Lotringer does not push Acker to elaborate on this but an element of failure written in the writer’s attempt to denounce bourgeois expectations from

⁹ See, for instance, Lotringer’s works: *Pure War*. (with Paul Virilio) Cambridge: Semiotext(e): 1983.; *David Wojnarowitz: A Definitive History of Five or Six years on the Lower East Side*. Cambridge : Semiotext(e), 2006.; *The Collected Interviews of William S., Burroughs*. Cambridge: Semiotext(e), 2002.; *French Theory in America*. New York, Routledge, 2001.

a Jewish woman born in the Upper East Side in New York vibrates in the interview. It is as if Acker suggests that despite her non-conventional life choices and the obvious and successful determination to justify her prose style by her life style, she did not actually succeed in such an attempt. One must take her seriously because as much as Acker is provocative and contradictory in her fiction, she attempts to be thoughtful and coherent in her essays and interviews; cunningly, she understands that they represent a platform for understanding her fiction. On the other hand, the remark is perplexing because she reinforces the power inscribed in the male, the exact hierarchy against which she argues in her texts. It is not clear why a woman cannot wander—exactly as Acker does in her own life—just because of her sex. In *Empire*, Abhor does not argue with Thavai when he sees her femininity as the main obstacle for her pirate life but accepts his reasoning without even questioning it. He “informed Abhor she had to be a man to be a pirate. If she wasn’t a man, she was as good as dead” (202). Acker’s revolt against the patriarchal order and the capitalist system of neo-colonialism is marked by failure, while *Empire* is the novel in which Acker’s failed attempt and pessimism about establishing a new, just society is the most apparent.

The Failure of the Country, the Failure of the People

Acker's *Empire of the Senseless* "is in many ways her most complete book" (Siegle 71). It marks, as the author claims, the beginning of her interest in mythology—the term she uses when she talks about the narrative—and a break with linguistic experimentations that are reduced to an aphoristic style typical of the historical avant-garde writing. She insists that her new focus on mythology should both provide the reader a universal template, and indicate her interest in timeless matters. Since she is invested in "the search for a myth to live by" (Friedman 17), she claims that *Empire*'s "purpose [is] constructive" (Friedman 17). In the Lotringer interview, she claims "That's the way you feel in the mythical stories. You don't know quite why they act the way they act, and they don't care. . . . The reader doesn't own the character. There's a lot of power in narrative, not in story" ("Devoured by Myths" 23). In other words, she is invested in the force projected by a narratological motif, not its individual manifestation (story), while the line of demarcation between the author and the reader recalls Roland Barthe's seminal proclamation about the death of the author. She is interested in the separation of the two exactly because she recognizes failure in her fiction. If neither the reader nor the writer is responsible for each other, then the text gains a certain level of autonomy. If it fails as an ideological or literary text, the author cannot be blamed because he is a mere scripter, while the reader's responsibility can be justified by his social and cultural circumstances that inform his readings. It is as if, by insisting on this distinction, Acker points out that she is not accountable for her texts' failures, although she is fully aware of them.

Her new style, on the other hand, is created through a negation of her previous works to the extent that Robert Siegel writes that "Readers who recall the early novels' appropriations or the linguistic experiments in *Blood and Guts* understand how far Acker has come in rethinking

the binary logic of purely oppositional writing” (74). Acker considers *Empire*’s language—and her emphasis on the narrative—a critical assessment of her previous fiction. She says that:

Ten years ago it seemed possible to destroy language through language: to destroy language which normalizes and controls by cutting that language. Nonsense would attack the empire-making (empirical) empire of language, the prisons of meaning.

But this nonsense, since it depended on sense, simply pointed back to the normalizing institution. (134)

While she makes a break with the linguistic experimentation, her style remains the same. It is “characterized by sweeping reductions, nihilistic sarcasm, and a generally bad attitude; . . . and obscenities are tacked onto the end of the rare innocuous sentence, in an excess of nausea” (Clune 505). The novel is divided into three parts, and told through two different voices, of Thavai, a white male who wants to become a pirate, and Abhor, “partner, part robot, part black” (3). The narrative line is more conventional than in any of Acker’s books although it is still at times challenging to make sense of her lack of transitions or of sudden and narratologically unexplained changes of scenery and characters. Acker’s characters, however, remain allegorical representations of her ideas, reduced to symbols. Abhor, like almost all of the characters of Acker’s fiction, is defined by incest, rape, and submissiveness. Thavai, on the other hand, attempts to solve his existential problems while trying to become a pirate. Her characters reveal her “special affection for marginal characters (prostitutes, drug addicts, homeless people, the mentally unstable) . . . However, she does not provide any possibility of transcendence for them, but rather portrays a masochist attitude of passive resignation” (Garrigós 124). In *Empire*, conversely, her characters attempt to overcome such a submission, and their failed attempts further emphasize the impossibility of any transcendence.

The first part of *Empire*, “Elegy for the World of the Fathers,” establishes a family history of Abhor, raised in a rich family but raped by her father and emotionally denied by her mother. As a consequence, Abhor leaves her family that presumably lives in New York, and heads to Paris where Algerians start a revolution. Abhor does not participate in the revolution but is exposed to the city’s underground life. Acker describes this chapter as the one that provides a “description of a society which is defined by the oedipal taboo. The oedipal myth, after all, is not only one story out of many, but also just part of one myth, the Theban cycle” (“A Few Notes” 35). The second section, “Alone,” is entirely focused on the revolutionary elements in Paris and, in Acker’s words, represents a society not defined by the oedipal taboo, “by phallic centrality and total domination on the political, economic, social, and personal levels” (“A Few Notes” 35). She claims that the writing process made her realize that the pressing question of her narrative is “In a society defined by phallic centrality or by prison, how is it possible to be happy?” (“A Few Notes” 36). The final, shortest section of the novel, “Pirate Night,” functions as the novel’s answer to such a question, and introduces Acker’s doubt about an existence of a society free of any social, sex, gender, or political restrictions. The section begins as an appropriated scene from Mark Twain’s *Huckleberry Finn*, “one of the main texts about freedom in American culture” (“A Few Notes” 36). She locates her disinterest in the ideological level of the novel that she recognizes only as a text that “hints of a possibility or beginning” (“A Few Notes” 36).¹⁰

Acker’s own insistence on the formal and linguistic originality of her writing contributed to scholarly responses focused on these elements. Approached in the context of feminism and

¹⁰ She repeats this explanation in the interview with Ellen G. Freedman almost verbatim. See: Ellen G. Freedman. A Conversation with Kathy Acker. *Review of Contemporary Fiction* 9:3 (1989): 7-22. The paragraph in which she discusses *Empire* is on page 17.

postmodernism, those critical studies overlooked the significance of the political and social in Acker's novel. Acker is particularly concerned with the gap between the First and the Third world, as well as with the dynamics induced by the history of colonial politics. She sees a failure of political governance in all the contemporary political systems but, at the same time, she is unable to provide a solution to such a situation. In the end, she recognizes even in her own admiration of anarchy an unsuccessful attempt to change the economic and social structure of the world. Also, she does not fully develop her argument about the possibility for a change in a neo-colonial/globalized world because she remains puzzled by the Algerians' invasion of Paris. Although considered a just retaliation for the French colonial terror, Acker is not sure how to fully justify the Algerian rebellion in Paris. Nor is she content with the policies practiced by the post-revolutionary Algerians; besides the power structure, Paris did not change a lot. Hence, Acker says, we are doomed to fail to change the already flawed world. Writing is all that is left.

For that reason, Acker writes about revolutions. In the first and the second part of *Empire*, she is focused on the Algerian revolution in Paris and its consequences, respectively. Angela Naimou argues that Acker chooses Paris as the stage for the revolutionary rebellion because of its importance in the history of colonialism, and that therefore her choice of Paris could not be more obvious: "What better place than Paris—celebrated site of Western culture, forged under an imperial, capitalistic system, and site of dis-ease between citizen and non-citizen from the colonies—to play out these culture wars as a colonial 'plague' in the metropolis?" (137). France's colonial history extends to three centuries, from the 18th to the mid 20th century, and her colonial power was comparable only to that of Great Britain. North Africa, the Caribbean, Asia and even North America were the sites of the French colonial politics that ceased to exist in a series of revolutions for independence after the Second World War. Those in

Algeria and Vietnam, in the 1950s, were the most violent, and by the end of the next decade, most of the French colonies gained independence. France, moreover, managed to partly preserve a level of her colonial power by integrating previously colonized islands in the Pacific, the Atlantic, and the Indian Ocean, as well as in South America (e.g. French Guiana), and the Antarctica into her borders. In North Africa, conversely, France maintains her post-colonial influence through economy and education (e.g. Senegal, Côte d'Ivoire). The past colonies became overseas departments and territories, administered by the French government, while their citizens gained a right to French citizenship. The governments of, for instance, Martinique and Guadeloupe are autonomous, but they are also represented in the French Parliament and the countries have a right to vote in the European Parliament. As of 2009, the French department and territories have more than 2.5 million inhabitants. In that sense, it is not surprising that when writing about an empire, Acker is particularly interested in the political power that legally still maintains its colonial status.

However, there is another reason for Acker's fascination with the French capital, besides its rich colonial past. Acker's literary and theoretical influences are French. She reads contemporary French philosophy and French literary theory, and places herself in the "lineage" (McCaffery 92) of Sade, Baudelaire, Rimbaud, Lautremont, Jarry, Bataille, Artaud, and Genet. When she claims that the biggest influence on her writing was Burroughs, she most directly recognizes the influence of French surrealism and avant-garde on her style. Not only did Burroughs spend extensive time in Paris and was introduced to the French avant-garde, but his *Naked Lunch*'s (1959) non-linear narrative is inspired by Brion Gysin's cut-up technique. Gysin, supposedly the only artist who earned Burroughs respect, reintroduced the montage—previously a typical surrealist technique—into the artistic world of the 1950s and 1960s. Therefore, focusing

on Paris, Acker pays *homage* to her literary fathers and, as well, attempts to explore the conflict between the imperial and the artistic.¹¹ Although she never fully articulates such an argument, she seems puzzled by the fact that the brutal colonial power contributed to such an extent to the development of literature and philosophy. Acker's hinted bewilderment is naïve in its nature, but it does reveal Acker's interest in failure. She finds confusing, and worth exploring, the fact that the country with one of the most accomplished literary traditions is an epitome of a failed political power.¹²

The narrative switch to the Parisian revolution in *Empire* is abrupt, marked by the beginning of the second chapter. Abhor finds herself in Paris where she fled from her problematic family, in an attempt to find herself, but instead she floats through the revolutionary underground, meeting prostitutes and revolutionaries and remaining equally confused even about her sexual identity. Acker describes the revolution as “Algerian,” referring to the last French colony—and one of the last world colonies—that declared independence in 1962 after an eight-year long war. She also brings to Paris the Haitians of the 18th century. Naimou is right when she says that Acker’s complicates her historical vision by “mapping the Haitian revolution onto the streets of 1950s Algiers during the war against imperial France and depicting these political struggles in 1980s Paris (when, historically, immigrants clashed with French citizens in the suburbs)” (134). But it must be added that Acker’s historical references function also as only

¹¹ Throughout her career, Acker was reluctant to acknowledge female writers as her literary predecessors. When she finally does mention them, she is again focused on French influences: “Duras's work interests me. Some of Violet Leduc, early Monique Wittig. Some of the Beauvoir's writing, Nathalie Sarraute. There is Elsa Morante's writing, Luisa Valenzuela. . . . Laure, an amazing woman, a French woman from the upper classes who lived with Georges Bataille. Wonderful writer” (Friedman 19).

¹² To follow that logic, it would be puzzling for Acker that, for instance, Jacques Derrida and Albert Camus were born in French Algeria and yet greatly contributed to French letters and philosophy. For more about the Algerian resistance, see: Jim House. *Paris 1961: Algerians, State Terror, and Memory*. New York: Oxford UP, 2006.; Patricia M. E. Lorcin. *Algeria & France, 1800-2000: Identity, Memory, Nostalgia*. Syracuse UP, 2006.; Todd Sheppard. *The Invention of Decolonization: The Algerian War and the Remaking of France*. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 2006.; Paul A. Silverstein. *Algeria in France: Transpolitics, Race, and Nation*. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 2004.

postmodern references; we should have knowledge of them but if we do not, it is sufficient to recognize in them the universal modes of the colonial and capitalist conflict. So, in a sense, Acker as much refers to the historical events as she does not. The fusion of two hundred years of history is metaphorical because it is based on the same premise: to overthrow the imposing, but unwanted power structure.

When Abhor comes to Paris, she sees “chaos. Thousands of Algerians were walking freely. Ragged. Dirty. Sticks. Dolls. Voodoo” (Acker 67). Fictionalizing her contemporary moment, she writes that Algerians were forced to carry a computerized identity card, and that by 1985, all of the blacks were forbidden to walk at night unless accompanied by a white person. Acker here refers to “a discriminatory night-time curfew imposed uniquely on Algerian workers” (House and Macmaster 1) in Paris on October 5, 1961. The measure was an attempt to prevent 180,000 migrant Algerian workers in Paris from bringing violence to the city whose government was in war with their native country. Aggravated by the French policies, as well as by discrimination and police treatment, on October 17 the “conflict split over directly into the metropolitan heartland, an exemplary case of the empire striking back” (House and Macmaster 25). House and Macmaster point out that “Not before or since, with the exception of the IRA bombing campaign in London, has a colonial war of independence been fought by urban guerillas or ‘terrorists’ within the imperial capital” (26). The reasons for such unprecedented violence the historians find in the geographical factors, large presence of Algerian migrant workers in Paris, as well as *Front de libération nationale* (FLN), which effectively raised money and gained support for the war in Algeria among the immigrant community in France. Algeria, “just across the Saine,” allowed the events to have an “immediacy” (House and Macmaster 25) that was not typical of, for instance, Indo-China. As a consequence, the French government was

invested in the war in the ways in which it was not in Asia. Moreover, the Algerian community in Paris represented the biggest colonial presence in Europe at the time, which allowed FLN to successfully campaign for the Algerian War. Acker follows history in this case and writes that despite the radical Paris government's measures, the non-whites are a huge, uncontrollable community: "It was unwise for whites to act" (76). Consequently, the revolution ensues, exactly as it did in the streets of Paris in 1961. In addition, "The Parisian and the French government desired simply to exterminate the Algerian trash, the terrorists, the gypsies. The urban sections inhabited by Algerians were literary areas of plague to Parisians who knew how to speak properly" (75).¹³ Those who "speak properly" are divided not only by the city geography of those who do not, but also by their class, education, and race. The French capital that functions simultaneously as the symbol of the colonial government, revolution, and its effects, in Acker's interpretation also embodies racism typical for any Western city.

Acker is particularly pessimistic about New York, in which she sees the epitome of the horrendous racism: "We live in New York City between people who own most of the money in this world and people who own so little that they're not human. . . . New York City, my home, Liberty. Who do you hate more, boy? Niggers or Arabs? I think you hate Arabs more" (ES 155, 163). If Acker chooses Paris as the site for her fictional revolution because of its cultural capital and colonial history, she mentions New York because of, how she sees it, hypocrisy. Since Acker introduces her revolt against the "American way" in *Don Quixote*, her disgust in *Empire*

¹³ In October 2005, a series of riots started. They lasted for three months and forced the Parliament to declare a state of emergency. The riots, that included setting cars on fire and public buildings, started in the Paris projects and spread all over France. They were, however, limited to the poorer, immigrant urban sections. Although the riots were triggered by an arrest of a group of teenagers, they were caused by the high unemployment among the immigrant population, police harassment, and religious conflicts. See: Thomas Crampton. "Behind the Furor: The Last Moments of Two Youths. *The New York Times*. Nov 7, 2005 Dec 5, 2009. http://www.nytimes.com/2005/11/07/international/europe/07youths.html/partner/rssnyt?_r=1

toward the capitalistic society, as well as the realization of the impossibility of a successful socio-political change that would not marginalize the Others, must be considered further development of her argument against capitalism: “The USA government is run out of fear. . . . One plus one equals zero. There’s no way I can directly fight America because there’s no way I can fight the landlord” (DQ 103, 105). While New York’s Statue of Liberty symbolizes the openness and the U.S. history of immigration, both the city and the country fail to act upon those premises. Historical New York City provides a pessimistic vision of post-revolutionary fictional Paris. Moreover, New York City, mentioned in most of Acker’s books as a negative symbol, haunts the entire world with its capitalist rules.

But before Acker offers such a conclusion, she focuses on Haiti and its history of resistance as a possible response to colonial Paris. She introduces her fascination with Haiti in *Kathy Goes to Haiti*, published ten years before *Empire*, the novel that she herself describes as a combination of pornography and travelogue. The book is modeled on Kerouac’s *Desolation Angels* (1965) and attempts to underscore the concept of Western tourists in a non-Western country. In *Kathy*, the main character embarks on a trip to Haiti, where she tries to find love. Instead, she not only becomes a sexual fascination for every Haitian man, but “Haiti becomes . . . a place of picturesque backwardness” (Sorensen 183). The colonial discourse is reinstated; Haiti remains exotic and primitive, exactly in the same manner in which Acker’s understanding of the Arab world in *Empire* does not surpass the dominant cultural stereotypes. Even more significantly, Acker suggests that Haiti’s revolution “has been commodified, penetrated by capital to the extent that it only exists in the form of tourist sights” (Sorensen 185), while the U.S. Navy ships in Haitian waters demonstrate the neo-colonial political power. In *Empire*, similarly, Acker finds the U.S. the final and the most influential political voice opposed to the

rebellious Haitian elements. The long episode from “Alone” illustrates Acker’s point about the U.S. domineering economic and historical position.

In Paris, the revolution starts with Mackandal. François Mackandal (died in 1758) is considered the revolutionary who paved the way for the Haitian slave rebellion more than a century later led by Toussaint L’Ouverture. He is also described as a voodoo priest and houngan, as well as associated with Islam, although none of those facts are historically accountable. One of the first guerilla leaders, he gained a mythical status because of his subversive methods against slavery, the French government that was in power in Saint-Domingue, and his supposed escape from the scaffold. Mackandal made poison from island herbs and distributed it to the plantations where slaves added it to meals and water of their owners. Under Mackandal’s leadership and his application of biological terrorism, a network of slave resistance was formed, with maroons attacking the plantations at night and killing the owners. Captured, he was burnt alive in the public square in Saint-Dominique.¹⁴ Widely present in pop-culture, Mackandal is also a character in *The Kingdom of This World* (1949) by Alejo Carpentier, who as well wrote about Trujillo and on whose novel of the dictator Díaz’ partly modeled his *Oscar Wao*.

Mackandal in Paris uses the same subversive methods, while his followers are “Algerians, and even other other black Africans, who hadn’t been content only to hover in the shadows”

¹⁴ Mackandal is known in literature also as Macandal. The spelling that I use in this chapter is prevalent in scholarship. See: Jerome Branche. *Colonialism and Race in Luso-Hispanic Literature*. U of Missouri P, 2006.; Karol K. Weaver. *Medical Revolutionaries: The Enslaved Healers of Eighteenth-Century Saint-Domingue*, Urbana: U of Illinois P: 2006. 77–97.; Carolyn E. Fick. *The Making of Haiti: The Saint Domingue Revolution from Below*. Knoxville: U of Tennessee P: 1990. 60-74.; David Nicholls. *From Dessalines to Duvalier: Race, Colour and National Independence in Haiti*. New York: Cambridge UP, 1996.; C.L.R. James. *The Black Jacobins: Toussaint L’Ouverture and the San Domingo Revolution*. New York: Random House, 1989. Mark Davis dedicated an entire website to Mackandal, based on his historical and anthropological research: www.macandal.org

(Acker 75). While historically Mackadal is a predecessor of the Haitian rebellion, in *Empire* he becomes the leader of all of the political and social outcasts using the same subversive approach:

There is a way to stop guns and bombs. There's no way to stop poison which runs like water. The whites have industrialized polluted the city for purposes of their economic profit to such an extent that even clean water was scarce. They had to have their servants just to get them water and these servants, taught by Mackadal, put poison in water. (ES 76)

Mackadal turns the entire Paris into a chaotic city, with the whites “trembling from fear, nausea, and diarrhoea” (78; Acker’s spelling). The victory of the disenfranchised is imminent, if it is not for the U.S. forces that, exactly as the French government in Saint-Domingue, fear that Mackadal’s subversion will force all of the non-whites out of Paris. Hence in an attempt to capture Mackadal, three white American soldiers from the American Embassy torture two Algerian boys “between the ages of twelve and eighteen” (78-9), and a six-year-old girl. The soldiers act “exactly as they had been trained” (78); they meticulously inflict the pain, break the boys’ bones and spines, and eventually kill them. Although Acker’s inscribes in the nameless boys’ behavior a purpose, which derives from their attempt to protect the leader and their national pride, the scene’s horror stems from the disproportional and absurd reaction of the American soldiers. They treat the children as reknown criminals, address the girl as “slut,” and therefore it is not surprising when the girl, terrified of the prospect of pain, “screamed out Mackandal’s name, all the other names of leaders which she could remember, and then they killed her” (79). Moreover, the merciless and military treatment of the children is an illustration of the U.S. position in the contemporary world. It is because of the U.S. involvement—and not the French concern—that Mackadal is finally captured, which for Acker symbolizes the U.S.

neo-colonial dominance in the world. Focused on the profit and led by the dislike of the Other, the U.S. is an unstoppable political and capitalist power. This Acker's argument originates in her often voiced critique for neoliberalism of the Ronald Reagan era which is, as she claims in interviews, one of the reasons she moved to England.

Acker's scene as well invokes the historical presence of the U.S. in the Caribbean. Mackandal, as a Haitian rebel, is a metaphorical force that the U.S. government has attempted to subdue. After gaining independence and reaching a period of relative stability, Haiti became particularly interesting for the U.S. The German community in the country, which in 1910 numbered around 200 people, controlled 80 percent of the international commerce, as well as the main wharf and a tramway in the capital. After France, Germany became the colonial power of Haiti, and in an attempt to limit its influence, the U.S. government supported a consortium of American investors. In 1910, assembled by the National City Bank of New York, they asked for a control of the Banque National d'Haïti, the country's commercial bank and the government treasury. When five years later Vilbrun Guillaume Sam established yet another dictatorship, the U.S. occupied the country. Interestingly, President Woodrow Wilson responded to the complaints of American banks to which Haiti owed a significant debt. That occupation lasted until 1934 and despite the health, education, and agricultural reforms, it created issues that haunt Haiti until the contemporary moment. In 1917, under the pressure and the demand of the U.S. to write a new constitution, the National Assembly was discontinued, and Franklin D. Roosevelt wrote a constitution that would considerably change the politics of Haiti. The new constitution abolished the prohibition on foreign ownership of land and therefore established the constitutional presence of the U.S. in Haiti, and her legal right to Haiti's natural sources and labor. When the newly formed National Assembly refused to pass the constitution, it was

resolved by military forces. In 1919, this Constitution was approved by a plebiscite in which less than 5 percent of the Haitians voted. The U.S. government acknowledged it, reasoning that “The people casting ballots would be 97% illiterate, ignorant in most cases of what they were voting for” (Schmidt 99). The U.S. became a neo-colonial power in the Caribbean. When Acker writes about the U.S. involvement in Paris, she actually recalls the historical memory of the U.S. colonial practices, similarly to Díaz whose *Oscar Wao* is based on the history of colonialism. Acker finds such practices horrifying, which might be the reason she includes Haiti as a motif in two of her books. Haiti should remind her American audiences about their government’s responsibility and participation in a foreign country’s affairs but unlike Díaz who approaches the subject with postmodern irony, although she reaches the same conclusion about the neo-colonial dependency of the Caribbean region, Acker is frighteningly solemn.

Acker’s version of Mackadal’s capture resonates with the historical records of his captivity. A female slave, with whom he was emotionally involved, revealed his whereabouts under the French’s government torture. However, he supposedly miraculously managed to escape from the scaffold, becoming a central figure of Haitian folklore. In *Empire*, although his escape is modernized and appropriated with a bomb, Mackadal evades his death “before the dumb Americans could react” (80). After the failed execution, Mackadal fades from the narrative and becomes a symbol of the oppressed resistance: “Poisonings of the whites continued: finally the Algerians won Paris” (80). And just when one thinks that Acker provides a happy ending, she adds the sentence that absolutely destabilizes the previous two. Despite the fact that the Algerians won Paris, Acker claims, “more than a third of the city was now ash” (80). And, for her, this is not an acceptable outcome of an attempt to create a new society, even on the ashes of the previous empire. In the narrative of *Empire*, it is not entirely clear whether the Algerians

really won the revolution and overpowered the U.S. as the ultimate force because post-revolutionary Paris is more chaotic than revolutionary. After all, both Abhor and Thavai try to leave it.

The empire Acker wants to dismantle, in the words of Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, does not have a “territorial center of power and does not rely on fixed boundaries or barriers” (xii). Empire is a new global form of sovereignty. In contrast to imperialism, it represents a decentered and deterritorializing apparatus of rule, where the spacial division of the First, Second, and the Third world has been reduced to the opposition of the First and the Third. In Acker’s *Empire*, there is nothing “between” primitive Haiti and industrialized Paris or New York. Hardt and Negri recognize in the spacial totality of empire, its lack of “temporal boundaries and in this sense outside of history or at the end of history” (xv), its omnipresence and rule of social life in its entirety, as well as its dedication to peace, “a perpetual and universal peace outside of history” (xv) their main characteristics. This is exactly how Acker sees the empire of the contemporary Western world: omnipresent, anational, and borderless. The characters’ attempts to challenge it are futile partly because, as Hardt and Negri emphasize, the effort to contest and subvert the Empire must take place “on the imperial terrain itself” (xv) and partly because “the multitude will have to invent new democratic forms and a new constituent power that will one day take us through and beyond Empire” (xv). While Acker’s Algerians successfully overrule the Western system, they do not introduce a new, more human political and social concept. The point of their revolution is not to change the world but to install themselves as its rulers. Hence the chaos ensues: “The Algerians took over Paris so they would own something. Maybe, soon, the whole world” (ES 82). Acker points out the economic element of the revolution (ownership), and suggests to recognize in it a reason for the revolution’s failure. A

segment from *Don Quixote* further explain the failed revolution—human nature: “You might ask how the Arabs know about nuclear armaments. Our answer must be that humans, being greedy, fearful, and needing vicious power, have always known” (25). Hardt and Negri, in addition, argue that the forces that contest the Empire are themselves not limited to a geographical region—as Algerians are in Paris—and that “the geography of these alternative powers, the new cartography, is still waiting to be written” (xvi).

For a moment, however, it seems that there is a global alternative to the contemporary dismal politics. Acker finds it in the Muslim world, which she sees as an answer to the West. She claims that the “world goes Coca-Cola and McDonalds, only the Muslim world resists. . . . I thought, for Westerners today, for us, the other now is Muslim. In my book [*Empire*], when the Algerians take over Paris, I have a society not defined by the oedipal taboo” (“A Few Notes” 35). In her short story, “Algeria: a Series of Invocations because Nothing Else Works,” she also calls for an Algerian revolution that should challenge the contemporary political structure. The allure of the Algerians for Acker is obvious. They stood up to the one of the biggest empires in the world and, even more significantly, they constitute a history of which Acker and her generation are a part. The adamant and armed Algerian resistance happened in Acker’s lifetime, making Algeria the last French colony. In addition, the Algerians are predominantly Muslim, which Acker sees not only as a victory of Islam over Western and corrupt Christianity, but also as a sign of returning to the pre-civilized. Remarkably, she does not recognize her own patronizing and exoticizing of the Muslim world. If the inclusion of the Muslim in her novel, as she claims, signals the lack of the oedipal taboo, she implies that such a world is not only non-Western, but that in its character it is also primitive. While the Muslims are unburdened by any of the “blisses and curses” of the civilization—at least according to Acker—they are also

savages, *tabula rasas* on which an absolutely new civilization can be written. Acker, bluntly, recognizes Muslims as the American Other. Edward Said, in his seminal *Orientalism*, notes that “Orientalism is a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient” (3). Since the beginning of the 19th century until the end of the Second World War, orientalism was particularly practiced by France and Britain. But, Said adds, “since World War II America has dominated the Orient, and approaches it as France and Britain once did” (4). That is why in *Empire* the Algerians ruin Paris only to establish their own dominance, similar in nature to the overruled one. Acker, despite her favoritism of the Other, cannot see the Arab world differently but through the Western stereotype about the violent country incapable of establishing a civil government.

It is remarkable that by favoring the Muslim world Acker not only reintroduces the West-East/Christian-Islam dichotomy, but that she also longs for the reintroducing of tradition: “A French friend of mine who frequently travels to South Africa just told me that that one town which he often visits ten years ago had churches and one mosque. Today, the opposite is true” (“A Few Notes” 35). What she admires in the South African town, and sees as an example that should be followed, is the Muslim determination to preserve their cultural and religious character. Coming from a woman who rejected any tradition but literary, such a sentiment is as myopic as it is naïve. Acker not only simplifies Islam to a mere opposite of the West and Christianity, but she also overlooks its conservatism that is oppressive toward the outcasts of whom she is so fond (women, homosexuals, homeless).¹⁵ Similarly, Acker glorifies the Eastern literary tradition and even includes the revised *1001 Arabian Nights* told by Sinbad the Sailor, as

¹⁵ It would have been interesting to see if in the light of the recent terrorist attacks in the U.S. and the general suspicion toward anything Muslim, Acker would nuance her understanding of the Muslim Other.

“a tale . . . which staved off death, which staved off patriarchy” (ES 152). Sinbad’s narrative is written in both the Arabic and Western alphabet, and its full meaning is accomplished through a juxtaposition with a segment from *Don Quixote*. Acker writes:

Unlike America and Western culture (generally), the Arabs (in their culture) have no concept of originality. That is, culture. They write new stories paint new pictures et cetera only by embellishing old stories, pictures. . . . They write by cutting chunks out of all-ready written texts and in other ways defacing traditions. . . . For that reason, a typical Arab text or painting contains neither characters nor narrative, for an Arab, believing such fictions’re evil, worship nothingness. (25; the author’s spelling)

Acker questions the concept of originality as the defining literary characteristic, recognizing in the Arab tradition a radically different approach. She, therefore, questions the idea of originality as fundamental for any culture and uses it as the ultimate proof for her own appropriations of literary and philosophical texts. In this case, she is not interested in the validity of her argument as much as in the validity of her poetics. She also readily overlooks the fact that the Arab ornamentation has religious origins, that the novel was imported into the Arab world in the 19th century from the West, as well as that that motifs and themes are repetitive even in Western literary tradition and folklore.¹⁶ In *Empire*, she similarly glorifies Scheherazade’s tales, overlooking that Scheherazade’s astuteness saved her from death, but not from patriarchy. That in *Empire* the revolution fails, based on the Arab otherness, is not surprising at all. The Muslim world, as it is presented in *Empire*, cannot pose an alternative to the flawed West in great part

¹⁶ James Frazer’s *The Golden Bough* (1890), a comparative study of mythology and folklore, is one of the first studies that traces the similarity and interconnectedness of myths. A seminal exploration of archetypal patterns is Northrop Frye’s *Anatomy of Criticism* (1957).

because Acker herself fails to understand its differences and establish a network of possible collaborations. Freedom remains to be dreamed about.

If I Could Only Be a Pirate

Acker is obsessed with pirates. For her, they represent a subversion of the governmental and economic order not only because of their anarchic life style but also because their life style does not recognize any conventions. Acker even admires pirates' brutality and barbarism that are in conflict with, as she sees it, the mediocre values of the bourgeoisie. Moreover, their friendship and loyalty to each other undermine the capitalistic structure rooted in the material, not emotional or ethical values: "Typically, they situated themselves, not against one class or even one nation, but against the whole world as the 'enemies of all mankind'" (Mackie 116). Pirates are Acker's response to the contemporary alienation and failure of the political that she associates with the gender dynamic and capitalism. Pirates, for Acker, equal freedom from any conventions: "Being free of both nationalistic and religious concerns and restrictions, privateering's only limitation was economic" (ES 26). The paradox of Acker's glorification of pirates is that like all of the concepts she discusses in *Empire*, it underscores the flaws of the contemporary times she wishes to challenge and change.

Acker writes, in Thavai's voice, that "I who would have and would be a pirate: I cannot. I who live in my mind which is my imagination as everything—wanderer adventurer fighter Commander-in-Chief of Allied Forces—I am nothing in these times" (26). It seems that both the author and the character, it is suggested by the 1st person utterance, share the longing of the heroic times and circumstances in which it would be possible to achieve the absolute freedom.

Moreover, they want to experience camaraderie because only through a relationship can a social and personal change be accomplished; to be a lone pirate does not amount to much. That is why, toward the end of the novel, Thavai tries to persuade Abhor to become a pirate, despite her supposed gender difference that prevents her from becoming one: “I didn’t want to be a pirate alone so I had to swallow my pride and ask her why she wanted nothing more to do with me” (190). Such a romanticized understanding of piracy, as well as Acker’s equally romanticized allegory of the pirate as the just brute, is typical of pirate studies of the 1970s and 1980s. Despite being thieves and torturers, pirates offered an alternative to a capitalized world and were considered to represent an organized democracy, economic fairness, and racial tolerance. They were, in other words, glorified dissidents, people with a revolutionary streak. They represent the ideals of freedom, equality, and fraternity. Erin Mackie, for instance, points out that the allure of pirates for scholars invested in liberation politics but cites almost the exact same reasons for such an interest that can be found in popular culture. She claims that piracy is seen “along three lines: piracy as a refusal of the labor discipline employed by the merchant navy; pirate societies as structurally democratic and egalitarian; and privacy as a haven for outlaw personal identities” (139). Furthermore, some scholars even see pirates as predecessors of the gay and feminist movements, both because pirate ships were predominantly male and because of a few recorded instances of female cross-dressing.¹⁷ More recent studies, such as *The Invisible Hook: The Hidden Economics by Pirates* by Peter T. Leeson, challenge the romantic understanding of piracy and pirates. An economist by vocation, Leeson finds in piracy a form of extremely successful governance and self-sustained economy, diminishing the common understanding of

¹⁷ See: Hans Turley. *Rum, Sodomy, and the Lash: Piracy, Sexuality, and Masculine Identity*. New York: New York UP, 1999.

the pirate life as disorganized, chaotic, and rapacious. Even the supposedly egalitarian character of piracy (fraternity) is deeply rooted in the economics of piracy. Pirates practiced relative fraternity not because of their investment in social equality and faith in human nature, but exactly because the self-sustained economy prevented any extreme hierarchy.

Leeson uses the phrase *the invisible hook* in order to explain the governing principles of pirating. Similar to Adam Smith's concept of *the invisible hand*, which is the "hidden force that guides economic cooperations" (Leeson 2) and based on self-interest, *the invisible hook* refers to the economic order behind the "literal anarchy of pirates" (Leeson 2). Smith explains that economy is driven by self-interest. For instance, a milkman does not sell milk and adjusts the price because of his concern for other people who should drink milk, but because of his attempt to sell as much milk as possible to as many people as possible at the price that will allow him both to dominate the market and make a profit. Pirates, Leeson claims, implore the same logic. While they do not sell things and did not improve the society as a whole, they were still governed by self-interest: "pirates devised ingenious practices—some there're famous for—to circumvent costs that threatened to eat into their profits and increase the revenue of their plundering expeditions. When pirates offered crew members rewards for superlative pirating, crew members worked harder to lookout for the next big prize . . . " (5-6).

The main reason for becoming a pirate was the "opportunity to become incredibly wealthy" (Leeson 13). Unlike privateers, who were commissioned by governments to seize enemy's merchant ships during wars and were therefore forced to share their loot with ship owners, pirates indulged themselves in sea banditry and shared among themselves their profit. And unlike sailors, who were at the bottom of the sea hierarchy, they were not responsible to a captain, a nation, or a king. Pirate ships did not either have a hierarchy typical for merchant

ships. Those ships had captains who often used their authority against sailors for their personal benefit. Sailors were punished for their potential misbehavior by either reduced pay, or by physical violence. The hierarchy between the captains and seaman was obvious. On pirate ships, however, captains were held accountable for their behavior and their control over sailors was limited. As a consequence, a form of democracy was established but only as an outcome of the sailor abuse on merchant ships, and pirates' desire to manage their "piratical cooperation" (Leeson 20) successfully. In short, piracy was a business, albeit a criminal business.

Remarkably, Acker does not distinguish between the sailor, the pirate, and the buccaneer, or between pirating and privateering. She uses the terms interchangeably, probably because of the lack of a deeper knowledge about the subject: "All good sailors espouse and live in the material simplicity which denies the poverty of the heart" (114). As a writer who insists on the metaphorical and multilayered meanings of her texts, even though invested in the popular culture myth about the "free sea souls," she would have been more careful if she had been aware of the differences inscribed in the terms. They, after all, enrich the texts with a rather different implication. While sailors and buccaneers, for instance, are paid by the government, pirates are free agents. Moreover, privateering is legal, and justified by governments as a means of the battle for sea dominance in peaceful times, but piracy is not. If caught, pirates were severely prosecuted. They were considered criminals and were publicly hanged, in an attempt to both prevent any further piracy fugitives, and demonstrate in the most obvious way the legal punishment for practicing piracy. In Acker's *Empire* all of these terms are blended into one, unified by Acker's romantic and idealistic understanding of piracy. When Thavai in the final chapters longs to be a sailor—not a pirate—he actually wants to become a submissive,

overworked and underpaid government employee. And that could not be further from the point Acker attempts to make.

Acker's glorification of the pirate life is, at least, ironic. Instead of being the subversive force behind the capitalistic word that will revolutionize and unavoidably change it, pirates are the self-centered power that, forced by economic calculation, distance themselves from the capitalistic center in order to take advantage of the capitalist system. Early in the narrative she introduces an idea very similar to Leeson's—that piracy was actually a business—although she abandons it promptly only to insist on the concept of the pirates as a potential subversive force of society. When Acker writes that "Piracy was the most anarchic form of private enterprise" (26), and that "Thus, at that time, in one sense, the modern economic world began. In anarchic times, when anybody could become any one and thing, corsairs, free enterprisers roamed everywhere more and more" (26), she insists, as Leeson does, that business constitutes the very core of the pirate life. In her understanding, and contrary to Leeson's argument, such a life was marked by anarchy. Leif Soransen notes that Acker defines piracy through European military history and the rise of capitalism, and claims that in *Empire* "the pirate foreshadows, instead of standing in opposition to, the multinational corporation" (192). However, Acker does not include in her definition such a pessimistic note because what would then be the purpose of longing for the pirate life, if it just leads us back to capital, even in its very primitive form. She continues her definition by expressing compassion for the outcasts who were almost forced to become pirates; those who willingly renounced their national and religious identity, found the sea as the only place where they could exist, undisturbed: "But in 1574, when regular, regulated war, that is, national war, which the nations involved had maintained at huge expense only via authoritarian expansion, ceased: the sailors the soldiers the poor people the disenfranchized the sexually

different waged illegal wars on the land and the sea” (26).

Although Acker is not right that Europe of 1574 was free of war, she argues that piracy was established because those who previously fought in service for their kings suddenly were *jobless*, and poor again. For Acker, such an occurrence is symptomatic of a power conflict whose real victims are the lower social classes: “By the time of the total halt of the legal, or national, European wars forced the French and German soldiers either to disappear or to become illegal—pirates” (26). Abandoned by their governments, as Acker views the poor, they were forced to become pirates, just as in the contemporary times corporations take advantage of their employees, only to get rid of them when they are not needed, or not able to successfully perform any more. That is why Acker’s characters aspire to become pirates; once they recognize the capitalistic hierarchy—or, at least, their uneasiness to live in the world as it is—they dream of becoming a pirate. To be an outcast would not only allow them to exercise power over their own lives, but they would be able to make sense of their reality in which being an outcast does not stigmatize them. Being a pirate, at least according to Acker, justifies one’s existence and grants a feeling of confidence, in the environment entirely composed of the social rejects. The only problem is, nevertheless, that not even Acker believes in such a possibility.

Yet another reason Acker is mesmerized by pirates is her implied understanding that the sea bandits were not only social outcasts, but also homosexuals and therefore sexually disenfranchised. For Acker, they resist the traditional sexual norm and are therefore subversive for the society, even though they removed themselves to its very margins. Their sexual non-conformity is appealing exactly because it is potentially revolutionary. Both in her private life and in her books, Acker sees sexuality as a means of social subversion and personal

accomplishment, and *Empire* is not an exception.¹⁸ The second chapter of the book told by Thavai, “Raise from the Dead,” starts with a scene of homosexual sex: “‘Afterwards I’d like to do it to you,’ the first pirate turned to the second pirate” (26). The sex is presented as meaningless and absurd (one pirate is concerned if he could get pregnant), if a violent bond between the pirates. As Acker narrates is, there is nothing unusual about neither the homosexual sex nor violence practiced by pirates. The scene ends abruptly, with pirates eating Nestle almonds, Cadbury chocolate flakes, and Mars bars. Their indulgence in the capitalist commodity products is more unusual and more important for Acker. Homosexuality, at least for Acker, is a standard, acceptable form of behavior that becomes tarnished by the pirates’ appetite for candies. The following quote illustrates that Acker is primarily concerned with the economics and political systems, while she understands sexuality as a matter of personal choice (which, disappointingly, can be practiced undisturbed only within a restricted space in all of her novels):

The Captain, me, walked on deck. “What a group of pigs! Didn’t your teachers in all the nice boarding schools you went to, which you never talk about, teach you about nutrition?”

“This ship isn’t a public school,” Fatty blurted out through showers of Coca-Cola mixed with beer. “This shit is a pirate ship. And this is a philanthropic association.”

“Sure,” Captain Thavai, me, sneered. “I’m a sweet socialist government so I’m paying you to sit on your asses in the sun and get suntanned just so that you are so happy you

¹⁸ In the movie, *Who’s Afraid of Kathy Acker?*, she argues for a sexual freedom and non-conventional sex. To paraphrase Acker, she claims that different things sexually excite different people. Moreover, sexual freedom leads to political and individual independence. In her essay about Marquis de Sade, for instance, she claims that “De Sade’s deeper purpose in penning these dialogues could not have been the seduction of the fifteen-year-old. Of a virgin who despises virginity and, even more, her mother—always a sign in the Sadean universe a propensity for freedom” (“Bodies of Work” 67). In Acker’s universe, sexuality is directly associated with an individual’s rejection of social norms.

will not revolt against my economic fascism.”

Fatty dropped to oppose me. “No way. This ship is our philanthropic association, our place of safety, our baby crib. Since they have enough dough to be our charity donors, all the people outside us here, are our enemies.” (21-22).

Since the pirate ship is a place of refuge for all of the outsiders, it unites them in their conflict with the world. Non-heterosexuality is, for Acker, only one instance of those who are either expelled or disagree with the mainstream. Leeson claims that “it’s highly doubtful that pirates cared one way or another about their fellow rogues’ sexual proclivities” (171), while Mackie says that pirates represent “a form of pronounced masculinity affirmed outside of sexuality” (120). Leeson adds that there is not any evidence that pirates were predominantly homosexual, which had been a scholarly conclusion about pirates’ sexual behavior, and emphasizes that there is, however, evidence that some of them were not gay. Archival notes mention their visits to ports’ “red quarters,” as well as evidence their marriages and extra-marital affairs. For instance, Leeson writes that Blackbeard was supposedly married to more than a dozen wives. While he recognizes this as an overstatement, he also mentions that “Blackbeard would not have developed this reputation if he hadn’t taken a strong interest in women” (Leeson 172). On the other hand, 17th-century buccaneers developed an institution called *matelotage* in which, according to Leeson, scholars wrongly recognized homosexual elements. The pirate would pair with another one, agreeing to share with him belongings and, in case of death in a battle, the dead buccaneer’s share would go to his *matelot*. Most often, the agreement was actually focused on the wife who should get the possessions of the dead buccaneer. Leeson bluntly states that *matelotage* was “a form of insurance. Buccaneers could diversify the risk of their chosen trade by spreading their potential gains and losses over two people instead of one” (174-5).

Mackie, interestingly, recognizes “the pirate’s hypermasculinity” (120) but adds that it was not acted upon; its mode is “nonsexual” (120). She explains that the assumption about pirate’s hypermasculinity is based on their actions, but that also our modern recognition of the pirate’s sexuality “speaks to our own modern assumption that masculinity depends heavily on the performance of sexuality” (120). The pirate’s sexuality remains private (or, at least, there are not historical accounts to confirm excessive sexual behavior), and therefore Mackie finds it especially appealing as a model for pre-teenage films aimed toward boys: “In the pirate, the preadolescent boy finds a model of autonomous masculinity outside not only the confines of the maternal domestic arena but also outside the as yet uncharted an anxious territory of sexuality itself (120; the error present in the original text). Although Mackie’s understanding of the pirate’s sexuality is provocative, it is based on her reading of Daniel Defoe’s *Captain Singleton*, and therefore can be argued that the pirate’s decision to not act sexually is actually written in the convention of the genre and the time period. Mackie’s reading, in this case, is literally, not historically based, as much as her understanding of the appeal of films such is the franchise *The Pirates of the Caribbean* is, paradoxically, oversexualized. Preadolescents are interested in *The Pirates* not so much because of the suppressed sexuality, but because of the adventure and exoticism, and even romanticism, that is dominant in the contemporary pirate myth. Acker’s understanding of piracy, no matter how flawed, is rooted in such a popular culture comprehension of piracy as an ultimate example of freedom and brotherhood.

Acker’s nostalgia for the distant past whose circumstances made piracy possible, and her melancholy associated with the present doomed by the capital, is not as romantic as it might seem at first. Leeson writes that contemporary pirates are nothing like those from the past. Besides the fact that contemporary pirates, exactly like the old ones, are centered in waters where

government enforcement is poor but ships are abundant (Indonesia and Somalia), they do not share any trait with their predecessors. Modern pirates, which Leeson categorizes in three groups, spend very little time together and often approach piracy as banditry. Whether they are contracted by land criminals or organized by themselves, when the loot is collected, “they return to their villages on the coast where they live among non-pirates and resume their daily jobs” (Leeson 203). They do not sail, or live together on a ship for months, and therefore “they don’t constitute a society and consequently face a few, if any, of the problems their forefathers did. Because of this, most modern sea dogs don’t exhibit any discernible organizational structure” (Leeson 204).

Although Acker at the time did not operate with a theoretical framework such is Leeson’s, her longing and the impossibility of being a pirate—free of any political or social obligations—made her revise her understanding of piracy. In her last book, *Pussy*, piracy is a female privilege and therefore introduced as an alternative to the patriarchal structure of the word. Her exclusively female characters are able, although with certain obstacles, to practice piracy without any restrictions. Of course, the basic expectation of the pirate life is to find a treasure, live on the margin of the society (in caves) and, most importantly, steal. Marjorie Worthington recognizes in stealing the component through which Acker’s female characters attempt to claim a space for themselves, since they are either expelled from the public space, or not allowed to enter it. Worthington, therefore, concludes that “As the characters attempt to find a pirate space where they can be free, the novel itself represents an attempt to construct that very space: a narrative space in which female characters can escape or transcend the traditional narrative demands on the feminine” (401). That is not all. Acker’s inclusion of pirates’ in *Pussy* is not exhausted by the interconnectedness of the pirate and female life. She is particularly

invested in the possibility of reclaiming both the female space and the female life style, “a constitutive action that creates a space for ‘the reign of girl piracy’” (Sorensen 193).

At the end of *Pussy*, a few female pirates find the treasure but contrary to the expectations provided by the narrative and embodied in the pirates’ life, the treasure remains untouched. One of the women pirates, Silver, claims that “I’d rather go a-pirating . . . If me and my girls take all this treasure, the reign of girl privacy will stop, and I won’t have that happen” (Pussy 276). In this case, piracy constitutes a possibility of a uniquely female life, outside of the patriarchal boundaries. If, as Silver reasons, the treasure is taken, such a life would immediately stop exactly because the task (to find treasure) is completed. If, however, the women continue their search for the loot, their uniquely female life is perpetually reclaimed. By avoiding the conclusion of the tasks, and emphasizing the process of their actions, the female characters in *Pussy* can exercise their femininity that is not reduced to the expectations induced by patriarchy. While in *Empire* Acker is unable to suggest in which ways the gender, political, and social discrepancies can be overpowered, in her last book she introduces a utopian vision of a female society. The only limitation of such a society is that it is formed and functions as a refugee from the real life, from the circumstance in which, according to Acker, women are always disenfranchised. That might be the reason in *Empire*, when Abhor realizes that she will never be able to become a pirate, she decides to join a motorcycle gang and practice her freedom randomly driving around the world. Even though Abhor’s attempt to accomplish freedom fails as well, the short section in which Acker describes Abhor’s motorcycle experience is one of the most accomplished parts of the novel. While her character fails to achieve her dream, Acker manages to write the section masterfully, illustrating her desire to not only create art despite its

social and political limitations, but also to accept failure as a component of our daily experiences.

There Isn't a Utopian Future. Or, Is There?

In the final chapter of the novel, "Black Heat," Abhor for a while escapes from Thavai. She walks into the woods, finds a Honda "which was only one year old, prerevolutionary, and in perfect shape except for one cracked mirror" (211). Abhor's idea of freedom is to become a part of the motorcycle gang, which is the equivalent of Thavai's (and Acker's) piracy obsession. Annoyed by Thavai's remarks about her inability to ride a bike, she finds *The Highway Code* in the woods and decides to follow it thoroughly. Her reading of *The Code* is literal because Abhor does not distinguish between abstract knowledge and common sense. Acker replaces "and" with "because" and averts the logic of the "x causes y" chains with a hilarious effect, reminiscent of the historical avant-garde writing. The most prominent theorists of avant-garde, Renato Poggioli, Peter Burger, and Clement Greenberg, recognize in the writing of the period a concentration of the linguistic experimentation. Since our public (and even literary) language is boring, opaque, and prosaic, the task of avant-garde writing is revolutionize it through the implementation of puns, non-linear narratives, symbols, and illogical chains. Such writing is funny and witty, and is purposely created as a negation of the literary tradition and literary conventions. For Poggioli (and Acker as well), the experimental language of the avant-garde has a predominantly social function. Such a language "functions as once cathartic and therapeutic in respect to the degeneration soliciting common language through conventional habits" and affects the "tensions

of our bourgeois, capitalistic, and technological society” (qtd. in Schulte-Sasse viii).¹⁹ Michael Clune, on the other hand, recognizes Acker’s style as “manifest in a Nietzschean assault on the fundamental arbitrariness of causality” (506). He points out that Acker’s characters are not only often unable to understand each other (e.g. language) but that they also cannot comprehend other characters’ requests for love and comfort (e.g. compassion). More importantly, through such a language Acker indicates our inability to successfully participate and comprehend our existential circumstances. Our language fails us even though we are not fully aware of its ineffectiveness. For that purpose, she exposes the discordance between the implied and the said and is interested in the interconnectedness of the implied and the understood in the language.

The first rule of *The Code* is that the biker must keep his bike in good condition. Abhor reasons that, before she even starts following the rules, she “had to substitute *her* first, but I didn’t think that changed its sense” (213). Then she concludes that “Since this bike wasn’t mine, I could keep her in any condition. Since it was only commonsense and commonsense is in my head, I tore out this section of *The Highway Code* and tossed it into a ditch” (213). The misunderstanding emerges because of Abhor’s literal reading of the manual: only bike owners should take care of their bikes. She fails to understand—or, rather, Acker would argue, the manual’s language fails because of its imprecision—that “her bike” refers to the bike that the person rides but does not necessarily own it. The commonsense she implores (bike owners keep their bikes in good condition) is not the commonsense of the manual (whoever rides a bike

¹⁹ Although these theorists differ when it comes to the understanding of the historical beginnings of avant-garde, its social function, and its role in the capitalist society, all of them recognize the linguistic experimentations as one of the main characteristics of avant-garde. Moreover, Andre Breton's *Manifests of Surrealism* (especially the First), approached avant-garde writing prescriptively: the writes should stay away from the realistic tradition and provide the narrative of our inner lives, which is achievable through the establishment of a new, experimental language. See: Renato Poggioli. *The Theory of the Avant-Garde*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1981.; Peter Bürger. *The Theory of the Avant-Garde*. U of Minnesota P, 1984.; Clement Greenberg. *Art and Culture*. Beacon Press, 1961.; Krzysztof Ziarek. *The Force of Art*. Stanford UP, 2004.

should take care of it). When she ditches the manual, she actually disregards both the logic of the manual—because she is not following it—and common sense because her reasoning is exclusive and limited to her own experience.

Similarly, when she reads that the driver needs to be in good condition to drive, she says that “Since I was obviously in bad condition from my jail experience and from my Thavai experience and, generally, from life (my life), there was no need for me to stay away from as much booze as I could get my hands, paw, and other limbs on” (214). She concludes that if *The Code* is based on commonsense, she obviously does not need it because she practices nothing but commonsense. Abhor uses the same logic when reading all of the other rules from the manual. She cannot keep distance that is not lesser than the overall stopping distance because she does not know what the overall stopping distance might be, and she cannot leave enough space between her and the vehicle in front of her just because there is not any vehicle in front of her. Although Acker does not mention him as one of her literary influences, her reasoning recalls the absurdist logic of Daniil Harms: “The problem with following rules is that, if you follow rules, you don’t follow yourself. Therefore, the rules prevent, dement, and even kill the people who follow them. . . . Disobeying rules is as the same as following rules cause it’s necessary to listen to your heart” (Acker 219). Therefore, when her escape from prison, Thavai, and the revolution fail, it seems it is because of her heart. Abhor did not follow *The Code*, but she did not really disobey it; she was imploring her commonsense. Inevitably, in the end, she faces failure because her logic is actually the one of outcasts—not of the mainstream and the traditional reason—and therefore doomed to fail: “I stood there, there in the sunlight, and thought that I didn’t as yet know what I wanted. I now fully knew what I didn’t want and whom I was hating. That was

something. And then I thought that, one day, maybe there'd be a human society in a world which is beautiful, a society which wasn't just disgust" (227).

What Abhor knows is that she does not want to be a part of the motorcycle gang because the policemen who caught her and want return her back to prison tell her a horrifying story about gang violence. Disappointed, she realizes there is not any possibility for escape, with which Acker fully establishes her "myth" about failed contemporary society. Abhor also, as Sorensen correctly contends, "rejects both the postmodern control society and the revolutionary society that has sprung up in opposition to it" (188). The attempt to bring about the change by the averted colonial practices does not cancel the flaws of the capitalistic word. In fact, it perpetuates them because even if the position of the colonized and the colonizer is changed, the system within which they function is unchallenged. Thus the failure Acker acknowledges in her texts here manifests as her inability to create a society even in her writing that is not "just disgust."

Although the previous paragraph is the final paragraph of the novel, *Empire* does not close with it. The image below closes *Empire*. Heavily tattooed and pierced, Acker admires tattoo as a profound art and even dedicates the novel to "my tattooist." In that context, the final image of the novel is not surprising, especially when one keeps in mind that in the novel Acker says that "The tattoo is primal parent to visual arts. . . . In decadent phases, the tattoo became associated with the criminal—literally the outlaw—and the power of the tattoo become intertwined with the power of those who chose to live beyond the norms of society" (140). In her interviews, she repeats the same argument about tattoo as a profound art, spiritual and material, and above all, the sign of the outcasts. Her characters, as well as she, attempt if not to live beyond the social conventions, to at least create ones that suite their unconventionality. Acker describes tattoos like this: "[They represent] not only outcasts—outcasts can be bums—but

people who are beginning to take their own sign-making into their own hands. There're conscious of their own making, signifying values really" (Friedman 18). If she had lived, she would have been surprised to discover that tattoos have become in the 1990s a commodity item embraced by pop culture, and that even that element of her resistance politics failed to be effective and everlasting. Sanders claims that the previously inscribed deviance of the tattoo has diminished because of its wider practice in the 1990s and, therefore, it is seen as less rebellious

or odd: "Clearly, tattooing has moved out of the dark underground of the 1950s into to spotlight of mainstream commercial culture" (Sanders viii).

The tattoo, as he puts it, became "de-deviantized" (Sanders viii).²⁰



A combination of unskilled handwriting and a symbolic image, Acker's tattoo is actually a visualization of the final words of the first section in which Thavai and Abhor get tattoos or, as Acker says, when they get "carved into roses" (ES 86). The tattoo has already appeared in the

²⁰ More about tattoos, see: Amelia Klem Osterud. *The Tattooed Lady: A History*. Golden: Speck Press, 2009.; Adrienne Lois Kaeppler. *Pacific Arts of Polynesia and Micronesia*. New York: Oxford UP, 2008.; Erich Goode. *Extreme Deviance*. Los Angeles: Pine Forge Press, 2008.; Mindi Fenske. *Tattoos in American Visual Culture*. New York: Pgrave Macmillian, 2007.; Ken Gelder. *Subcultures: Cultural Histories and Social Practice*. New York: Routledge, 2007.; Karin Beeler. *Tattoos, Desire and Violence: Marks of Resistance in Literature, Film and Television*. Jefferson: McFarland, 2006.

final pages of the novel, when Abhor learns to write a motorcycle. Reading the *Code*, she finds pictures that are actually traffic signs, “radioactive,” “compressed gas,” and “toxic,” and reads them as an explication of the current political and social situation. For instance, “compressed gas” means that “The CIA is uprooting the soil that had been used for agricultural purposes . . . There were more and more motorcycles” (220). The tattoo is Abhor’s “final picture which summed up all the other pictures” (221), made in response to the signs she sees in the *Code* whose importance is further emphasized by its inclusion on the last page of the novel. The image is a combination of a dagger and a bleeding rose, where the dagger is stabbed through the rose and causes it to bleed, while it simultaneously forms its stem around which is written “discipline and anarchy.” The unprofessionally done image, with the uneven letters and underdeveloped drawing, recalls the cultural stereotype about bad sailors’ tattoos.

The tattoo is also a reference to the pirate’s grave. Away on the sea, the pirates cannot have their graves carved because the graveyard is the sea: “No roses grow on sailor’s graves” (114). Therefore, they are carved into roses, into tattoos on their own bodies that are also their gravestones. Forgotten and without a marker of their existence, sailors continue their free life even in death. One of the finer connections between Acker’s prose and the visual elements included in *Empire*, the tattoo summarizes Acker’s desire for a society free of social, political, and social restrictions. It also reinstates her pessimism about its potential existence. Combining the rose and the dagger, as well as anarchy and discipline—the radically opposite elements—she smirks at her own effort to resolve the dilemma. She recognizes yet one more time failure that marks her political and artistic attempts. If she provides a universal narrative, it is the one about the perpetually failed attempts to change the patriarchal and capitalist society. If one were, also, to respond to her question about a possibility for reaching happiness in the phallogentric society,

which was at the center of her second section, the answer would be simpler than she would like it to be. Although as a society the U.S. fails, as well as the dominant capitalist and neo-colonial system, Acker hints that only art and our personal accomplishments can make sense of the flawed universe: “[it] doesn’t mean that you can’t change things slowly, or on a person-to-person basis—that’s what I was suggesting at the end of *Empire of the Senseless*” (McCaffery 96). That is why hope is only that is left and why Acker closes the book with an anticipation of a better future; only can writing and exploration of the world within the arts save us. Everything else is failure.

Chapter 2: Nostalgia, Apocalypse, and Race: Historical Failure in DeLillo's *Underworld*

In a *New York Times* article published shortly before *Underworld* (1997), Don DeLillo claims that, “The novel is the dream release, the suspension of reality that history needs to escape its own brutal confinements” (par. 1). He then provocatively invokes Aristotle’s distinction between history and poetry, favoring the latter for its transformative powers. DeLillo’s reference to the ancient philosopher, fascinating in a decade when history was declared dead,²¹ suggests that he most certainly does not abandon the past. Rather, he articulates a decidedly poetic approach to the historical moment. For DeLillo, the power of the historical novel lies precisely in its ability to suspend history. At its best, in other words, the historical novel becomes poetic exactly as a way of suspending history in order to comprehend it. The writer’s task, as DeLillo contends, is to fight through language “the vast and uniform Death that history tends to fashion as its most enduring work” (par. 20). DeLillo’s 11th novel, *Underworld*, engages in such a struggle.

The notion of history in *Underworld* has been most often analyzed through tropes of commodification or paranoia in the context of the 1950s Cold War.²² Elements of apocalypse, nostalgia, and race—the main focus of this essay—have not been in the center of critical

²¹ Francis Fukuyama, for instance, in his *The End of History and the Last Man* (1992), argues that liberal democracy, which he sees as a dominant political system at the end of the 20th century, represents both the final point of ideological evolution and the ultimate form of government, therefore announcing the end of history. According to Fukuyama, liberal democracies lack internal contradictions that are essential for an evolutionary progress of history, while the end of history is associated with the end of the Cold War.

²² Paranoia and the ways in which it is produced and manifested in *Underworld* is often a subject of critical attention. See: John N. Duvall “Excavating the Underworld of Race and Waste in Cold War History: Baseball, Aesthetics, and Ideology.” *Critical Essays on Don DeLillo*. Ed. Hugh Ruppersburg. New York: G.K. Hall & Co., 2000. 258-282.; Thomas Mayers. “*Underworld* or: How I Learned to Keep Worrying and Live the Bomb.” *Underworlds: Perspectives on Don DeLillo's Underworld*. Eds. Joseph Dewey, Steven G. Kellman and Irving Malin. Newark: U of Delaware P, 2002. 161-172.; Peter Knight, ed. *Conspiracy Nation: The Politics of Paranoia in Postwar America*. New York: New York UP, 2002.

attention even though they were associated with the questions of historical memory.²³ I argue, however, that nostalgia and apocalypse provide a new insight into the novel and the historical moment upon which it concentrates. DeLillo's understanding of race, on the other hand, exposes both the firm racial hierarchy of American society and the historically induced marginalization of the African-American community. A close reading of the novel, in the manner that Jane Gallop has recently proposed with a focus on the style and "reading the text itself" in order to look at "what is actually on the page . . . in the *writing*"(7),²⁴ suggests that history in *Underworld* is formed as an abiding conflict between nostalgia and apocalypse, in whose background is a simmering racial conflict. As a consequence, the characters fail to identify themselves with the historical present, longing for the past, while the racial clashes remain unsolved. While Acker's characters are unable to challenge their present, DeLillo's protagonists reject it because it is a source of their existential uneasiness.

²³ See, for instance: Molly Wallace. "'Venerated Emblems': DeLillo's *Underworld* and the History of Commodity." *Critique* 42.4 (2001): 367-382.; Peter Knight: "Everything is Connected: *Underworld*'s Secret History of Paranoia." *Critical Essays on Don DeLillo*. Ed. Hugh Ruppersburg. New York: G.K. Hall & Co., 2000. 282-301.; Steven G. Kellman. "Don DeLillo's Logogenetic Underworld." *Underworlds: Perspectives on Don DeLillo's Underworld*. Eds. Joseph Dewey, Steven G. Kellman and Irving Malin. Newark: U of Delaware P, 2002. 68-78.; Emily Apter. "On Oneworldedness; Or Paranoia as a World System." *American Literary History* (18:2) 2006: 365-89.

²⁴ Gallop provides a list of elements on which a close reading typically focuses: 1) unusual vocabulary, 2) seemingly unnecessary repeated words, 3) images and metaphors, 4) text written in italics or parentheses, 5) footnotes.

Order of the Past

What I really want to get at is the ordinary thing, the ordinary life behind the thing.

Because that's the heart and soul of what we're doing here. DeLillo, Underworld

The melancholic and catastrophic elements of the novel are not projected into the past or the future, but instead they exist within the present. In that sense, nostalgia and apocalypse are correctives of the contemporary moment. Even more importantly, nostalgia and apocalypse reveal the characters' discomfort in their own present; the characters long for the moments when history was horrifying. They are nostalgic—despite all of the attempts of denial—because the approaching end of the world seemingly stabilizes in their view the global order. In other words, they are nostalgic for the time during which they dreaded the apocalypse, failing to embrace the changed historical moment.

Nostalgia is longing for a time that cannot be restored in the present. Linda Hutcheon claims that nostalgia marks “the invocation of a partial, idealized history [that] merges with a dissatisfaction with the present” (par. 9), while Svetlana Boym divides nostalgia into reflective and restorative; the former critically looks at the past and is often expressed through works of art, and the latter “attempts a transhistorical reconstruction of the lost home” (xvii) and is associated with kitsch and “midnight melancholias” (xvii). Ascribing an aesthetic value to nostalgia, Boym adds that restorative nostalgia is the basis for all national and religious revivals of a specific historical moment, whereas reflective nostalgia can present “an ethical and creative challenge” to the moment (Boym xviii). Although *Underworld's* nostalgia is often more reflective than

restorative, the novel contains both aspects of nostalgia that not only enrich the notions of historical but also problematize the understanding of the American recent past.

Characters in *Underworld* repeatedly try to revitalize the past in order to make sense of their present. There is also an attempt—nostalgically—to restore the past in order to gain a stabilized personal and national identity; what enriches the narrative are both aspects of statements about nostalgia, most often delivered by the characters who reminisce about their previous private and historical experiences, which, paradoxically, leaves the characters perplexed about their own positions within the historical context. DeLillo's introduces this contradiction as early as in the first chapter, "Long Tall Sally, Spring Summer 1992." Nick opens the narrative 41 years after the infamous Brooklyn Dodgers New York Giants baseball game played on the day when the Russians tested the second H-bomb: the Cold War ended, and with it disappeared the peril of a nuclear cataclysm. Nick comes to a site in Arizona where Klara Sax, his lover from his teenage days when she was the wife of his former science teacher, works on an art project that includes B-52 long range bombers that were designed for and carried nuclear bombs. Klara is adamant that her assignment is "an art project, not a peace project" (70). The project consists of repainting 230 planes and arranging them in the desert where they stand as symbols of an overpowering influence of the Cold War.

Stressing that the "desert bears the visible signs of all the detonations we set off. All the crates and warning signs and no-go areas and burial markers, the sites where debris is buried" (71), Klara discusses the project in an interview for a French television network. She compares the present 1992, after the end of the Cold War, with the times before the fall of the Berlin Wall. Unexpectedly, this is reflective nostalgia in its purest form:

Now that power is in shatters or tatters and now that those Soviet borders don't even exist in the same way, I think we understand, we look back, we see ourselves more clearly, and them as well. Power meant something thirty, forty years ago. *It was stable, it was focused, it was a tangible thing.* It was greatness, danger, terror, all those things. And it held us together, the Soviets and us. Maybe it held the world together. *You could measure things. You could measure hope and you could measure destruction.* Not that I want to bring it back. It's gone, good riddance. But the fact is. (76; emphasis mine)

Interestingly, Klara was not particularly affected by the Cold War; she was at the time she nostalgically remembers a struggling artist in New York with a few marital dilemmas, and later she held a social position that allowed her to perceive the conflict catalyzed through the artistic and intellectual milieu. However, DeLillo insists—giving Klara's character a prominent position at the beginning of the novel—that even those who were not directly affected by the Cold War were profoundly influenced by it. She even claims that “war scared me all right” (75) although she only watched the sky from her roof, cushioned by warm California nights and an upper-class marriage. She approaches her project with an ambition to “get the ordinary life behind the thing” (77), to expose the component of everyday life that is not directly associated with the Cold War weaponry. Even though Klara's project introduces a gender specific example (erotically painted women) to support her argument about the omnipresence of the Cold War, the symbolism of her project transcends gender limitations.

As she explains, the planes' noses are painted, commonly with women, creating “nose art.” Klara is mesmerized by the images because, in fact, they represent “a charm against death” (77) to the soldiers who “lived in a closed world with its particular omens and symbols and they were young and horny to the boot” (77). Her project, therefore, should reveal the mundane

existence that is associated with the Cold War although not directly influenced by it, exactly in the same manner that her own existence was profoundly affected by the war although she did not directly participate in it. That is the reason she, while removing the combat paint and repainting the planes, keeps only “nose art,” the equivalent of male paintings on bar bathroom walls. Reducing the plans to symbols of the Cold War whose common characteristic is gorgeous, clumsily painted women, Klara insists on the underlying unity of the generation exposed and involved in the Cold War conflict. The implied eroticism of the paintings is easily comprehensible despite the change of setting. The painted women signify maleness; those who might see or draw a painting on a bathroom wall are metaphorically introduced to the battle by the women placed on the planes’ noses. The soldiers in the combat planes maintain a contact with the daily routine by the images on the planes, the images that carry them into apocalyptic flames. The art that emerges from Klara’s project points out the impossibility of escaping the profound influence of history.

On the other hand, although an example of reflective nostalgia, Klara’s sentiment announces longing that is dominant for *Underworld*’s characters. She does not really long for the Cold War, or the strict power structures. She longs for a time when there was an order, for the period when it was easy to position oneself and define one’s identity through a simple opposition. Klara also yearns for the times when it seemed that, despite a horrifying future prospect, it was easy to imagine it; there was a future. She adds that the things “had become unreal” (82); if the end of the Cold War allowed the big powers to understand each other better, as she claims, why would the threat of the nuclear war be more appealing if not because of a nostalgic reinterpretation.

Klara also states that after the Cold War “Many things that were anchored to the balance of power and the balance of terror seem to be undone, unstuck. Things have no limits now” (76). Despite its inhuman nature, the War introduced an order that allowed Klara to position herself toward reality. The dreadful time was, at least to a certain point, instructing because the expectations regarding the power and terror, two elements that she singles out, are obvious. It was apparent what can be expected from the present, while in the post-Cold War moment—it seems to her—such positioning is, at least, challenging.

Threads of Klara’s testimonial are present throughout *Underworld*, to the extent that it can be perceived as DeLillo’s announcement of his understanding of American history and non-historical figures within it. His characters are most often in a historical limbo: defined by history and outside of it, they are failures of their times. Klara’s reaction also “poses the question, what if the *End* does not happen?” (Rosen 100), which forces the characters to vacillate between the longing for the past and the fear of the future that is indefinable, exactly because there are not strict political binaries in their present. This idea DeLillo develops gradually, expanding it from Klara’s comparison between the past and the present to Marvin’s openly articulated longing for the times of terror.

The character who further elaborates the Cold War nostalgia is Nick. He is engaged in a dialogue with Klara and explains that: “I believed we could know what was happening to us. We were not excluded from our own lives. That is not my head on someone else’s body in the photograph that’s introduced as evidence. . . . I lived in the real” (82). His visit to Klara’s colony is an attempt to revisit the romantic past he had with her, even though he claims that he decided on a whim, after reading an article in an airplane magazine, to see Klara and her project. His obsession with the ball from the historical Dodgers-Giants game, in the same manner, is an

attempt to preserve the nostalgic notion of that past: a piece of his history.²⁵ He cannot, however, explain his obsession with the baseball beyond “it’s the only thing in my life that I absolutely had to own” (97), seeing in it a symbol of “mystery of loss” (97). Nick claims that he needs to have the ball to “commemorate failure” (97); not to glorify the win of the Giants’ but to be constantly reminded of the Dodgers’ loss: “To have that moment in my hand when Branca turned and watched the ball go into the stands—from him to me” (97). Similarly, most of the *Underworld*’s characters glorify the moment of disruption—the pressing threat of the war—and not the moment in which the crisis is solved. In that sense, they understand failure of the international politics as the defining moment of their existence.

That is why it is not surprising that in the very end Nick repeats Klara’s nostalgic words from the first chapter almost verbatim. His initial suspicion about the historicity of his own life is dissolved and he embraces the historical moment as a constitutive element of his own individuality. Nick, recapitulating his life and closing one narrative stream, claims that:

I long for the days of disorder. I want them back, the days when I was alive on the earth,
rippling in the quick of my skin, heedless and real. . . . This is what I long for, the breach

²⁵ The ball, which is in American pop-culture known as “Shot Heard around the World”—incorrectly and self-indulgently—has reached a mythological status in American arts. Jack Kerouac and John Steinbeck wrote about it, while Phillip Roth included it in his satire about baseball and the U.S., *The Great American Novel* (1973). It was, as well, mentioned in Woody Allen’s *Deconstructing Harry* (1997), in which the protagonist claims that the homerun was for him the first proof of God’s existence, and in an episode of *M*A*S*H*, “A War for All Seasons,” in which Klinger convinces Winchester to bet on the Dodgers. Francis Ford Coppola included the game in his *Godfather* (1972), even though the narrative of the movie takes place in 1949, not 1951. Most recently, Colm Tóibín in *Brooklyn* (2009) uses the game and the ball references in order to contextualize the narrative. Until one of the characters, a Dodgers fan, mentions that they were tremendously beaten “last year” by Bobby Thompson, it is only clear that the narrative takes place after the World War II. As well, one of the decisions the young couple, jokingly, makes is about the baseball preferences of their future children; the dilemma is whether they will be Dodgers’ or Giants’ fans. In 2004, the sports auction house Lelands.com announced that it would guarantee \$1 million at the auction to a person who brings the ball to the office. See: Vic Ziegel. “Offer Heard Around the World.” *Daily News* April 19, 2004 August 4, 2009 http://www.nydailynews.com/archives/sports/2004/04/19/2004-04-19_offer_heard_round_world.html

of peace, the days of disarray when I walked real streets and did things slap-bang and felt angry and ready all the time, a danger to others and a distant mystery to myself. (810)

This can be considered the chagrin of an old man who misses his youth and is aware of his passing life but, as the narrative shows, he assisted an un-intentional suicide, spent years in jail, indulged himself in a bizarre affair with his teacher's wife, as well participated in street fights. Nick's nostalgia is private, and restorative; he longs for action and the physical masculinity of his teenage years that happen to be a part of the Cold War era despite the horrifying moments that modeled his existence.

DeLillo announces in the third paragraph of the novel that "Longing on a large scale is what makes history" (11) and later in the narrative destabilizes that notion, claiming, "You do what they did before you. That's the connection you make" (174). In that sense, nostalgia is also haunting. It does not allow the characters to progress, leaving them in a psychological vacuum in which reevaluating the past is the ultimate quest. Marvin Lundy is the character who is mostly unhappy with the historical outcome of the Cold War. For him, the war is not "winding down" (170) and it is also needed for the U.S. to stay on top of the dominance of the world. Years after the Russian nuclear explosion, he produces a reading that has a threatening post-Cold War implication: "It's like they knew. They sensed there was a connection between this game and some staggering event that might take place on the other side of the world" (172). More than Klara or Nick, Marvin yearns for a binary political opposition that makes his historical identification unquestionable; his sense of history is fetishized and mythologized.²⁶ He is the character who most clearly expresses longing for the feeling of apocalypse.

²⁶ For a more detailed discussion see: Peter Knight. "Everything is Connected: *Underworld's* Secret History of Paranoia." *Critical Essays on Don DeLillo*. Ed. Hugh Ruppersburg. New York: G.K. Hall & Co., 2000. 282-301.;

Marvin claims that “every privilege in your life and every thought in your mind depends on the ability of the two great powers to hang a threat over the planet” (182). He says this to Brian, Nick’s friend who comes to inquire about the ball and is not particularly interested in the political discourse Marvin offers nor can he understand Marvin’s statement about reality that “doesn’t happen until you analyze the dots” (182). Since the Cold War ended, and with it the obvious polarization of the world that annulled the threat of the imminent apocalypse, Marvin explains that “once that threat begins to fade” (182), “you’re the lost man of history” (182). For Marvin, the dominant sense of the end of the world, a realization that death is about to happen any moment, marks not only the Cold War era but also historicizes his own existence. Without the expected apocalypse, life becomes unremarkable and ordinary.

When Marvin goes to San Francisco to meet Chuckie in an attempt to piece the puzzle of the ball’s history, a woman in a mohawk and white makeup punches a leaflet into the belt of Marvin’s coat. The flyer says, in threatening capital letters: “PEACE IS COMING—BE PREPARED” (318). The scene is short, reminiscent of James Joyce’s *Ulysses*, and reduced to an anecdote told in a half a sentence describing a random urban experience, but its significance is hard to overlook. As in Acker’s prose, the very image of the woman implies her association with the punk movement that is commonly associated with anti-establishment stands.²⁷ The idea of a non-conformist propagating the danger of peace corresponds with Marvin’s discomfort induced by the end of the power and arms race. The woman, in fact, confirms Marvin’s anxiety about the present and reestablishes his nostalgia for the catastrophe-marked past; as much as it becomes

Steven G. Kellman. “Don DeLillo’s Logogenetic Underworld.” *Underworlds: Perspectives on Don DeLillo’s Underworld*. Eds. Joseph Dewey, Steven G. Kellman and Irving Malin. Newark: U of Delaware P, 2002. 68-78.

²⁷ See: Craig O’Hara. *The Philosophy of Punk: More than Noise*. AK Press, 1999.; Steven Taylor. *False Prophet: Field Notes from the Punk Underground*. Wesleyan UP, 2003.; Rupert Weinzierl, ed. *The Postsubcultures Reader*. New York: Berg, 2003.; Daniel Sinker. *We Owe You Nothing: Punk Planet: The Collected Interviews*. New York: Akashic, 2001.

challenging for a political and cultural rebel to revolt in relatively peaceful times, it is as much horrifying for Marvin to find a marker for his own existence. On the other hand, the woman's leaflet can be associated with Marvin's suspicions about the moment when all the restrictions are erased. According to him, the threat of apocalypse provides an order. When the existential danger is gone, the chaos ensues. Hence, he traces the ball. And the ball symbolizes "something larger, the long arching journey of the baseball itself and his own cockeyed march through decades" (318).

The ball for Marvin encapsulates the past of the Cold War with its apocalyptic imminence and justifies his own life. But the ball also represents the moment in which Marvin accepts the apocalyptical threat and the Manichean division of the world's super powers. Therefore it is significant that his quest for the ball starts in the middle of Europe, in Switzerland, "a normal neutral place" (313). On the train, he listens to the game on the radio together with two GIs, but the game is "interrupted whenever the train entered a tunnel, and that's where Marvin was when Thompson hit the homer, racing through a mountains in the Alps" (313). He comes back from his honeymoon that also included a "mission important to Marvin's family" (308), a trip to Gorki, Russia, to where he traces his lost half brother, Avram Lubarski, a former Red Army soldier. With Avram, when he finally finds him in his decrepit apartment that "came without windows" (312) and without a tap in the bathroom because "construction of this block of flats ends on a certain date, finished or not" (312), he argues for three days about political issues—about the Cold World dichotomy. Even their private conversations are overshadowed by the division on "Us and Them" (312); Avram claims that the West will be defeated by the East that sacrifices the standard of its citizens for the future dominance in the world, while Marvin unsuccessfully tries to expose to Avram his own disillusionment. Marvin is particularly upset

“to hear these things from a man so self-assured who is a total nobody, a little guy who pushed upward when he talked, with two false teeth made of stainless steel” (312), as well as that Avram, whose existence is marked by a minimal comfort, can be “so cocky and flushed” (313). The two part with their beliefs unshaken. Avram, “a dedicated communist” (311), and Marvin, a Westerner, never meet again.

Marvin’s confidence in such righteousness of the Western system stems from his embracement of the Cold War politics and its strict division on two poles of the world, intensified by a looming catastrophe. His worldview, likewise, is informed by the East-West conflict. The West is superior, according to Marvin, and he is flabbergasted even by a possibility of the opposite thought. When Marvin talks to Eastern Europeans he encounters on his trip, he tries to expose the faults of their political convictions to the extent that he asks himself “Who are they, Marvin thought, that it drives me crazy not to convince them that they’re wrong” (310). When Avram claims “We’re making bigger bombs that the West can even dream” (313), it seems that only the shock induced by the boldness of Avram’s claim stops Marvin from arguing the same thing about his part of the world. If Marvin is annoyed by Avram’s political and private confidence that cannot be justified by his living standard, it is because Avram uses the same approach to his life as Marvin; he measures it by the possibility of the apocalypse. Marvin’s trip to Russia should have amounted to a rescue mission of a lost, trapped Westerner but, instead, it turns into Marvin’s personal failure. The two brothers cannot find a common ground but that, it appears, is not as important as the fact that the possibility of the looming catastrophe defines the existence of both characters. In that sense, Marvin’s trip confirms his nostalgia for the times of apocalypse and the fact that DeLillo uses a common literary trope of two brothers separated both ideologically and physically by politics intensifies the idea of longing for the apocalyptic times.

The possible end of the world marks both Marvin's and Avram's existence, regardless of their political preferences.

The trip, on the other hand, Marvin remembers mostly by his bowel movements that worsen as he and his wife, Eleanor, move further east: "The deep into communist country, the more foul his BMs" (311). The odor of his intestines is so intense that he fears that he would lose Eleanor on their honeymoon, but while his physical reaction aggravates when he travels toward the East, it disappears once he reaches Western Europe. By the time he listens to the game in the Alps, "his system slowly returned to normal, branny BMs, healthful and mild" (313). His physical reaction to Eastern Europe that was manifested in a horrible odor of his intestines is, at a literal level, a rather blunt suggestion about the East-West dichotomy. Marvin's response to the East marks, actually, a beginning of apocalypse (the rotting of one's body) and also a literal manifestation of his fear induced by the opposing political power that is capable of starting a catastrophe. Significantly, Martin remembers the foul Eastern European episode while he waits for Chuckie in the San Francisco bay, and both he and Eleanor are disgusted by the horrible smell coming from a ship on the pier. The smell ignites Marvin's memory (postmodern take on Marcel Proust's madeleine?) and he recognizes in it the stench of human waste. The ship that emanates the reek "appeared to be abandoned, with bridge and deck deserted and rust stains running down the sides and graffiti spray-painted on the smokestacks in languages he did not recognize and in alphabets unknown" (312). Later in the narrative it is confirmed that the ship cruises around the world because it cannot get rid of its unusual cargo, while the strange alphabet is recognized as Russian. The episode corresponds with Marvin's physical reaction to the East, to crossing the border of the two ideological worlds. The ship's appearance in San Francisco bay is equivalent to the Marvin's trip to Eastern Europe and confirms that the polarized East and West,

whose existence is rooted in the end of the world as we know it, should not interact. In that sense, apocalypse itself is not horrifying—although Marvin’s discomfort and the stench cannot be denied—but the very idea of it.

The hazard of the total end of the world gives meaning to the character’s lives; if materialized (in this case, as human waste), the apocalypse suggests that the “balance” that constitutes it, as *Underworld*’s characters see it, is challenged and the new order of the world is about to ensue. Indeed, the notion of apocalypse stabilizes both the characters and their understanding of the environment and therefore makes them—particularly Marvin—long for the feeling of apocalypse. Similarly to Junot Díaz *Oscar Wao* in which the idea of Trujillo, and not the character himself, overshadows the entire narrative, in *Underworld* it is nostalgia for the times of horror that constitutes the characters’ existence. When in the closing sections of the novel Nick expresses his nostalgia for the past, in the words that recall Klara’s and Marvin’s, there is enough reason to conclude that DeLillo’s protagonists’ selves are in danger because they are trapped in the past as well as they evaluate their own existence through the prism of American history. The order established by the Cold War, no matter how bizarre, provides stability. If the dual classification is annulled, a destabilization that brings discomfort is induced, and that discomfort can be surpassed only if a new order is introduced. If it is not, which was the case both with American and the former USSR foreign politics of the 1990s, longing is all that is left.

Apocalypse Now or Later?

Leave it to Americans to write, The End. Kurt Vonnegut, *Bluebeard*

While nostalgia is associated with long gone moments and apocalypse with upcoming events, both elements in the novel are concerned with the “now”: nostalgia with moments that should be lived in the present and are not, and apocalypse with moments that should never occur in the present, but loom. As much as characters long for the moment of catastrophe, they are also directly exposed to apocalypse that functions as a defining element of their existence.

Apocalypse in *Underworld* is manifested as a historical horror. In Judeo-Christian tradition, before the Revelation, there is first the end of the world. If the Revelation is the ultimate reading of history that becomes a “transcendent realm” (2), as Louis Parkinson Zamora claims, then the apocalypse described in the Old and New Testament is the crucial proof that the political and social practices of that world are deeply disturbing. Most importantly, they are always described by an outsider who emphasizes both the political impotence of the outcast and his disagreement with the structures in power, and serve as a blunt critique of the world that deserves to come to its end. The outsiders, however, wait for God to intervene and correct human history and in doing so their sense of history and time is transformed. Projecting the outsider’s expectations into the future, where God has already mediated the present, the future becomes the past; the future has happened; it is a fact. Apocalypse is a corrective that allowed that future to materialize: “Thus, apocalypse is not merely a vision of doom: For its original audience, it was, on the contrary, a luminous vision of the fulfillment of God’s promise of justice and communal salvation” (Zamora 2). The narrator of the apocalypse and those who believe in their salvation in

the post-apocalyptic times are in mutual agreement that not only is the apocalypse justified, but it is also deserved. Hence, the Revelation is even more transcendent and needed.

Unlike in the Bible where there is a series of catastrophic events, in *Underworld* the apocalyptic elements are a consequence of the paranoid narrative threads and the characters' existentialist fear. In his seminal book, *The Sense of an Ending*, Frank Kermode sees in apocalypse a moment of crisis in which the end is "immanent rather than imminent" (30). He claims, in short, that "anxieties about the end are, in the end, anxieties about one's own end" (186) and that to make sense of our lives, "we need fictions of beginnings and fictions of ends, fictions which unite beginning and end and endow the interval between them with meaning" (190). Even though in *Underworld* apocalypse is understood as a moment of crisis, the nostalgic yearning for apocalypse expands Kermode's definition. Similarly, *Underworld* is more concerned with global politics and their potentially Armageddonian consequences regarding the protagonists' longing for the past.

Narrative threads in *Underworld* have a political implication—they are a critique of the American Cold War years— but the concerns about the catastrophic outcomes are always expressed by outsiders, without any political power (e.g. Marvin, Klara, Moonman).²⁸ The character who shows that apocalyptic sensibility was a defining feature of the Cold War era is Lenny Bruce, a comedian who is nowadays considered a man ahead of his time.²⁹ In the chapter

²⁸ J. Edgar Hoover is the only character completely in control of his private history, with a deep understanding of the extent of his power and the existing moment. He is an Antichrist, described by DeLillo as "a man who distorted the lives of real people as a matter of bureaucratic routine" ("The Power of History" par. 22), and as the man who in the name of "the state controlled the means of apocalypse" (563). Although Hoover is an Antichrist with a style, his character is more important as an illustration of the questionable politics imposed during the Cold War than as a character who manifests a longing for the times of horror. Antichrist with a style, he reveals DeLillo's anti-Hoover sentiment.

²⁹ Literary portrait in the novel is not entirely historically accurate. Elisabeth Rosen points out that the difference between the "historical" Lenny Bruce and his performances, and DeLillo's appropriation in the novel, symbolizes the transition between what "now seems a more innocent, naïve, and refreshing time to our more ambiguous and

“Better Things for Better Living through Chemistry,” which depicts a series of private and public “selected fragments” from the 1950s and the 1960s, DeLillo includes five scenes of Bruce’s performance during the week of the Cuban Missile Crisis in 1962. The scenes are set all over the country, in Los Angeles, San Francisco, Chicago, Miami and New York, and follow Bruce’s actual tour although its chronology is revised. In all of the segments of the series, Bruce is a modern Jeremiah, the prophet who sees the coming end. All of his performances are defined by the feeling of apocalypse, and all of his jokes inevitably are interrupted by the voiced fear of the approaching doom: “We’re all gonna die!” The scream, which is never in accordance with the narrative line of the joke Bruce is telling, encapsulates both Lenny’s existential fear and that of the audiences, who came to the comedy club to find a remedy for the horrifying reality by which they are marked. According to Lenny, the apocalyptic sensibility is the defining feature of the present.

Lenny screams at the audience “We’re all gonna die!” but “the audience sat there thinking, How real can the crisis be if we’re sitting in a club on Santa Monica Boulevard going ha ha ha” (507). His routine invokes the catastrophe at the moment when his audience’s attention is drifting away “Then he remembered the line he’d come to love” (547), although the apocalyptic reference exceeds the obvious rhetorical strategy. The terror is titillating and comprehensible for Lenny, but seemingly surreal for his viewers. Not only is it pronounced by a humorist but it also is revealed in the comfortable, bohemian environments of urban America in which the audiences seek a sanctuary from the frightening everyday occurrences. It is easier to believe that the end is not approaching if such a notion is masked by humor. Bruce insists that

complex one” (112), while Catherine Morley claims that it is “striking here” (142) that Bruce did not have skits about the missile crisis. Even though she says that even DeLillo seemed surprised to discover that Bruce had not spoken about the crisis, her argument can be easily repudiated by the claim about one’s artistic and political preferences.

his audiences should comprehend the meaning of nothingness in the same manner in which he defines his own existence in relation to the Cuban crisis. During his performance in San Francisco, the lights go off suddenly, in the middle of his joke about the bomb. The audience's confusion and uncertainty about the event is described like this: "Were they thinking maybe this is it, a bomb, an airburst?" (548). When the lights come on, after a few minutes, and Lenny goes back to the stage mimicking a person sneaking back into the room, "they waited for him to say something that would pay off the long tense moment and shake them with laughter" (548). However, Lenny does not comfort his audience. On the contrary, "he lifted the dingling mike and put it to his face and it began to screech and crackle and then the lights went out again" (548). Lenny, obviously, finishes his show in a dramatic manner. More importantly, he terrifies his audience who perceived the time that passed between turning off and on light as "a twenty-second lifetime later" (548). For a moment, they were not sure if they are a part of the theatrical experience or if the catastrophic reality finally comes to realization. Lenny's spooky exit announces the reality of the apocalyptic moment but it is even more significant that Lenny's skit "works" exactly because the audience is marked by the same potential cataclysmic experience. Similarly, during other performances, his audience "laughed, and half wept" (594), precisely because the Cuban Missile crisis provides a context in which his apocalyptic pronouncements might be taken seriously.

Therefore it is not surprising that, when Lenny announces the solved crisis with "We're not gonna die!" (624), there is a relief on the audience's part because "they've just survived a crisis" (626) and certain disappointment, even boredom for Bruce: "Lenny lost interest" (626). The successfully solved crisis does not bring comfort to the comedian. He claims that "He was supposed to be happy and revitalized but he wasn't" (629). Although the entire country survives

the horrible week and the potentially catastrophic situation whose positive resolution should bring comfort to Lenny, he resignedly claims, “But that was over now. . . . There were other, deeper, vaguer matters. Everything, nothing, him” (629). It seems that there are not any important matters for Lenny once the threat of apocalypse is abolished, and one is led to believe that “deeper, vaguer” matters are actually trivial and mundane. Lenny does not list them because, it appears, there is nothing worth mentioning; whichever concerns arise, they will not reach the magnitude of possible death. Such an understanding is supported by the explanation that Bruce has “been running on scared fumes all week and he feels revived, alive, ready to wail the night away” (626). The fear of death, as well as the death itself, marks Lenny’s existence.³⁰ He even on the spot, during the New York performance that takes place after the solved crisis, invents a joke, a long, meandering story about a virgin grown up in a Mexican bordello, who is saved from the life of perversion by a New England millionaire. Unable to finish the story and feeling the audience’s “puzzlement” (632), he switches to the old mother-in-law jokes. Despite the “booming waves of laughter and applause” (633), Lenny stood on the stage “small and remorseful, and then he turned and walked toward the wings” (633). When the disaster is avoided, the habitual performance again takes place, and Bruce loses his prophetic aura.

But not entirely. The key for understanding Lenny’s apocalyptic character is offered by Clyde, Hoover’s right hand. When he sees, at the Black and White Ball, a few women in modified medieval dresses, they remind him of “the hip sick dopest comic—Lenny Bruce” (574). At that point, Bruce had already been dead for a few months from an overdose, but “an 8X10 police photo of the bloated body—the picture could have been titled *The Triumph of*

³⁰ Recently, José Saramago introduced a similar argument, although in relation to the philosophical discussion about the meaning of life. In *Death with Interruptions* (2008), he claims that life becomes meaningless if it is not defined by death.

Death—was in the Director’s personal file. Why? The horror, the shiver, the hellish sense of religious retribution out of the Middle Ages” (574). The image of Lenny’s deformed body not only appears as a logical continuation of the medieval apocalyptic pronouncement but also his death seems to be reasonable in the times when his voice is ignored. Although Catherine Morley’s argument about Lenny Bruce as “a figure of redemption” (143) is hard to challenge if one understands Lenny as a voice of the nation’s anxieties—as a socially acceptable outlet for the deepest human fears—Lenny’s character, more significantly, points out that the Cold War was defined by the feeling of apocalypse. Even Clyde’s reference to Pieter Bruegel’s *The Triumph of Death*, otherwise “the infinitely reproducible image” (Duvall 260) in the narrative of *Underworld*, indicates the apocalypse in its modern form of which Lenny is a prophet.

These apocalyptic elements declare historical turbulences but their full meaning can be understood only from the historical position and distance from which DeLillo writes and his reader comprehends *Underworld*. The characters are struggling to grasp their present, grabbing for the past and the future in order to gain a place in the historical narrative. Their attempts fail, as one might expect, and their marginal historical position is never changed. The writer and the reader invest in the reading of the novel a historical knowledge, but the characters long for the moments when the official history produced a sense of a stabilized global order. Or, as Klara, early in the novel notes about the WWII and the Cold War: “The one difference is we haven’t actually fought a war this time. *We have a number of postwar conditions without a war having been fought*” (69-70; emphasis mine).

In that sense, the final chapter becomes a grotesque of the first-hand experienced apocalyptic moments of history. While the chapter’s title “Das Kapital” announces the pessimistic triumph of consumption, attempts to achieve the revelation are actually not only

associated with a foreigner but also dislocated to a Third World country. Viktor, Nick's and Brian's host in Kazakhstan, brings them to the spot of the 1953 hydrogen bomb explosion (and hence the one circle of the novel is seemingly closed). Victor, in particular, voices sardonic-reflective nostalgia but, interestingly, problematizes the longing for the times of apocalypse exactly because apocalypse, and the treat of apocalypse, has not ceased to exist. His character underlines DeLillo's idea, introduced with Marvin and Avram, that apocalypse marks *Underworld's* characters regardless of their ideological and geographical preferences, although Victor destabilizes the understanding of apocalypse as a typical occurrence of the Cold War era. The Americans, Nick and Brian, are interested in a commercial use of the testing area and in order to examine its potential to eliminate hazardous materials from the US, they are given a tour. The premise on which the Kazakhstan company Tchaika³¹ builds its business is very simple:

They sell nuclear explosions for ready cash. They want us to supply the most dangerous waste we can find and they will destroy it for us. Depending on degree of danger, they will charge their customers—the corporation or government or municipality—between three hundred dollars and twelve hundred dollars per kilo. . . . *We will get a broker's fee*" (788; emphasis mine).

But it seems that the Americans, especially Nick who narrates the episode, are not entirely aware of the context in which they engaged themselves. Nor do they find anything ethically problematic. Nick is flabbergasted not only by post-USSR Kazakhstan's debris and remnants of the historical world (e.g. how could Lenin, Trotsky, and Marx be together in a club on "the forty-

³¹ Tchaika (Чайка) in Russian means seagull but DeLillo is careful not to associate it with one of the most accomplished Anton Chekhov's plays with the same title: "seagull [. . .] refers poetically to the fact that the company's basic business is waste" (791). In the play, the dead seagull is a symbol of an ultimate defeat and a ruined life. Seagull, as a name for a waste management company in Kazakhstan, is also an ironic reference to the biggest cosmodrome in the world during the Cold War era.

second floor of a new office tower” (786)) but also by the blunt and merciless capitalistic logic: the poisonous level of waste is measurable and then easily compensated by money. He shrewdly sees in everything “displacement and redefinition” (786) but since the comment is directly associated with a business building in which they are randomly juxtaposed to “brokerage houses, software firms, import companies and foreign banks” (786), together with the already mentioned club and “a professional Lenin look-alike” (786), it seems that what bothers him the most is the resemblance the East is trying to achieve with the West. The grouping of different elements in one place is an urban and postmodern characteristic of his world—not any different from an amalgam he could see every day in New York— and one wonders why Nick would so strongly react to it if not because of nostalgia. His crossing to the former USSR is both the final catastrophe of his world “as he knows it,” and the end of the historical divide; the potential enemies become business partners, alike in their mercilessness and wittiness to him.

And yet the apocalyptic moments of disgrace and defeat are reserved for non-Americans; the U.S. just wants to get rid of its own waste.³² Nick’s and Brian’s decision to consider Tchaika’s luxurious business proposal is not even questionable although what they see in the country is horrifying, and it is obvious that the consequences of the waste destruction will be equal to those of the nuclear testing. The profit they will gain is presented almost as a “collateral damage” of the world for which they are not personally accountable and that split between

³² Some of the first reviews of the novel emphasized this theme with titles such as “Waste Management” and “We are What We Waste.” Although the subject has been one of the most analyzed in *Underworld* scholarship, waste has been mostly addressed as a problem of commodification, cultural authority, and art in the United States. See, for instance, Todd McGowan. “The Obsolescence of Mystery and the Accumulation of Waste in Don DeLillo’s *Underworld*.” *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* 46 (2005): 123-45.; Paul Gleason. “Don DeLillo, T.S. Eliot, and the Redemption of America’s Atomic Waste Land.” *Underworlds: Perspectives on Don DeLillo's Underworld*. Eds. Joseph Dewey, Steven G. Kellman and Irving Malin. Newark: U of Delaware P, 2002. 130-143.; Jesse Kavadlo. “Recycling Authority: Don DeLillo’s Waste Management.” *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* 42 (2001): 394-401.; Ruth Helyer. “Refuse Heaped Many Stories High’: DeLillo, Dirt, and Disorder.” *Modern Fiction Studies* 45 (1999): 987-1006.

personal and historical responsibility (even if it is not a moral reaction on the reader's part) is, at least, ironic. In the environment where they experience first-hand the nuclear Armageddon, they are engaged in clearing up personal and emotional histories; the importance of their private lives overpowers the significance of the nuclear site. The catastrophe that "directed" many American lives and U.S. politics during the Cold War is materialized in Kazakhstan, almost within reach, but its proximity to the characters is intangible as if they stayed in the U.S. In this case, and similar to the Biblical disaster, it was not the apocalypse itself that was scary but the very idea of it.

Nick tries to understand the former USSR. He, however, reserves for himself a liberal position that, paradoxically, allows Viktor to be the star of one of the most memorable ironic moments in the novel. When he asks Viktor about his occupation before Tchaika, Viktor replies: "I teach history twenty years. Then no more. I look for a new life" (789). And Nick continues the conversation and blurts out: "There are men like you in many American cities now. Russians, Ukrainians. Do you know what they do?' 'Drive taxi, he says'" (789). The moment is hilarious not only because a seemingly polite question suggests an absolute lack of consciousness about immigrant experiences, but also because Viktor recognizes in the question Nick's ignorance and provides the most stereotypical and expected answer. (He also shuts down a probable conversation that might lead to sympathy and moral invocations.) The irony is, of course, that Viktor's answer is accurate and that often highly educated intellectuals from the ex-communist countries turn into basic laborers in the new world. The irony is also that he does not care about them, exactly because they were not able to recognize a new wave of capitalism. And, finally, it is amusing that Nick fails to distinguish among all of the Russians and considers Viktor an expert for that subject. Later, Nick laments the village built on the nuclear site near the Mongolian

border, and asks: “Viktor, does anyone remember why we were doing all this?” (793). Viktor readily replies: “Yes, for contest. You won, we lost. You have to tell me how it feels. Big winner” (793). Nick’s Western, assumed superiority, is destroyed in a few short sentences of broken English, but what Viktor’s answer makes even more sarcastic is the fact that the scene is narrated *post festum*. Nick includes Viktor’s remark as an illustration of the futile nuclear race although he obviously fails to comprehend its meaning, nor can he reconcile the historical role of the U.S. with his entrepreneur position in the post-Soviet society.

Nick’s inability to grasp the extent of the *real* catastrophe also sheds a different light onto his character. In the penultimate chapter of *Underworld*, it is explained that the murder he committed was an accident: he trusted George the waiter and pulled the trigger because George claimed that the gun was not loaded. Nick insisted with his therapist in jail, “It was a gesture without a history” (509) but never clarified “why would he point the gun at the man’s head” (781). Even if the ethical question about the responsibility in the murder is put aside (is the guilty party the one who claimed that the gun was empty or the one who tested the truthfulness of that remark), it is questionable to what extent Nick is changed. Nick’s reinvention starts with his education at a Jesuit school through which he acquires a new life perspective and behavior, becoming a typical American citizen. He obtains financial security, a family, and fuses into the middle class hiding the homicide from his past. But, besides his obsession with waste and a quest for the baseball whose purchase he does not fully understand, he is not substantially changed. He is floating in the historical, not entirely understanding the moments in which he lives. In that sense, Nick’s attempt to detach himself from his personal history and reinterpret his own life is at least open to discussion. He is in Kazakhstan genuinely surprised by the outcome of the nuclear apocalyptic testing, and does not see himself as a part of the post-Cold War

situation that his presence directly invokes, which makes his understanding both of history and his own existence superficial.

The other paradox of the epilogue is encompassed in the fact that the world is still threatened by apocalypse even though it is now dislocated from the East that was once the symbol of the nuclear catastrophe. After the fall of the Berlin Wall, that threat disappeared but the consequences of nuclear testing are still present: “Yes, it’s true that geography has moved inward and smallward. But we still have mass graves, I think” (788). When Nick and Brian are taken to the Museum of Misshapens and later to the clinic that has “disfigurations, leukemias, thyroid cancers, immune systems that do not function” (800), it is as much to expose the costs of the nuclear testing as to show that the apocalypse is still present. The end of the Cold War did not bring any changes for people whose bodies are disfigured by the radiation; the apocalypse is literally embodied in a few generations of Kazakhstan citizens. The disfigured bodies are demonized and their grotesque features, as the narrator claims, remind Viktor “that he is not blind to the consequences” (800) of his job. But there is a suspicion that arises from that statement. First, the narrator announces, “it is the victims who are blind” (800), and instead of an expected moralistic point, he provides a short index of “blind victims” and starts every sentence with “it is” referring to their blindness. The blinded are not the people who take advantage of the nuclear weapon/waste but those who are manipulated and blind. Then, it is obvious that Viktor’s business will expand by taking the First World’s nuclear waste into the country and the generational catastrophe will be not only continued but also aggravated. He recognizes his own skepticism while Nick, and especially Brian, are genuinely shocked. Viktor, nonetheless, offers a story as a counterpoint:

“An interesting thing. There is a woman in Ukraine who says she is second Christ. She is going to be crucified by followers and then rise from the dead. Very serious person.

Fifteen thousand followers. You can believe this? Educated people, look very normal. I don’t know. After communism, this?”

“After Chernobyl maybe” [Nick says].

“I don’t know,” he says. (802)

Neither of the characters offers a reading of this episode. As in the Biblical apocalypse, there is punishment for political and cultural misdeeds, but it seems that the revelation is hardly going to happen. If the novel offers a possibility of revelation of closure, it is associated with the technological advancement—the World Wide Web.³³

The final word of the novel, *peace* (as well as apotheosis of a 12-year-old raped Latino girl from the Bronx) has been seen as a basis for DeLillo’s optimism and universalism, the ultimate denial of death (Duvall), and a redemption that recalls the Catholic mass (Hungerford). However, the closing utterance has a radically different meaning, suggested by the narrative itself. The final chapter, as well as the novel, finishes with the death of Edgar, a stern, racist, germophobic and unloving Catholic nun from the Bronx who, similarly to Marvin and Nick, after the fall of the Berlin Wall, longs for the apocalyptic times of the Cold War precisely because the apocalypse provided a seeming feeling of order. Her downward spiral starts when she admits to herself that the possibility of the catastrophic occurrence, with which he associates her life, is irrevocably gone: “Edgar used to care but not today and maybe never again. She feels week and lost. The great Terror gone, the great thrown shadow dismantled— . . . All terror is

³³ Recent cyberspace scholarship insists that race, ethnicity, and gender are inscribed in the World Wide Web as much as they are present in our reality. See, for instance, Lisa Nakamura. *Cybertypes: Race, Ethnicity, and Identity on the Internet*. New York: Routledge, 2002.; *Digitizing Race: Visual Cultures of the Internet*., Duluth: U of Minnesota P, 2007.

local now” (816). But when she dies, she does not reach the heaven described by the Catholic theological doctrine but dissipates into the cyberspace, a new wonder of the post-apocalyptic times. DeLillo writes that “the real miracle is the web, the net, where everybody is everywhere at once” (808). In such heaven, finally, “everything is connected in the end” (826). Joyously, sister Edgar is able not only to revisit the H-bomb explosions and revive her defining feeling of catastrophe, run across the continents with a click of the mouse, and “summon the world” (826) in thousand languages, but also “follow the word through the tunneled underworld of its ancestral roots” (826). Her epiphany is complete and she is—what she had never been while alive—happy.

The Elysian character of the cyberspace is not achieved. When DeLillo claims that the modern miracle is the web with its endless inclusiveness and simultaneity, he also adds that those who participate in the life of cyberspace, like Jeff who spends most of his time on line, are “unseen” (808). The statement could have been insignificant if it was not for the episode in which he describes an anonymous predator who kills a girl on the web in almost the same manner in which Esmeralda was killed: raped, cut open, and thrown out of a roof. The offender, after the committed crime, “goes back to thinking his nighttime thoughts. Screen reads *Searching*” (818). On the web, therefore, the apocalypse is not only possible and impending but also endlessly repetitive. And, therefore, it seems that the paradise of cyberspace is not in its interconnectedness but in the possibility to be threatened and be defined by the catastrophe, exactly as during the Cold War era. The appeal of cyberspace is not in its perfection but in a perpetual prospect of apocalypse, in a possibility to be defined by failure.

Therefore, the epiphany materialized through the WWW is not comforting; it reconciles the tension between the past and the future, erases the horrifying present of the subject, but it

also replicates the horrors of everyday life that thrive after the historical, apocalyptic danger is gone. The final paragraphs of *Underworld* do not point to peace and coexistence in the postmodern heaven of cyberspace, but to nostalgia for a more structured world. The narrative is closed not when the narrator proclaims *Peace* but at the moment when Nick closes his narration and laments—as it is exposed earlier—his past of unrestrained teenage masculinity. In that sense, the peaceful suggestion of the final word is not only limited to an individual choice but also its power is restricted to the margins. Just as nobody in Ukraine believes that a self-proclaimed female Jesus after the Chernobyl incident is actually going to save the former USSR, the apotheosis of Esmeralda is restricted to the Bronx, “the American Gulag” (807). If sister Edgar finds her happiness in cyberspace exactly because she is perpetually close to danger of the nuclear apocalypse, then precisely the times of horror define *Underworld*’s characters. Also, it is fair to ask what is it to gain by yet another multiplication, of another underworld that is even more distanced from historicity, but the sheer amazement by the world’s infinite replication? On the other hand, cyberspace allows a parallel existence of the highest and most conflicting diversity. If in cyberspace everything is connected, then peace is achieved by the juxtaposition that is not threatening for anybody because the web is virtual, not *real*, reality. Random connections cannot cause any terror, unlike games and nuclear blasts during the Cold War, because they are replicated: “There is no space or time out here, or in here, or wherever she is. There are only connections” (825). And that is not peace but yet another manifestation of longing for the times of horror.

Baseball and Racism

Another fascinating element of American history DeLillo recognizes in race. While the longing of his characters for the times of terror signals their failure to adapt their existence to the political and historical changes of their country, the characters' inability to overcome racial stereotypes, as well as to recognize their own racism, indicates the complex and problematic nature of the American past. Interestingly, DeLillo associates race with baseball.

Baseball is as ingrained in American culture as is racism, claims DeLillo. Both of these statements, the one about the sport component of American culture and the one about its intricate and historical racism, have been discussed widely and profoundly and they helped to create an excessive scholarship that, ultimately, establishes baseball as one of the most analyzed subjects of cultural studies, as well as challenges the dominant racial hierarchy.³⁴ When DeLillo approaches them in his novella "Pafko at the Wall," in *Underworld*, he examines America racial politics in relation to baseball, while, at the same time, he sees in baseball the quintessential element of American identity. According to DeLillo, race and baseball are interwoven and should not be examined separately, especially because they illustrate the historical and political development of the country. However, "race is an issue largely ignored in most critical evaluations of *Underworld*" (Morley 145) even though it represents, in a rather literal manner, the foreground for the identity quests of DeLillo's protagonists. More importantly for the

³⁴ See, for instance: Robert Elias. *Baseball and the American Dream: Race, Class, Gender, and the National Past Time*. New York: M.E. Sharpe, 2001.; Lawrence Baldassaro. *The American Game: Baseball and Ethnicity*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 2002.; Adrian Burgos. "Learning America's Other Game: Race, Baseball and the Study of Latino." *Latino/a Popular Culture*, Michelle Habell-Pallán, ed. New York: New York UP, 2002. 225-240.; Paul Buhle, ed. *Jews and American Popular Culture*. Vol 3. Westport: Praeger, 2007.; Edward J. Rielly. *Baseball and American Culture: Across the Diamond*. New York: Haworth, 2003.

analysis of failure, DeLillo's understanding of race, as well as its representation, has evolved in the *Underworld* narrative, which expanded from a novella to a book over 800 pages long.

In "Pafko," a novella published in 1992 that in a revised form functions as the opening chapter of the novel *Underworld* (1997), the plot is simple. An African American teenager, a 14-year-old Cotter Martin, skips school and goes to the historical 1952 Dodgers-Giants game where he befriends an architect, Bill Waterson. He, like Cotter, had "gladly gone AWOL" from his office, and shares with the boy admiration for the Giants. The title of the novella—which exists in the same form as an opening sentence of a paragraph—is inspired by a photograph of the Brooklyn-Dodgers left fielder, Andy Pafko, who stands at the wall looking up as Bobby Thompson hits a homerun and leads the New York Giants to a 5-4 victory. As one critic succinctly pointed out, "the novella evokes American nostalgia about baseball and the early 1950s... and is a critical evocation of nostalgia that allows Pafko to double as a commentary on contemporary American life" (Duvall 287-288).

The ways in which DeLillo incorporated a discussion about American racial politics—by a juxtaposition with baseball—are particularly significant. The protagonist, Cotter, is a Harlem kid, who together with a crowd of other teenagers jumps over the fence, in order to see the game. While Cotter does not have any money to pay for the ticket, and does not intend to crash the gate, the racially mixed crowd draws his attention: "Because any time you see black and white together you know they are joined in some effort of betterment. Says so in the Constitution" (42). Although the irony of this statement will be fully accomplished at the end of the novella, here it emphasizes that Cotter has internalized the American ideology of racial justice and equality, even when he does not experience them first-hand. Also, the statement reveals Cotter's belief in baseball as a typically American experience, as the concept that overcomes any inequalities and

racial prejudices. Since baseball, according to Cotter, is the core value of the American experience, that experience appears to be more liberal than it actually is. By extension, baseball exemplifies in the brightest light the values written in the Constitution.

And yet, despite Cotter's idealism, he is recognized in the crowd by his racial and class status. His own awareness about his race makes him uncomfortable and suspicious in the seemingly liberated and open-minded crowd, especially when he sees a policeman. Cotter is as much concerned that he will be recognized as one of the delinquents who crashed the fence as he is anxious that he will be removed from his seat because of his black face in the white mass of baseball fans. Moreover, DeLillo says that Cotter's glasses had belonged to his older cousin, "dead at twenty-six of being in a room that contained a discharging pistol" (37). Evoking a stereotype about an African-American upbringing, DeLillo undermines Cotter's remark about the equality of the races, guaranteed by the Constitution and manifested in baseball.

Even when Cotter finds a seat, he is reminded of his race by a "peanut vendor who deftly catches the coins the people toss his way" (41). Moreover, the vendor insists on establishing a relationship with him, trying to engage Cotter in a conversation and sell him peanuts. Cotter is visibly uncomfortable, and it is suggested that the vendor knows how Cotter got his seat:

It's a thrill-a-minute show but Cotter feels an obscure danger here. The guy is making him visible, shaming him in his prowler's den. Isn't it strange how their common color jumps the space between them? Nobody saw Cotter until the vendor appeared, black rays phasing from his hands. One popular Negro and crowd pleaser. One shifty kid trying not to be noticed. (41)

Despite his attempts to appear invisible, Cotter is noticed by Bill Waterson, who insists on sharing peanuts and soda with Cotter. Although Waterson assumes that Cotter does not have a

ticket for the seat he holds, he engages him in a conversation in which both reveal their ultimate passion for baseball. Waterson even claims that he immediately recognized in Cotter “not one of those delinquents” (hinting both at the gate-crashers and African-Americans), but a true baseball lover. Their bonding is conditioned by their love for baseball and its tradition that they discuss in detail. Mostly thanks to Waterson’s fatherly attention, the class and racial differences disappear as the game progresses.

Such reconciliation is deceptive. When Cotter catches the homerun baseball and refuses to give it to Bill, the racial tensions—which seemed to cease to exist through the appreciation of baseball— explode. Bill and Cotter fight for the ball; Cotter wrests it from a person he later realizes is Bill. Cotter is aggressive in his attempt to get and keep the ball, as much as Waterson is verbally forceful. As a consequence, Cotter’s racial consciousness is activated again: “Cotter’s body wants to go. But if he starts running at this point, what we have is a black kid running in a mainly white crowd and the kid’s being followed by yelling thief or grief or something” (65). The conflict between the adult and the teenager “also takes on overtones of the white domination of the sport in 1952 . . . Although the color bar in the major leagues officially had been broken by Jackie Robinson in 1947, African-American players in this came—Robinson, Willie Mays, and Roy Campanella—are as much interlopers on the field as Cotter Martin is in the stands” (Duvall 297).

Waterson follows Cotter for many blocks, desperately trying to persuade him first to give him the ball, and later arguing that the ball belongs to him because Cotter ripped it out of his hand. Waterson pleads, evoking the shared moments of enjoying the game, and his attempt to talk Cotter into giving him the ball is as much unethical as indicative of the racial tensions in the

early 1950s. Waterson tries to represent himself as a compassionate and understanding white man who, exactly because he exercised those traits, deserves to be awarded by the ball:

I look at you scrunched up in your seat and I thought I'd found a pal. He's a shy kid that wears glasses. He roots for the right team. Not like many so others. These kids, these days. This is a baseball fan, I thought. Not some delinquent in the streets, a petty thief that does people out of things that are rightfully theirs. Baseball is what saves kids from mean lives. . . . We had a big day together at the ballpark and now you're dead set on disappointing me. Cotter? Buddies sit down together and work things out. They find a way to reach an understanding. . . . Now tell me what it's going to take to separate you from that baseball, son. (68)

Waterson tries to buy the ball, stressing its financial and historical value, as much as his race and class by which he is, as he claims, entitled to the ball. Moreover, Cotter understands that Waterson sees in the ball mostly a potentially expensive memorabilia, "the white man's property interest in the ball" (Duvall 296). The scene culminates in a racial slur shouted at Cotter, and an irrational run through the city, to the north. Surprised by his own reaction, Waterson tries to utter an apology, but his attempt to yet one more time reconcile with Cotter is more insulting than the original slur:

Then Bill pauses, he stops cold and looks up and away in a dumb show of self-exasperation—a pained regret in his face and stance...

"Look at that now, Cotter. Aw Christ, you made me say that word. Goddamn, *you made me say it* and there's no forgiving the fact, is there? Aw shit, good Christ, *but I'd never said it if you hadn't made it*. Jesus in heaven, I'm completely mortified. (68)

Waterson focuses on his emotion—which is, at least, myopic— but what he fails to understand is the ambivalent notion that surrounds baseball. It is supposed to insure the stability of the status quo and the middle class hegemony but also to encourage independence and radical political solutions. As Duvall explained, “Cotter exposes the constitutive contradiction of postwar baseball rhetoric—is he a better boy because he embodies the virtues the game supposedly advocates, or is he a bad boy because he is not saved by baseball and thus fails to recognize his place?” (298).

At the entrance of Harlem, Bill finally gives up but only because he fears for his life; he is in an environment that he recognizes as dangerous. In the novel *Underworld* DeLillo is much more subtle, removing Bill’s heated rhetoric together with the entitlement embodied in his class and race. Waterson does not offend Cotter but, subdued and afraid, gives up the ball somewhere around 148th street, in the Bronx. DeLillo keeps the basic plot, and insists on Waterson’s attempt to gain the ball either by evoking the racial rhetoric or the financial compensation, but the voiced racial and class differences from “Pafko” are silenced and turned into simmering racial tensions. In the novel, Bill attempts to reason with Cotter using baseball as the ultimate example of comradeship, although the fact that his quest again stops in the Bronx only confirms the racial conflicts. This moment also represents the crucial difference between the novella and the novel, indicating the change in DeLillo’s understanding of the political and racial nature of baseball.

In *Underworld*, Cotter runs away from Waterson through the city, but instead of being yelled at, he is aware of the rich city’s life that includes all of the races. Waterson is, “skewed with rage, face bloated and quirked. A sleeve hangs down from the jacket in his hand and brushes softy to the ground” (56). When Cotter reaches Harlem, “unmixed Harlem,” he becomes aware that as much as he felt uncomfortable at the game, Waterson must feel displaced in the

dominantly African-American environment. Placated and protected, Cotter not only “feels a sense of placeness that grows more familiar” (58) but also becomes playful: “Cotter goes south on the avenue and runs half a block and then he turns and does a caper, he does a physical gape—running backwards for a stretch, high-stepping, mocking, showing Bill the baseball” (57). Bill slows down and eventually gives up, silently, the quest for the ball, but Cotter, “the more enlightened he becomes, the more open grows the space for Cotter’s anger” (57). The enlightenment here refers to Cotter’s realization of the rigid race differences that cannot be annulled even by the ultimate American experience: baseball. His anger is directed both to Waterson who felt entitled, because of his class and race, to possess the ball, and to the neighborhood that raised him not as an equal in American cultural life. In the novel, even the sentence about the equality guaranteed by the U.S. constitution is erased, by which is reduced the irony of Cotter’s status and his seeming friendship with Waterson. On the other hand, the absence of that sentence emphasizes the complexity of the racial conflicts in the U.S. and diminishes the didactical element that is present in the novella. For instance, although equality is guaranteed by the Constitution, a plethora of every-day situations proves that the Constitution rights are not practiced. The sentence that is missing in the opening chapter, DeLillo incorporates in the middle one, “Better Things for Better Living Through Chemistry: Selected Fragments Public and Private in the 1950s and 1960s.” In the episode about the African-American peaceful protest in Jackson, Mississippi, in 1964, the Constitution innuendo is even stronger in meaning.

A group of activists “began to sit on the floor of the whites-only waiting room” (521), while the others are gathered in front of the church, protesting segregation. The police breaks up the peaceful protest with clubs and CS gas that “made people dizzy almost at once and caused a singing on the body where the skin was moist” (525). But the leader, “the charismatic black”

(521), continues to talk, claiming that “Because anytime you see black and white together you know they are joined in some effort of betterment. Says so in the Constitution” (524). The sarcasm of his remark is obvious, referring to the situation in which the white policemen use force to prevent not only a civil African-American protest but also to deprive African-Americans of the right that are guaranteed by the Constitution. The policemen, as well as protesters, are motivated by the prime U.S. civil document: the policemen to limit its use, while the activists to fully practice it. Significantly, the protagonist of the scene is Rosie Martin, Cotter’s smart sister and Manx’s gentle daughter, who “[had] come from up north, riding buses all the way, and now she was in the terminal, fittingly, about to sit on the floor” (522) of the whites-only waiting room. Although she securely employed in New York as an insurance adjustor, she is a part of “weeks of bus rides and marches across state lines” (525). Her fight against segregation is best understood if compared with Cotter’s encounter with Waterson.

At the terminal, where Rosie sits on the floor, she calmly watches the policeman who drags other participants out of the waiting room and hit them mercilessly and methodically, “counting the number of sit-in marchers before he got to her” (524). Although aware of the atrocious prison conditions to which African-Americans are submitted regardless of gender—which is the punishment for all those in custody—Rosie keeps her calm. Eventually, she is “dragged on her ass out into the street and spun around on her britches and left there” (525), only to be surrounded by even more police forces and exposed to tear gas. Together with other activists, she tries to reach the church and escape the gas, but she sees a cop who, unprovoked, beats a sixty-year-old man on the way to his house. Rosie, without too much thinking, “pushed through a couple of sawhorses and ran directly toward them, feeling fast and light and unstoppable. . . . She had no idea what she planned to do when she got there, about four seconds from now” (526). If

Cotter needs to run away from Waterson to Harlem in order to save both himself and the ball, Rosie runs directly into the situation that succinctly illustrates the contemporary context: African-Americans are perceived, unreasonably, as a threat. Rosie's anger is also induced by the fact that the man is just a passer-by, disinterested in the protest besides the attempt to get away from the gas. Cotter consciously hides behind the environment that he knows will make Waterson uncomfortable but Rosie creates situations that make the white population uncomfortable on their "own" grounds (e.g. the white-only waiting room). Although DeLillo stops Rosie's scene at its culmination, the outcome is easy to comprehend from the historical perspective inscribed in the narrative. Rosie probably ends up in jail, subjected to the inhuman conditions, but her rejection to hide in the ghetto, as Cotter does, results in the historical change of the African-American status in the U.S.

Rosie's act also counterbalances both Cotter's fear of Waterson and her father's heartbreaking existence reduced to day-to-day survival. The scene in which Manx desperately tries to sell the baseball, and then is tricked into drunkenness in order to accept the named price, illustrates the U.S. social and racial hierarchy. Manx, as soon as Cotter comes home and announces that he caught the famous ball, recognizes in it a potential financial gain. He reasons with Cotter, who does not want to sell the ball, that "We buy your mother a winter coat. Winter's coming and she needs a heavy coat" (146). Manx does not even know how the ball should be priced and is only convinced that "they want this ball" (146). He steals it from his son's room and the next day goes to the opening game of the 1951 World Series between the Giants and the Yankees. There, he realizes, he needs to sell it to the white man because "the numbers [are] mostly white, so it's the percentage play" (642). Shrewdly, he recognizes that the best potential buyer would be a father with a son because the ball would "appeal to the man's whatever, his

rank as a father, his soft spot, his willingness to show off a little, impress the boy, make the night extra special” (643). After an exhausting and humiliating search that includes an apparent racially-charged encounter with a heavy man and his son, he finally runs into Chuckie and his father Charlie, who is much more than his son interested in the ball—and not because of the reasons Manx assumed.

A rather long and seemingly warm conversation proceeds which encapsulates the racial hierarchy: “They’re having a pretty good time, the one on his haunches against the wall, the other in his crapshooter’s squat, with the lump in the flannel bag gone totally still” (649). The scene peaks with Charlie offering a flask with Irish whiskey to Manx. Charlie surprises, and ultimately wins over Manx, when he “doesn’t even wipe the rim. Just tips the flask and drinks, too deep” (650). They pass the flask for a while, until Manx becomes inebriated and Charlie starts a negotiation, alluding manipulatively to the just established emotional bond and the understanding of the two men: “You were honest with me. Least I can do is tell you what I’m thinking” (650). Without too much thinking, Manx allows Charlie to offer the price because he “want[s] a fan to own this thing” (652), and immediately regrets, recognizing in it the submissive position in which he puts himself. He, as well, realizes that the dynamic with Charlie is as well informed by their race. Charlie appears sincere, offering him even the last nickel from his pocket, but he takes advantage of Manx not only because he knows that the man needs money urgently (such a homerun ball is usually not for sale at the beginning of the next game), but also because he recognizes in him an alcoholic and an African-American deeply aware of the racial dynamic. Charlie’s explanation for paying for the ball only \$32 is as much emotional as its calculated rhetoric should present him as a sympathetic white man, Manx’s benefactor—the one who does him a favor: “I want to take it all because it’s all I’ve got. Even the change. I want you to even

have the change. Because I got the tickets money here. . . . And the car keys here. . . . And I want you to have every nickel in my pocket above and beyond” (652). On the way home, Manx, expectedly, “feels a familiar stab of betrayal. Be messing with his head. Tricked him whichway. The baseball’s bound to appreciate is the word. And the cash be worth less by the minute” (654). The acknowledged betrayal refers as much as to the insignificant sum he gets for the ball, as to the realization that Charlie was ready to feign friendship and racial open-mindedness in order to get a good deal on the ball. Ashamed and disappointed, Manx walks the entire night, unable either to face his wife or his son, and the only way to protest is to self-induce an injury. His anger toward the dominant racial hierarchy, unlike his son’s or daughter’s, is restricted to his own body that is healed in the privacy of his own home.

While it seems that Cotter, Manx, and Rosie signify different, generational ways of challenging the racial hierarchy, DeLillo’s white characters remain oblivious to it, similarly to Franzen’s who find themselves in a comfortable white environment. DeLillo’s characters do not question racial divisions not because of their inherent racism but because, as much as the Cold War defines their present, the racial hierarchy, ostensibly, simplifies their present. Nick is confused in Kazakhstan because he cannot comprehend the changes introduced by the change of the political system, and he is, in the same manner, unaware of the historical and cultural implications inscribed in race. When, for instance, his colleague Sims expresses his disbelief both in census and its accuracy, recognizing in the official number of 25 million black people in the U.S. misestimate by “maybe forty percent” (336), Nick sees in Sims’ argument “genuine paranoia” (336). Sims, an African-American from St. Louis, opens his claim with a story about the census during which his mother forced him to hide in order to avoid the questioners, and uses the story as the justification of his suspicions. For his mother, the census was “not only the

census” (334)—as Nick perceives it—but a means of governmental control over the African-American community. Nick, however, rejects any Sims’ attempts to engage him in the conversation and to question the supposedly objective survey, insisting on the undeniable “numbers” and “facts.” Sims, on the other hand, sees in the potential error a purposely construed scheme, based on the historically present racism in the U.S.: “You don’t think somebody’s afraid that if the real number is reported, white people gonna go weak in the knees and black people gonna get all pumped up with, Hey, we oughta be gettin’ more of this and more of that and more of the other” (335). Sims calls for a “right to know how many of us are there” (336), insinuating that the predominantly white government deliberately prevents any type of African-American unity.

Nick finds Sims’ argument paranoid not only because of his private discomfort (Nick, therefore, would be also a part of the white government, by the virtue of his race) but also because it further destabilizes the strict division of his world. Nick defines his past for which he longs, as well, by fights with African-Americans on Brooklyn streets. Sims blatantly claims that the real number of African-Americans in the U.S. is unknown “Because the number is too dangerous. How threatened do you feel by the real number?” (336). This argument escalates into a fight on the street, in front of the club. Seemingly unprovoked, Sims puts his hands on Nick’s shoulders and “head-butt[s]” (337) him. Nick reciprocates and ends up with a swollen face but what threatens to develop into a racial conflict, in fact, brings the men together. Both of them readily lie to their wives about their bruises and when Nick explains to Sims’ wife that he had a little scuffle in the elevator, with a white and black drunk guy, he “could feel that Sims enjoy this in his hot Reeboks” (340). Nick even comes to “understand the hidden triggers of experience, the little delves and swerves that make a state of being” (336), although the reader is not entirely

convinced by his epiphany. While the argument Sims introduces remains unsolved, DeLillo suggests that besides the obvious and historically inscribed racial tensions it is unimaginable to deny—or refuse to recognize—the historical and cultural presence of the African-American community. According to him, exactly the unspoken and hidden racial issues—seemingly absent because they are not discussed—constitute the American identity.

Such an argument is further supported by the scene in which Chuckie and Louis, “a scornful black” (608) are “flying in a three-bomber formation called a cell” (610) over the South China Sea. The plane is *The Long Tall Sally*, the one in which Klara recognizes a symbol of the apparent daily activities. In short, a random male conversation about the benefits of marriage turns into in a discussion about the origins of the song after which the plane and the girl on its nose are named. Louis reminds Chuckie that song is Little Richard’s, one of the founders of rock’n’roll, claiming that since its author is an African-American, the girl that Little Richard had in mind most likely does not have anything in common with the long-legged and blond representation from the plane’s nose. Chuckie is oblivious to the implication, adamantly refusing to acknowledge that Sally might be an African-American woman. The following long dialogue shows Chukie’s naïve resistance, almost a need to believe that the song refers to a Caucasian woman:

“Only the Sally in Little Richard’s number ain’t gonna be seen in no car and no drive-in movie doing a little necking with a youth like yourself.”

“Why not?” Chuckie said.

“Because she’s black and she bad.”

Chuckie studied his radar scope and recomputed the aircraft’s path over a couple of thousand miles of sea curve and mango atoll.

“What do you mean she black?”

“Because the song has a plot that somehow got lost in the wooing and wheeing.”

“This song’s been around thirteen, fourteen, fifteen years maybe?”

“More or less,” Louis said.

“And in all these years I’m not aware of anybody coming forth with a correction to the skin color of the title character, okay?” (609)

Even after Louis, in addition, explains that the author of the song is an African-American woman from Appaloosa, Mississippi, Chuckie “hurt and sad” (610) tries to challenge the notion of race written in the song. He claims “Little Richard’s mostly for white people anyway” (611). One more time, Louis reminds him about what he had just said, and asks Chuckie not to forget that Sally is black. The scene ends up immediately and abruptly—mimicking the stream of the consciousness model, although written in the 3rd person—and switches to Chuckie’s regret over the lost ball, which was, as he sees is, the only connection between him and his father. Louis, or the Long Sally, is not mentioned in the narrative any more, although the race, and the ways in which it attempts to be erased from American culture, remain to loom over the narrative. The invocation of baseball in the end of the segment is, at least, sardonic because the ball that Chuckie’s father cherishes so much and in whose search Marvin spends a great part of his adult life, has a remarkable history associated with an African American family. More importantly, that history would not be possible if Cotter had not caught the ball.

Such a racial “background” and assumed—but unrecognized— presence of the U.S. history and culture is the most apparent in the novel’s visual structure. *Underground*’s chapters that deal with Manx Martin are marked by black pages, the technique that DeLillo borrows from Laurence

Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*.³⁵ While in *Tristram Shandy* Sterne compellingly indicates the death of Yorick (on page 71) signifying the nothingness associated with one's death, DeLillo emphasizes by his black pages the contradictory position of the African-American community: highly visible, it is yet a marginalized social stratum. Namely, *Underworld* is divided into eight sections, which include an epilogue, a prologue, and six lengthy "parts," but there are only three unusually short chapters, barely 15 pages long, dedicated to the black America. Each section starts and finishes with an entirely black page, and each chapter provides a chronological narrative about the baseball, about the gain and loss of the historical ball. Catherine Morley remarks that "Cotter's link to the ball is erased; his history is written out of the official narrative" (147) but Nick's and Marvin's histories are nothing more official, and that their nostalgic celebration of the past—through the ball—is as questionable as the erasure of Cotter from "official" history. Importantly, the ball cannot be praised and recognized as the famous homerun ball exactly because Marvin is unable to provide its complete "lineage," which should trace it to the moment when Cotter caught it in the stands. Even though Nick spends a fortune on it (exactly "Thirty-four thousand five hundred dollars" (132)), its value is in the sentiment, in the potential historical meaning, and not the historical accuracy. Marvin openly tells Nick, who is about to buy the ball, "The lineage. I don't have the lineage all the way" (192), while Glassic explains that the relatively low price of the ball was induced by "First, the dealer wasn't able to provide absolute final documentation" (97).³⁶

³⁵ Although written in 1759, *Tristram Shandy* is considered a proto-postmodern novel, and often used as an example in discussions about postmodernism as a style.

³⁶ In his *Miracle Ball: My Hunt for the Shot Heard 'Round the World*, Brian Biegel traces the ball through the photographs and testimonials, and comes to a surprising conclusion. The ball was caught by a woman, a nun called Helen Gawn. Since she furtively attended the game—against the Catholic strict rules and in civil clothes—she was not able to announce her catch. After her death, only one shoebox with her possessions was left that her sister,

While there are only six black pages in the entire novel, all of the pages that announce the new sections are black and white. The black part constitutes the lower, one third of the page, indication the foundational importance of the African-American community that still fails to be recognized in the American culture and politics. If Ralph Ellison in his seminal *Invisible Man* exposed the invisibility of the African-American man, DeLillo in *Underworld*, although reluctant to fully develop his argument, shows the historically induced marginalization of the African-Americans despite their significant presence (and visibility), as well as contribution to American culture and history.

In the novella, therefore, DeLillo uses baseball, and one of the most significant games in baseball history, as a means to expose not only racism that cannot be even seemingly reconciled by the American national pastime but also to critique nostalgia embodied in baseball as a uniquely *American* game. In the novel, in contrast, baseball emphasizes the prevalent apocalyptic chaos of the postwar years, and serves as the dominant narrative motif. Non-White characters rarely appear beyond the first chapter, and nor does the significance of African-American characters expand beyond their association with the history of the famous baseball. In *Underworld*, the characters' examining of the Cold War is motivated by their quest for the historical baseball, as if it encompasses both the essence of American culture and the fundamental nature of American politics. The approach DeLillo employed in his novella, "Pafko," does not challenge the stereotypical binary position associated with race. He suggests in the novella that the "dual" racial system can hardly be abolished despite the seeming equality associated with the American favorite past time and the legal battles. DeLillo uses baseball only

without even opening it, "hurled ... into a landfill in Monterey" (209). See: Brian Biegel. "Digging out the Past." *My Hunt for the Shot Heard 'Round the World*. New York: Crown Publishers, 2009. 205-209.

to expose racism that cannot, according to him, be eliminated from American culture in the same manner that baseball remains to be the favorite American sport. In the novel, on the contrary, his argument about the connection between baseball and racism is more nuanced. Although DeLillo still claims that American mass culture is rooted both in baseball and racism, he sees in them the forces behind American history. But the fact that there are only a few black characters in the novel—and also eliminated within the first hundred pages—grotesquely emphasizes the U.S. racial hierarchy. Unlike in the novella, in *Underworld* DeLillo hints that after the end of the Cold War, racism could be overpowered. Since all of his main, white characters face tremendous changes in their lives after the fall of the Berlin Wall despite their clinging to the past, it is fair to conclude that the prevalent racist binary in the U.S., if not absolutely eliminated, will at least be challenged and exposed in the new historical context. Although one must wonder to which extent such a change should be contributed to the end of the Cold War, we have been witnessing for at least a decade the tremendous presence of non-White baseball players (especially Latino) in Major League Baseball, as well as the progressively declining quality of the American game presented at the international championships, such as World Baseball Classic. The *American* in baseball is being reinvented and revalued, as much as American identity politics are being changed. The failure to comprehend such a change—as DeLillo's characters are unable to grasp the present—is problematic in the same manner in which *Underworld*'s characters long for the times of apocalypse.

Did We Lose Our Lives in the Future?

Four years after *Underworld* was published, and in the shadow of the recent terrorist attacks that included frequent references to history and race, DeLillo wrote that “The dramatic climb of the Dow and the speed of the internet summoned us all to live permanently in the future, in the utopian glow of cyber-capital, because there’s no memory there and this is where markets are controlled and investment potential has no limit” (“In the Ruins of the Future” par. 1). The presumptuous American belief that “America invented the future” (“In the Ruins of the Future” par. 68) collapsed with the fall of the Twin Towers in New York. “History is turned on end” (“In the Ruins of the Future” par. 74), while the present produces American historical counternarratives of false memory, imagined loss, and primal terror. Instead of living in a painless future, Americans are forced to recognize their insecure present and long for times when the future was accessible. According to DeLillo, that happens when history ends.

But, does it? On the cover of the 1997 edition there is André Kertész’s 1972 photograph titled *New York* in which the Twin Towers dissipate into a cloud behind a church tower. It is not clear whether we should be worried and consider the cloud smoke, or be amused by the artistic playfulness. Nonetheless, the picture is spooky, for a number of reasons: the towers might be on fire; the smoke might suggest a nuclear mushroom; the towers, while symbolizing technological progress, might also signal the decline of traditional forms of morality and ethics in the city where the world of capitalism overlooks church steeples. There is even a bird that resembles a plane, as if it is about to crash into the towers. Looked at more than 30 years later, the picture poses a question about re-reading moments of our private histories within a historical

perspective, and contextualizing historical moments. It also suggests the end of the history as we know it is not necessarily expressed as a sheer terror, but as juxtapositions of different historical narratives, exactly as DeLillo claims in “The Ruins of the Future”: there are different understandings of the historical, and there are different historical quests.

Looking at the novel and Kertész photo from a post-September 11 perspective, and before that through the contemporary moment of the 1990s, or keeping in mind, for example, the Bay of Pigs crisis and World War II, it seems that there have been many possible historical ends.³⁷ What is remarkable is that the end of history is always induced by our present, one which is simultaneously torn between a wish to revive the past and a primal fear of living in a present that cannot be controlled. *Underworld*’s characters yearn for the moment when history was horrifying, because the fear of apocalypse modeled the world of their existence. In other words, there is a nostalgic longing to restore the time of threatening terror—in order to stabilize the world—and there is nearly a self-destructive fear of present that is informed both by the future and the past. The result is, as the historical counternarrative of *Underworld* shows, almost schizophrenic, torn between the past and the future and the attempt to find a right historical end.

³⁷ The end of history has a different meaning at the margin and in the centers. During the ethnic war in the former Yugoslavia 1991-1995, the meaning of the *end of history* was revalued; the trope that was dominant both in literary theory and literature was replaced by the experience of war and shock that history is possible after its end has been officially declared. The historical end referred not any more to a lack of historical lineage or the impossibility of historical progress—as it was most often seen in Western theory—but the possibility that historically a primordial event was occurring in a post-modern moment (Europe of the late 20th century).

In a 2007 article, *The Washington Post* amusingly summarized a poll conducted by the Economic Policy Institute: most Americans see themselves as middle class, which is to “say you’ve succeeded without openly bragging that you’re superior—a no-no in a democratic culture. You’re like everyone else, only a little more or less so” (“Progress Breeds Middle Class Angst” par. 1). Only two percent of Americans describe themselves as upper and only eight as lower class, while those in the middle are enraged, “worried about jobs, health insurance and retirement income” (“Progress Breeds” par. 4), greatly concerned with oil and drug companies, corporate CEOs and globalization that threaten their own existence.³⁸ And yet, while being almost traumatized by the US economy, a great majority of middle class is perfectly satisfied with their own personal circumstances, claiming that their financial situation is excellent or good, that their living standards are rising and that they have or will attain the American Dream thanks particularly to their good education and hard work.³⁹ *The Washington Post* suggests that “Just as Americans often criticize public education but like their local school (or hate Congress while supporting the local congressman), they rationalize personal economic success with national economic shortcomings” (par. 10).

With more intellectual vigor, although coming to the same conclusion, Andrew Hoberek examines *The Twilight of the Middle Class*. He scrutinizes post-World War II American fiction

³⁸ According to the poll, “They didn't like oil companies (66 to 13 percent), drug companies (49 to 25 percent) and corporate CEOs (35 to 18 percent). Globalization wasn't especially popular either; by 59 to 32 percent respondents favored more limits on imports” (par. 7).

³⁹ Although only 32 percent rate the economy as “excellent” or “good,” 52 percent rate their own personal situation as excellent or good. Most Americans (60 to 37 percent) think their own living standards are rising. Almost 70 percent of Americans say they have attained or will attain the “American Dream,” as they define it. More than half say success comes from a good education and hard work, not from connections (18 percent) or being born wealthy (13 percent).

through the class and economic lenses, basing his argument announced in the book title on two premises. One refers to the notion that the postwar critics were prone to overlook the problems of finances in favor of psychologization although, he argues, “economics and class remained central to postwar writing, belying our standard assumptions about the irrelevance of such matters in the postwar period” (2). As a result, he as well disputes the myth of America as a classless society that “has proven especially compatible with our understanding of the postwar boom” (3).⁴⁰ Recognizing the disparity between the reception and the actual manifestation of class, Hoberek provides a theoretical understanding for the situation that *The Washington Post* displayed using statistics: the middle class ambivalence about its own achievements and importance. Hoberek’s second assertion is that the middle class by the end of the Second World War lost “its historical control over property, which in a capitalist economy rendered it vulnerable *as a class* to future losses of income and job security” (9). Namely, the middle class is not defined any more by a small business ownership, both the symbol of American successful entrepreneurship and the foundation of American economy, but by the value of their finances invested in homes and, for instance, cars. This process caused the emergence of the Professional-Managerial Class (PMC), which, according to Hoberek, faced the loss of agency induced by its inability to identify itself with property ownership. By extension, Hoberek sees writers and intellectuals as PMCs, white-collar workers who also lost their agency because of the

⁴⁰ For a more detailed historical and economic account of the middle class in the U.S. see; Ellen A. Brantlinger. *Dividing Classes: How the Middle Class Negotiates and Justifies School Advantage*. New York: Routledge, 2003.; Ellis Cose. *The Rage of a Privileged Class: Why Do Prosperous Blacks Still Have the Blues?*. New York: Harper Perennial, 1995.; Barbara Ehrenreich. *Fear of Falling: The Inner Life of the Middle Class*. New York: Perennial, 1989.; Joe R. Feagin and Melvin P. Sikes. *Living with Racism: The Black Middle-Class Experience*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1994.; Carolyn Howe. *Political Ideology and Class Formation: A Study of the Middle Class*. Westport: Praeger, 1992.; Wright Mills. *White Collar: The American Middle Classes*. Cambridge: Oxford UP, 2002.; Marina Moskowitz. *Standard of Living: The Measure of the Middle Class in Modern America*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 2004.; Richard Parker. *Myth of the Middle Class*. New York: HarperCollins, 1974.

institutionalization of intellectual work: “But because they defined themselves at least partially in opposition to the rest of the middle class, they developed a form of professionalism designed to protect their authority as much from the public as from the institutions of corporate capitalism” (19). Seemingly unconstrained by the economic context, the only political response to such a situation the post World War II authors found was in their style—the oasis of autonomy—although to what level of success, one must note, in the commercial driven market remains open to debate.

Although focused on the decades following the Big War, Hoberek’s discussion serves as framework for an analysis of Jonathan Franzen and his novel *The Corrections*. Franzen declares in his essays that his position as a contemporary writer, as well as his novel, is subversive toward the postmodern literary poetics and politics that he finds outdated. He, however, fails to establish either himself or his novel as politically or socially innovative. As the analysis points out, neither does he succeed in positioning himself as the “cerebral authority,” as I call it, in the American capitalist-driven literary community, nor does he write a book that points out the failures of the dominant American contemporary poetics. What he does is write a novel that is deeply invested in the U.S. middle class and the attempt to preserve its core values, while its style appears conservative, recalling the bourgeois novel of the realist tradition. Franzen’s rhetoric fails his poetics that is informed by consumerism and the middle class quest for commodity. Whereas Acker’s, Díaz’s, and DeLillo’s novels insist on failure inscribed in the political and the historical, Franzen’s *Corrections* fails to engage in the multilayered and multicultural American society by insisting on the traditional ideals embodied in capital that is exclusively associated with the American white middle class. Although that is not a unique case in American literature, the

discrepancy between Franzen's rhetoric and poetics provides a platform for exploring failure in his novel.

The Cerebral Authority of the American Author

The Corrections and its author are most often associated with a literary scandal. In 2001, just a few weeks after the terrorist attacks on the U.S. and the publication of the novel, media mogul Oprah Winfrey chose *The Corrections* for her notorious Book Club. However, Franzen determinedly expressed his reluctance to associate the novel with the recognizable Oprah logo because, as he put it, she "picked some good books, but she's picked enough schmaltzy, one-dimensional ones that I cringe, myself, even though I think she's really smart and she's really fighting the good fight" (Weich par. 53). And that was enough for a public expression of hurt feelings on both sides. Oprah decided to *disinvite* the book and the author because it was not her "intention to make anyone uncomfortable or cause anyone conflict" (Winfrey qtd. in Lehmann 3). She even suspended the Club for a year, after five years of its existence.⁴¹ Apart from the fact that in a high-capitalist society a book can provoke a national polarization on pro-art and pro-culture masses (an issue that might call for a Jamesonian analysis), the whole dispute seemed paradoxical. Franzen associated himself with high-literature that, as he claimed, cannot be compromised by mass-marked consumption, and pronounced that "I feel like I'm solidly in the high-art literary tradition" (Kirkpatrick par. 14). And yet, his argument seemed contrived because

⁴¹ Oprah's Book Club and Oprah's role in contemporary U.S. literature have been most often examined in relation to marketing and her self-imposed role of a literary authority. See, for instance, Travis Trish. "It Will Change the World If Everybody Reads This Book: New Thought Religion in Oprah's Book Club." *American Quarterly* 59:3 (2007): 1017-1041.; Mark Hall. "The 'Oprahfication' of Literacy: Reading 'Oprah's Book.'" *College English* 65:6 (2003): 646-67.; John Young. "Toni Morrison, Oprah Winfrey, and Postmodern Popular Audiences." *African American Review* 35:2 (2001): 181-204.

the novel was not only published by a major, although highly respected house that organized an aggressive promotional campaign, but he also willingly participated in the promotion of the novel through media and TV shows that were little different from Oprah's Club.⁴² Also, he suggested that the novel is not a part of the consumer culture because of its nature that resists the market regulations. Novels like his are not a corporate product, they are high-art, he claimed, and they are endangered by the market. Interestingly, he did not decline Oprah's invitation; he just had certain qualms about it and as Annesley explained, "the very fact that the controversy generated by his dealings with Winfrey provoked a brief flurry of media interest that promoted his book in ways that possibly equaled (if not eclipsed) the publicity that would have been created had he actually appeared on Oprah's Book Club adds an additionally ironic dimension to his position" (120). Had Franzen's argument been nuanced by a notion, for example, that the consumption of high-literature is put at risk by the expansion of technologies and yet, in order to be consumed, literature should take advantage of mass media, he could have avoided later labels that ranged from "elitist" to "stupid." Franzen's literary "scandal" illustrates the complexities that authors who insist on their artistic integrity might face in a commodity-driven market and it corresponds with Díaz, whose literary stardom was initiated by the shrewd marketing presentation of his agents and publishers.

Interestingly for this analysis, neither party practiced what they were eager to present—subversion and generosity—and the dispute became another continuation of the divergence between aesthetics and the democratic approach to culture. In the same way that *The Washington Post* amusingly concluded that "progress breeds middle-class angst," both Franzen's revolt

⁴² Susanne Rohr discusses in a greater detail the conflict between Franzen's attempt to claim a purely artistic, underground position and the commercial success of the novel that was almost guaranteed by the prestige of the publishing house. See: Susanne Rohr: "'The Tyranny of the Probable'-Crackpot Realism and Jonathan Franzen's *The Corrections*." *American Studies* 49.1 (2004): 91-105.

against mass-culture and Winfrey's kindness were informed by their class position of a middle class writer and a media-mogul. Franzen's distrust of the contemporary market and literary consumption showed his paradoxical desire to be defined within and through materiality of his own culture (e.g. the culturally engaged novel) and the fear that the democratic, absorbent values of the culture might ignore aesthetic values of his work. In that sense, it seems that the Oprah affair was yet another chapter in *The Corrections*, with its middle class angst and seemingly articulated bourgeoisie subversion, and it read as a memoir of an author who still cherishes the romantic idea that the writer's persona equals his work. The danger of such an approach is proven with the reception of his next book, *The Discomfort Zone* (2005), that was almost unanimously and undeservedly declared bad non-fiction and the author a cold, selfish, self-centered person.

The reviewers asked questions such as "Just why anyone would be interested in pages and pages about [Franzen's unhappy marriage] or the self-important and self-promoting contents of Mr. Franzen's mind remains something of a mystery?" (Kakutani par. 10). A few years later, in the Spring of 2008, Franzen reciprocated at the reading advertised as a "face-off" with James Woods of Harvard University, one of his harshest and yet most careful readers, with a statement that became an immediate Internet hit and somewhat of yet another scandal, although ignored by those to whom it was aimed. Referring to Kakutani, Franzen said that "the stupidest person in New York City is currently the lead reviewer of fiction for the *New York Times*" (Neyfakh par. 1). He also added:

The reviews tend to be repetitive and tend to be so filled with error that they're kind of unbearable to read, even the nice ones. . . . The most upsetting thing nowadays is the feeling that there's no one out there responding intelligently to the text. . . . So few

people are actually doing serious criticism. It's so snarky, it's so *ad hominum* [sic], it's so black and white. (Neyfakh par. 3)

What Franzen suggests is that intelligent books lack intelligent, even professional readers, and that a writer like him is doomed to be misunderstood because, following the logic of his argument, the venue—and the proper reception—for fiction like his does not exist. It seems that while voicing his dissatisfaction with his (professional) readers, as well as refusing to be a part of the Oprah's empire, Franzen has in mind an agenda that he perpetually fails to successfully articulate and, therefore, generates conflicts. He is interested in establishing a position of the author as the authority of his time and not, like many critics have suggested, in re-establishing the aesthetic novel in the postmodern era, or undermining postmodernism itself by returning to the poetics of postmodernism. The irony of his position is that “people of high culture”—those he prefers—have never been figures of significant influence in American society, or American letters, despite the high regard the culture might have expressed for them. Franzen's preposition demonstrates his failure to comprehend the complex intricacies of the writer's place and his role in the historically capitalist society.

James Wood famously stated in his review of Franzen's *Corrections* “Jonathan Franzen and the ‘Social Novel’,” that the author “has himself to blame for the idiocy of his coverage, for his essay repeatedly had recourse to the personal as a way of solving what should have been impersonal arguments” (197). Wood analyzes the novel through Franzen's well-known essay “The Perchance of the Dream,” published in *Harper's Bazaar* in 1996, and recognizes in Franzen's dismissal of the social novel, as well as in Franzen's scorn toward Oprah's invitation, the author's attempt to reclaim the aesthetical values of the novel. The essay, revised and included in Franzen's collection of essays *How to Read Alone* (2003) under an even more

suggestive title “Why Bother?,” is a cornerstone of Franzen’s not too abundant scholarship and one of the most significant texts of Franzen’s *oeuvre*.⁴³ Hardly does a scholar—including the author of this text—start the analysis of Franzen’s book without referring to the essay and the “scandalous” manufactured affair. The reasons for that are twofold: the essay is the most polemical and theoretical Franzen’s text, and he has not yet revised his understanding of his work and American literature expressed in “Why Bother.” Recognizing its importance, Franzen himself claims in the introduction to the collection that, while rereading the essay, he realized that “I’d managed to forget that I used to be a very angry and theory-minded person” (“A Word About This Book” 4). He also ironically declares that “The first third of the *Harper’s* essay was written from this place of anger and despair [where culture and economy does not support art], in a tone of high theoretical dungeon that made me cringe a little now” (“A Word about This Book” 5). The Kakutani anecdote raises suspicion toward such a statement, signifying Franzen’s continuous investment in the cerebral position of the writer that he has not mollified in the past years.⁴⁴ Wood’s reading of the essay, in which he recognizes Franzen’s demand for aesthetics in contemporary literature, and therefore *The Corrections*, is misleading, in the same way in which Robert Rebein’s argument that Franzen decision to “abandon” postmodernism “had as much to do with survival—as both a writer and a person—as with anything so pedestrian as increasing sales” (207).

Wood’s lengthy review of *The Corrections*, however, is rather positive. If Wood’s article is perceived as a harsh assessment of *The Corrections* (Rebein, Hipsky), it is because Wood,

⁴³ An MLA International Bibliography, the most thorough literary scholarship archive, lists only eight entries about Franzen’s books.

⁴⁴ Of course, the other possible reading—and the one which will not be approached here—is that playing the *infant terrible* of contemporary literature Franzen forces the public to pay attention to him. He cleverly abuses the marketing dynamic.

while examining Franzen's novel, inscribes in it his own literary program about an aesthetic approach to literature. He appreciates *The Correction*'s scope, "its considerable grace, power, comedy and beauty" (201), and praises Franzen's success in avoiding "postmodern provincialism" that makes it "easy to imagine that the press of modernity makes authentic encounter uniquely difficult, that we are all belated exeptionalists" (209). It is the logic of Franzen's argument about the social novel that irritates Wood, its incoherence that was not noticed because of the article's style and the writer's "charm": "Franzen's aesthetic solution to the social novel—the 'refuge' of 'sentences'—is, I think, the right one, or at least one of them, but his reasons for arriving at it are the wrong ones" (197). In short, Wood writes that Franzen declares the social novel dead exactly because his previous socially engaged novels failed to be incorporated as such in the culture, and that Franzen expresses longing for a renewed position of the social novel. Franzen does not argue against the social novel, contends Wood, and "appears to be disillusioned only with the possibility of the social novel, not its desirability" (200). As a consequence, Franzen proposes "a softened DeLilloism," while *The Corrections* appears as a "correction of DeLillo in favor of the human" (202), greatly admired by Wood who finds in American contemporary literature a surplus of encyclopedic, unnecessary knowledge, and a lack of psychologically developed characters.

Rebein much more ambitiously approaches both texts: they represent Franzen's, he claims, final break from postmodernism and his definitive decision to ally himself with the authors of realist tradition (John Updike, Saul Bellow, Alice Munro). Therefore, claims Rebein, the failure of postmodernism is final. When "the darling of an older generation of writers and critics" (Rebein 201) renounces the poetics that secured him a critical attention, there is something inherently *passé* about postmodernism itself. In the *Harper*'s essay, Rubein

recognizes Franzen's concerns about his audiences who are estranged from contemporary postmodern fiction because of its level of "difficulty." The epiphany of Franzen's self-analysis is the realization that his audiences are readers who share with writers "their need in solitude, in their pursuit of substance in a time of ever-increasing evanescence: in their reach, via print, of a way out of loneliness" (Franzen 88). In that move Rebein recognizes Franzen's "large and decisive step away from . . . postmodernism" (206). The next phase of Franzen's distancing from postmodernism is evident in *The Corrections*, when the writer prefers the characters over the supposedly complicated postmodern plot: "That postmodernism is hostile to character has long been recognized" (Rubein 17). Thus it does not come as a surprise when Rebein suggests that not only is *The Corrections* Franzen's best work to date but also the first great novel of 21st century American literature, which demonstrates that "the aesthetics of literary postmodernism have become an indulgence the contemporary writer can ill afford" (220).

The reason Franzen's *Harper's* essay and, by extension, *The Corrections*, are read so differently and ambitiously is in the essayistic nature of Franzen's writing; the topics and the associations overlap to the extent of disruption. Franzen testifies, somewhat self-mockingly, that he was puzzled by the journalists' misunderstanding of the essay as well as by their insisting to associate the essay with *The Corrections*. Their incapability to discern its "simple idea" shocked Franzen: "No, actually, the *Harper's* essay was about *abandoning* my sense of social responsibility as a novelist and learning to write fiction for the fun and entertainment of it . . . " ("Why Bother?" 64). But Franzen, actually, does not abandon a social agenda. He introduces in *The Corrections* a set of socially conservative values that overshadow a concern that seems to be of a central interest for Franzen, although so far unrecognized in literary theory: a position of the author's cultural and social authority in contemporary, technological times. Franzen argues for

the writer-pundit whose words are not limited to “sixty reviews in a vacuum” and “the money, the hype, the limo ride to a *Vogue* shoot” (61). He wants to matter to the culture concretely, as a voice of reason and a voice of an intellectual concern. Franzen wants to be a writer with agency; he wants the writer to have his, as I call it, cerebral authority, recognized.

Franzen encapsulates his concerns about contemporary literary as well as cultural affairs in a question: “Where to find energy to engage with a culture in crisis when the crisis consists in the impossibility of engaging with culture?” (65). It is not possible, he is convinced, to resolve this conundrum because not only did TV “kill the novel of social reportage” (67) but also because progressively dominant “technological consumerism” (68) diminishes any significance of the literary attempt in contemporary U.S. He links the post-Cold War period with consumerism and capitalism of Armageddonian proportions in which “The dollar is now the yardstick of cultural authority” (63). For Franzen, the result is the obsolescence of all art that is even more horrendous when compared with the times “when the life of letters was synonymous with culture” (88). In *So Many Books, Reading and Publishing in the Age of Abundance*, Gabriel Zaid writes that since the 1950, when TV was introduced to the public, the amount of published books has not declined. He illustrates his point like this: since the 1950s, the annual growth of the population is 1.8%, while the annual growth of published books is 2.8 percent a year. Although Franzen in his own essay refers to Anthony Lane’s claims that the American reading tastes have not changed in the last 50 years but that the economy of book publishing is altered because it is most often associated with Hollywood, he fails to incorporate those arguments in his own reasoning.

Franzen recognizes in the nineteenth century the moment in which the written word equaled culture, when authors such as Disraeli, Dickens, and Darwin read each other and a new book by Thackeray or Howells, as he puts it, was anticipated with the enthusiasm that can be

compared to the contemporary late-December film release. Franzen's argument can be challenged on a number of theoretical, historical, and social grounds. Amanda Claybaugh, for instance, writes that Thackeray, although recognizing the prominence of the "novel of purpose," argued that the novel should provide amusement, while Dickens' interest in the social novel developed gradually and is representative of the later phase in his literary career. Howells' critical and editorial work, in a historical perspective, is seen as more significant than his fiction and he, in fact, attacked Thackeray for his romanticism. The realist scholars influenced by poststructuralist theories of power and knowledge, such as Amy Kaplan, Mark Seltzer, and D.A. Miller, argue that the realist social novel is not progressive because its ultimate goal is to exercise control over its subjects. Franzen's idealistic understanding of the period authors and their works is as much fascinating as his attempt to attain the position of the cerebral authority, the position that the writer have never had in the American context.

Jeremy Green writes that Franzen's insisting on the "cultural authority" (7) manifests, in fact, the conflict of the private and the public. Habermas sees in the eighteenth century an example of the perfectly balanced conjunction of the aesthetic, moral, and political life manifested in the public sphere, achieved through circulated essays and criticism as well as conversations in public houses. That juxtaposition constitutes the space for generating discussions. Although Green carefully reminds us that "the public sphere was founded not just on reason, but on property rights, as well as exclusions of gender, class, and race" (8), he claims that in the modern period, with the increasing role of advertising, entertainments, and publicity, "the public sphere gives way to the realm of mass culture, so the citizen gives way to the consumer" (8). He concludes, somewhat pessimistically, that both the *Harper's* essay and the Oprah affair exemplify "civil privatism": "Franzen fails to engage with the absence of a political

and cultural space that is the merit and timeliness of his essay to identify. . . . his position deplores the therapeutic public without imagining anything but private and spiritual satisfaction to replace it” (96). Green furthermore writes that, consequently, the problem of agency remains unresolved between the roles of citizen and consumer, contained in the essay and the Oprah scandal, respectively, and embodied in the writer—Franzen. But despite the theoretical attractiveness of Green’s stance, it is impossible not to notice that Green strips Franzen of any agency, reducing him to the sub-product of the culture in which his intellectual and private identity is marked by the overpowering mass (public) culture. A Habermasian understanding of Franzen’s position and the perception of his works is not only close to Franzen’s original complaint about the cultural disinterest in intellectually demanding and socially engaging literature but also erroneous because it recognizes in Franzen’s request—the attempt to “reclaim” the intellectual authority—proof for the flawed culture. Green’s reading also provides a simplified explanation of the complex U.S. cultural politics and market circumstances. The Habermasian public sphere is equaled with mass culture in which the rational intellectual, if not absent, is at least transformed into a consumer. However, the relative marginalization of the author in American society can be explained by the historical context.

Franzen longs for a position that writers had only in communist Eastern Europe. That position, despite Franzen’s nostalgic recollections and romanticized reading of the literary past, has never been dominant in the American cultural context. The reasons for such a difference, which Franzen almost shortsightedly overlooks, are found in the very nature of the Western democracies, the educational systems, the national and political agendas as well as the mercantile driven Western publishing markets. (And they are not, as Franzen or his critics propose, directly associated with the supposed failure of postmodernism and the limitations of the social novel.)

Or, as Andrew Wachtel succinctly suggests, the capitalist and communist establishments produce writers who have fundamentally different social roles. Wachtel, an Eastern European scholar at an American university, notes that unlike in communist Eastern Europe where writers represented the intellectual authority, in the U.S. the general public turns to “politicians, television or radio personalities, preachers, or others” (8) as experts on pressing contemporary issues. The writer in the U.S. has never “gained his authoritative position after initial success as a writer of serious literature . . . serious writers such as Don DeLillo and Thomas Pynchon may well have important things to say about American society, but beyond a handful of literature professors few people are able and willing to recognize this” (8-9). And that is, according to Wachtel, because writers in communist Eastern Europe were recognized as the founding fathers of their nations, which were created during the national revivals in the mid 19th century, and whose national identity was based on the shared national language and literature of the country.⁴⁵ Wachtel concludes that the author’s status was reinforced during communism, when the writers were recast as protocommunists and, consequently, introduced as the carriers of the historical and literary lineage of the pre-revolutionary times. Therefore, the writers were relevant in a sense that they “expressed truths to which society as a whole should attend” (Wachtel 8). They were acknowledged as the ultimate intellectual authority, notably, by the audiences educated in the litero-centric system who exercised a profound scorn for pulp and non-fiction.⁴⁶

⁴⁵ This model is usually associated with the German Romantic poet, Johann Gottfried von Herder, who equated the nation with its language; a nation is defined in linguistic terms, by a language its people speak. That seems to be the main reason many new post-communist countries have insisted on their particular national languages even when the linguistic differences did not transcend a dialect disparity (e.g. Croatian, Serbian, Bosnian, and the latest, Montenegrin)

⁴⁶ Although not fully developed, a similar argument about writers in former communist countries introduces Robert Murray Davis in his *The Literature of Post-Communist Slovenia, Slovakia, Hungary and Romania* (2007), as well as Harold B. Slegel in *The Columbia Literary History of Eastern Europe Since 1945* (2008).

On the contrary, writes Wachtel, in Western Europe and particularly in the U.S., the founding fathers are politicians and law-makers, while sculptures of military figures and governmental service men decorate public places. The high-brow writer's voice is irrelevant if expressed outside of the literary and academic circles. What makes Wachtel suspicious that another Solzhenitsyn or Kundera will appear any time soon is the collapse of the communist states. And, consequently, "the creation of fledgling civil societies, democratic governments, and market economies" (Wachtel 5). Not only are writers not needed any more to justify the existence of the state and the nation but they also do not represent any more voices against oppressive communist regimes. Without the censorship and with a new capitalistic book market, the writers find themselves intellectually and economically marginalized "and the prestige of serious literature declined drastically in the first postcommunist decade" (Wachtel 6). Paradoxically, and that brings us back to Franzen and his request for the writer's cerebral authority, democracy is bad for *serious* writers. In other words, the cultural, political, and historical circumstances of the U.S. have precluded the establishment of the writer as the cerebral authority.

The Idea of the Middle Class: Christmas Ornaments, Cabbage, and Champagne

Almost in the same manner in which Franzen tries to establish himself as a cerebral authority, he also attempts to distinguish his novel as subversive. Franzen supposedly writes against the dominant postmodern practices and the novel, consequently, is praised for creating "a critical image of contemporary and economic conditions" (Annesley 113). The novel fails in such an approach and becomes a bourgeois novel that reinstates the values of the white middle

class. The novel does not bring about newness or freshness, despite its often humorous tone, but appears conservative and traditional in its ethics and values.

The Corrections is a narrative about the white middle class, while the identity quandaries of Franzen's characters are facilitated and cushioned by their middle class status. The novel, a combination of postmodern and traditional storytelling, exposes through two generations of Lamberts the discomfort of the characters who embody their class ideology or feel restrained by it. In short, Enid and Alfred have internalized the middle class values; the family life is centered on their three kids and a working father, who idealizes his class and working ethics up to the point that the upward class mobility of his family is prevented. Expectedly, the children try to escape their middle-class upbringing even though firmly staying within its boundaries. Gary, the oldest, is worried that "the nature of family life itself was changing—that togetherness and filiality and fraternity weren't valued the way they were when he was young" (166); Chip by embracing liberal politics, and although the youngest Denise sees in the St. Jude, Minnesota house a suffocating presence, she is the first who tries to solidify the dissipating order.

The plot is as well focused on the middle class values although it is seemingly concerned with the tragic family matter. Enid wants to bring the whole family home for "one last Christmas" because of Alfred's rapidly progressing Parkinson's disease, but the obstacles her children list are an array of sexual and identity crises typical for the contemporary American middle-class context. Gary's marriage is controlled by his passive-aggressive wife; the younger Chip is bankrupt because of his irrational spending, while the youngest Denise feels uncomfortable in her mother's company who does not approve of her private life. And yet, the problems of all of the characters are embodied in the middle-class and capitalistic values.

Martin Hipsky recognizes in the novel “domestic anxiety—‘domestic’ in the double sense of ‘within the household’ and ‘within the nation’—that initiates and renews the representational production of the white, middle-class nuclear family throughout *The Corrections*” (par. 18). He also claims that this anxiety “takes the form of apprehensions about the future of the rising generation” (Hipsky par. 18) within class- and race-based inequalities that are felt to be “intractable as the indifferent Nature itself” (Hipsky par. 18.) On the contrary, these disparities are not only traceable but they also represent the nucleus of the characters’ actions. The class and race awareness brought into the novel constitutes its world by inversion; Franzen’s novelistic setting is defined not by those who are included in it but by those who are either excluded or are on the margins of *The Corrections*’ world: non-White, non-Christian, foreigners, women, and, above all, non-wealthy. The values of the white middle class, therefore, are articulated through a negation, through an opposition to the elements that supposedly form the concept of the middle class. Consequently, the characters readily express what they are not and what they do not want to become, but they rarely define their identities through a positive association with another character or an idea.

Franzen’s technique is best illustrated by Jacques Derrida’s understanding of the concept of presence/absence. In “Signature, Event, Context” and *Of Grammatology*, Derrida is concerned with the characteristics of the spoken and written word, usually perceived as a hierarchical binary. Since it is assumed that the physical presence of a speaker authenticates his speech, and that the speech could be continued in writing, spoken language is directly related to thought. Writing is only supplementary to spoken language because a writer is not present to validate his words. Consequently, the category of presence is favored over absence, speech is favored over writing, and this assumption is based on the logic that presence itself validates an object. In other

words, what is present is more valued than what is not—what is absent. Derrida destabilizes this binary opposition claiming that speech (as the first, present category) is dependent on writing. Rooting his argument in the Ferdinand de Saussure's structural linguistics, Derrida says that "self-identity"—signifying form of any spoken language—is based on its recognition and repetition. What allows that signifying form to exist, although it is separated from its phonic sign or grapheme, is the possibility of being "repeated in the absence not only of its referent, which goes without saying, but of a determined signified or current intention of signification, as of every present intention of communication" (par. 17). Derrida concludes that the possibility of being detached from its referent or signified (and therefore from communication and its context) constitutes every mark. Ultimately, he claims that "this law" can be extended to all experience in general, "if it is granted that there is no experience of *pure* presence, but only chains of differential marks" (par. 17). In *The Corrections*, Franzen's characters' selves are construed through the exclusion of all of the elements that are considered a threat to their middle class status. What they are *not*, defines who they *are*.

Very early in the novel, for instance, Chip recalls a family dinner, to which he brought his Marxist girlfriend from North England, Ruthie. After, unknowingly, she broke every rule of the house, including lighting a cigarette indoors and not wearing a bra to dinner, she provoked Alfred to pronounce that "'the blacks' would be the ruination of this country, 'the blacks' were incapable of coexisting with whites, they expected the government to take care of them, they didn't know the meaning of hard work" (Franzen 23). Later in the novel, Chip similarly remembers his childhood dinners during which Alfred expressed his support for death penalty, only regretting that it is not practiced often enough even though he is aware that "the men whose gassing or electrocution he'd called for . . . were usually black men from the slums on St. Jude's

north side” (128). Alfred’s and Enid’s “rules” delineate both the world of their household and the social boundaries within which they are ready to interact. Enid is conservative and “proper,” although almost charming in her old-fashioned habits (she is offended when Ruthie refuses to try her special salad of water chestnuts, green peas, and cheddar-cheese cubes soaked in a thick mayonnaise sauce). When she meets Julie, Chip’s girlfriend who breaks up with him the same morning she meets his parents, Enid has a cannonade of questions in which Chip “could hear subtexts and agendas” (23). The passage is brilliant because it encapsulates all of the limits of Enid’s world that are often contradictory. It also points out conflicts inscribed in Enid’s own ethical standards; besides the fact that she follows the norms of St. Jude and the Midwestern manners, Enid’s codex is hardly unique.⁴⁷ The passage also excellently illustrates the identity processes of *The Corrections*’ characters: they define themselves through a negation, not an association with a certain group or a concept.

“Do you live in the city?” Enid said. (*You’re not cohabiting with our son, are you?*) “And you work in the city, too?” (*You are gainfully employed? You’re not from an alien, snobbish, moneyed eastern family?*) Did you grow up here? (*Or do you come from a trans-Appalachian state where people are warmhearted and down-to-earth and unlikely to be Jewish?*) “Oh, and do you still have family in Ohio? (*Have your parents perhaps taken the morally dubious modern step of getting divorced?*) “Do you have brothers and sisters? (*Are you a spoiled child or a Catholic with a zillion siblings?*) (23)

⁴⁷ Although it is tempting to blame geography for the differences between Enid and her children, as Ralph Poole argues, it seems that the gap between Enid’s and Alfred’s and their children should be blamed on generational differences. See: Ralph Poole. “Serving the Fruitcake, or Jonathan Franzen’s Midwestern Poetics.” *Midwest Quarterly: A Journal of Contemporary Thought* 49:3 (2008): 263-283.

Enid's anti-Semitism, announced in the paragraph above, is a motif that Franzen exploits throughout his narrative.⁴⁸ One of the most painful moments for Enid is when Denise introduces her boss, and future husband Emile, "a short, unsmiling, middle-aged Jew from Montreal" (120) to her mother. Enid does not like his old white T-shirt that, she thinks, suits better a cook than a chef, his crab cake is richer than she would like it to be, and although he prepared the meal for Enid and Alfred together with Denise, his biggest "crime" is that "instead of apologizing and deprecating himself, as any polite St. Judean would have done" (120), Emile carelessly defended the richness of his cakes. Since Denise married without a big, St. Jude wedding of which Enid has been secretly dreaming, she not only announces to all of her friends that Denise marriage to "a very nice Canadian man" is coming "soon" and that the ceremony will be limited to the closest family, but also orders without Denise's knowledge 200 engraved announcements to make "the wedding appear more conventional" (121). Franzen here insists that the Enid looks up to the standards of St. Jude, an epitome of an American small town. Franzen lets us only in the houses of the people of whose life-styles either Enid or Alfred disapprove. We do not know too much of Enid's friends either, beside from the fact they embody petit-bourgeoisie mannerisms, like Chuck Meisner, who had given his daughter a lavish and kitsch wedding party, with a champagne cocktail, a helicopter, and a brass octet playing fanfares. Enid does mourn that her children "didn't match. They didn't want the things that she and all her friends and all her friends' children wanted" (121).

⁴⁸ The literary stereotype of a Jew as a traitor, as well as a Jew as a merciless businessman, and a member of an "unclean" ethnicity can be traced to the very beginning of Christianity: the New Testament. The stereotype prevailed through more than two thousand years of history, while its most atrocious manifestation is the Holocaust. For further discussion, see: Andrea Dworkin. *Scapegoat: Jews, Israel, and Women's Liberation*. New York: Free Press, 2000.; Avner Ziv and Anat Zajdman. *Semites and Stereotypes: Characteristics of Jewish Humor*. Westport: Greenwood Press, 1993.; Henry Kellerman, *Greedy, Cowardly, and Weak: Hollywood's Jewish Stereotypes*. Fort Lee: Barricade Books, 1993.; Ellen Sciff. *From Stereotype to Metaphor: the Jew in Contemporary Drama*. Albany: State University of New York P, 1983.

But all of her children did what is expected from suburban children. They go to college and have successful careers, satisfying lives, and are, if not rich, comfortable in their accumulation of wealth outside of St. Jude. Gary is a banker, married to a ridiculously rich woman whom he met at Swarthmore; Chip is a professor at a prestigious Northeastern college, until he involves himself in an affair with a student, Melissa, and gets fired, while Denise is a rising chef in Philadelphia whose work is already noticed by venues such as *The New York Times*. But even Chip, who seems to be overly sensitive to the cruel nature of capitalism, never stops yearning and embracing its most prominent value: money. That is not too different from the average St. Judean's life path that replicates the traditional American Dream, and it is not too challenging to understand to which values Enid aspires. When after five years Dennis divorces Emile—who also turns into a stereotypical “Jew-traitor” because he takes Denise's job when she is fired from the Generator—Enid is not happy that her daughter is not any more associated with a Jew but hurt and disappointed that all her efforts to restrain herself in front of Emile and reinvent her daughter's marriage in front of “her friends” were in vain. It is as if Emile is one of the signifiers of her word; his Jewishness symbolizes the feigned openness of her white, Christian world although it does not define its specificities beyond the common stereotypes and expectations of the middle class.⁴⁹

Gitanes, the Lithuanian who hires Chip to help him with pyramidal machinations in Gitanes' native country, marks the boundaries of the middle class almost in the same way as Emile does. Franzen moves Chip to Lithuania to expose the horrors of early capitalism but, more significantly, Gitanes' character demonstrates the ignorance of the middle class through

⁴⁹ It is hard to find a sound parent who does not want a smart, beautiful, and hardworking partner for her child, or her child to be happy. That is why it is easier to understand at the end of the novel Enid's “conversion” and her acceptance of Denise's lesbianism and Chip's Jewish wife.

seemingly unimportant details. Gitanes is Chip's *deux ex machina* (who is also Julia's ex-husband). When Chip finally spends literally his last dollars on the lottery ticket, Julia leaves him, and the present has never seemed to be gloomier, Chip's agent introduces him to the mysterious Eastern European. Gitanes offers Chip an adventures business proposal and before the end of the day that started disastrously, Chip is on his way to the freshly independent ex-USSR state where he acts as Gitanes' "leverage" in conning greedy Western and American capitalists who, despite unreasonable business proposals, invest in the country of which they have barely heard.⁵⁰ The premise of Gitanes' scheme is the Western inability to comprehend Lithuania as a geographical territory but only as an investment; since Lithuania is an ex-communist country, only those who invest the first and the most will benefit from the newly formed capitalist market. The adventure does not last, suddenly interrupted by arm clashes, and Chip flees to the secure States, describing the collapse of the Lithuanian escapade as "wholly typical . . . of his luck that before he could enjoy even two good months in Vilnius, both his father and Lithuania fell apart" (Franzen 439). Gitanes refuses to join Chip and reasons "I'm not employable in America. As of next month, I'm not married to an American" (449).

In fact, being married to an American does not allow a foreigner to work in the USA; the permanent residence status, popularly called the green card, does. The green card can be granted, among other instances, through a marriage to an American citizen. Getting a divorce, on the other hand, does not disqualify a person from working in the country, as long as the green card is granted. If based on a bona fide marriage to an American citizen, the green card does not expire

⁵⁰ The same destiny—or business path—is still typical for most of the ex-communist Eastern European countries. The process of transformation from the communist into capitalist system is generally described as "transition." See, for instance, Paul Dragos Aligica and Anthony Evans. *The Neoliberal Revolution in Eastern Europe: Economic Ideas in the Transition from Communism*. Northampton: Edward Edgar Publishing Limited, 2009., and Daniel Gros and Alfred Steinherr. *Economic Transition in Central and Eastern Europe: Planting the Seeds*. Oxford: Cambridge UP, 2004.

nor is it renounced, while the only obstacle a person might face is a longer period required for the application for American citizenship. In addition, Gitanas was a diplomat and had a diplomatic passport that granted him an array of benefits and limitless entry to the U.S., although the marriage to an American citizen made him eligible for the green card. Since he is a shrewd *businessman* (after all, he buys an apartment in New York City with government money), and the main reason for his marriage, as Franzen explains, was to keep him in the U.S., it is hard to imagine that he would miss an opportunity to obtain a green card. As a diplomat, Gitanes is qualified to stay in the U.S., based on “persecution or a well rounded fear of prosecution.”⁵¹ Although it is tempting to conclude that Gitanes uses the alleged green card complications to hide that he is staying in Lithuania because of his mother—an act that is the opposite of his macho image—such an analysis would be excessive.⁵² Gitanes is a stereotypical representation of an Eastern European corrupt politician. Nonetheless, his explanation is sufficient enough for Chip because, “It warmed his Foucaultian heart, in a way, to live in a land where property ownership and the control of public discourse was so obviously a matter of who had guns” (441).

On the narrative level, Gitanas’ reasoning is an elegant way to remove the character from the novel, although it significantly undermines the authenticity of Franzen’s proclaimed realism. More importantly, it counterpoints the middle class paradise of which Franzen is so fond. When Chip comes back to the States from the turbulent Lithuania, after a few days of traveling and a good bit of walking, he is ecstatic because: “Denise’s shampoo had the pleasing, subtle scents of late-model Western capitalism” (538). As an epic character sent by the higher power on a quest, Chip comes from his travels transformed, although only to fully accept the benefits of developed

⁵¹ For detailed information, see the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services’ website: <http://www.uscis.gov>.

⁵² This inversion of the macho concept is particularly significant in Latino literature and culture, which I examine in the chapter regarding *Oscar Wao*.

capitalism that he theoretically resisted. Chip is not excited that he escaped the country on the verge of civil war without a scratch but that he comes from a country that manufactures olfactory pleasing hygienic products. Only a desperate man, a poor man, like Chip was on the starting day of his Eastern European adventure, would follow an absolute stranger—let alone a foreigner—across the ocean because of potential financial benefits. The moment Gitanes is removed from the narrative, Chip's middle class recovery starts, only to be crowned by a reconciliation with his family, marriage, and twins. While Emile helps Enid to define her middle class values, Gitanes reconciles Chip with his bourgeois manners.

Franzen develops gradually the elements that constitute the middle class. The episode from the middle section of *The Corrections*, when Enid and Alfred at a cruise meet Sylvia and Ted Roth who lost their daughter in an absurd crime, most intensely constitutes the white middle class values. The scene, although relatively short and with the characters whose functionality does not surpass the chapter, is a culmination of the inversion technique that Franzen employs in the novel. The scene, as well, marks the middle point of the novel, and one can hardly not notice its significance in almost a literary manner.

On a ship full of retired rich and semi-rich older couples, Sylvia befriends Enid and shares with her the most burdensome secret: the coping with the death of her daughter, an art-therapist, who was killed by her crack-addicted patient, Khellye Withers. Withers did not believe that his therapist lent her Cabriolet, his object of desire, to a friend for a weekend because, according to the court report, he “couldn’t get [his] ass around” (305) the fact that Jordan had two sets of keys. High on crack, he tortures her for 30 hours with an iron, and then cuts her throat in fear of the friend who came to return the keys on Sunday evening. Although Franzen points out the intricacies of the consumer society that triggered Withers’ temporary madness—he was

able to buy crack in Philadelphia because the society had not “stanch[ed] the flow of illegal drugs” (305) into urban neighborhoods; he lives in a society that reinforces idolization of “brand-name consumer goods” (305), while he did not have a steady job exactly because of his underprivileged racial position—he lets Sylvia’s argument to be heard. Rhetorically, the long paragraph in which Franzen explains and repeats that “she wanted him dead despite” a series of rational reasons, is the same inversion that Franzen uses when exploring the limits of his characters’ worlds. The prime reason for Jordan’s death, despite her therapist’s forbiddance to indulge herself in such explanations, for Sylvia is in “a divine judgment on her own liberal politics or liberal parenting or senseless affluence” (304).

This remark not only sets up the ideological tone of the novel and the middle class anxiety, but also reflects the concerns of Franzen’s audience. It is important that murderer Khellye Withers is African-American, and the only African American character in the novel. However, he is more a sketch than a character. With his voice limited to the court transcripts—and to the voice that describes only his incredulity about the double set of keys, in a typical urban African American vernacular—he represents both a racial threat to the security of the characters’ domestic spaces and their only racial encounter. Reduced to the stereotype of a non-white lower class person, he functions as only a symbol in the novel. The middle class values are defined in opposition to Withers, and therefore, another race. Sylvia abandons her liberal politics and comforts herself with images of the man’s suffering to the point that she becomes a supporter of capital punishment, feeling guilty that her open-mindedness, in fact, hurt her daughter. It is significant that in attempt to cope, Sylvia spends five years as a “gun artist,” searching hardcore porn for the best image of a black man fellating a white man for her model of

the black killer sucking pistol. Her desperate and unsuccessful attempts to draw Withers bring her to the epiphany; she passionately wants him dead.

Sylvia's vindictiveness cannot be attributed solely to the expected reaction of any parent who loses a child because it encompasses the stereotypical understanding of black masculinity. The black male body is commonly perceived as oversexualized and therefore potentially dangerous. The threat is manifested as either fear of the black man's desire for the white woman, or the fear of the black male sexual organ. Even when Enid is uncomfortable, but listens to Sylvia's story "because she was missing certain key facts, such as whether Khellye Withers was black and whether Jordan had been brutally raped" (305), she simply replicates the stereotypes inscribed in the black male body.⁵³ Sylvia, interestingly, reinstates the stereotypes through images. Finding homosexual porn pictures on the Internet, and then transforming them into "therapeutic" sketches, she not only symbolically strips the black body of its assumed sexuality but also kills the killer—with transforming a penis into a gun—with its own sexuality. It is insignificant for Sylvia that her daughter was not a victim of a sexual crime; her perception of race is reduced to stereotypes about black masculinity which, as she emphasizes, are actually accurate. Despite her liberalism and her daughter's education, neither did her or her daughter's openmindedness eradicate them from the social context. More importantly for Sylvia, her daughter is a victim of such a racial divide despite her attempt to overcome it by working as a

⁵³ Harry Stecopoulos and Michael Uebel significantly contributed to the scholarship about the correlation between race and masculinity in the in the *Anthology Race and the Subject of Masculinity* (1996), as well as these scholars: Phillip Brian Harper. *Are We Not Men? Masculine Anxiety and the Problem of African American Identity*. Cambridge: Oxford UP, 1996.; Marcellus Blount and George P. Cunningham, eds. *Representing Black Men*. Routledge: New York, 1996.; Hazel V. Carby. *Race Men*. Boston: Harvard UP, 1998.; Michael Awkward. *Negotiating Difference: Race, Gender, and the Politics of Positionality*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1995.; Maurice O. Wallace. *Constructing the Black Masculine: Identity and Ideality in African American Men's Literature and Culture, 1775–1995*. Durham: Duke UP, 1995.; Richard Majors. *Cool Pose: The Dilemmas of Black Manhood in America*. New York: Touchstone, 1992.

therapist with inner-city adolescents. In other words, her daughter's death exemplifies the failure of liberal politics. Sylvia's reasoning recalls Walter Benn Michaels' argument presented in his *The Trouble with Diversity: How We Learned to Love Identity and Ignore Inequality*, in which he claims that we wrongly assume that our society is divided into races rather than into economic classes. He writes that "Instead of trying to treat people as if their race didn't matter, we would not only recognize but celebrate racial identity. Indeed, race has turned to be a gateway drug for all kinds of identities, cultural, religious, sexual, even medical" (5). While it is easy to imagine Franzen's protest against a comparison with Michaels, Sylvia most apparently represents the essential values of the white middle class.

The images Sylvia finds on the Internet function as "metapictures," as W. J. T. Mitchell calls them in his *Picture Theory*. The metapicture is "a representation of a representation" (11), which projects a meaning that is comprehensible and dependable on a context. Mitchell writes that "understanding of pictures seems inevitably to call into question the self-understanding of the observer" (57), as well as the notion of identity that "also engages the status of the metapicture in a wider cultural field, its positioning with respect to disciplines, discourses, and institutions" (57). Sylvia's found-and-appropriated images are therefore as much the representation of the racial male subject (oversexed and dangerous), as they are signifiers of her class' simplified racial discourse. Hipsky notes that Sylvia "ideologically mirrors *The Corrections*' target demographics more directly than does Enid" (par. 21) but her stance also emphasizes the racial anxiety embodied in her class. Since Sylvia lost her daughter in a random, urban act of violence, her racial prejudices seem to her as justifiable as her own previous guilt over her affluence was ridiculous.

This argument rooted both in class and race is also associated with Chip. In the opening section of the novel, he is convinced that he is going to be fired from his college-professor position not because he had a sexual relationship with his student and wrote her papers, but because he cannot get away with it since he is a white male professor. A few years before his employment, his college fired a well-liked, young drama professor who claimed to have a degree she did not have. But the outraged students and young faculty forced the college, with their organized boycotts and candlelight vigils, not only to rehire Cali Lopez but also to promote her to a full professor.⁵⁴ Chip reasons that “Granted, [he] was neither a lesbian nor a Filipina, as Lopez was, but he’d taught Theory and Feminism, and he had a hundred-percent voting record with the Queer Block” (83). His sister Denise also “resented that the college was making her feel guilty about her privileges while granting certain lucky identity groups plenary indulgences from guilt” (376). In his essay, “Why Bother?”, Franzen critiques cultural politics, suggesting that they discourage his students to take literature seriously. He even claims that “there’s also evidence” (80; sic!) that young writers feel imprisoned by their ethnic and gender identities:

One evening a student reported that his contemporary fiction class had been encouraged to spend an entire hour debating whether the novelist Leslie Marmok Silko was a homophobe. Another evening, when I came to class, three women students were both hooting with laughter at the utopian-feminist novel they were being forced to read for an honors seminar in Women and Fiction. (78)

⁵⁴ One can only smile at the fact that students and junior faculty might have that much authority at any U.S. higher education institution, and at boycotts (although it is not clear of what) and candlelight vigils as a powerful negotiation tool in (hiring) politics. Díaz, when he tries to establish himself as an outsider in American literature, recalls Franzen’s narrative. He claims that his girlfriend is responsible for his Cornell University M.F.A. degree because she secretly sent his story, in his name, to the University. The rest is history, he suggests. Anybody who went through the application procedure for any U.S. graduate program must chuckle at Díaz’s explanation that, undoubtedly, initiates a myth about the author’s career.

Franzen, in other words, claims that multiculturalism damages the sensibilities of young readers and contributes notably to the “antiliterate tendencies” (Green 94) that already govern American culture. Kathleen Fitzpatrick finds Franzen’s approach typical for the new generation of white male writers. Cultural producers, as Fitzpatrick labels them, such as Don DeLillo, David Foster Wallace, and Franzen, articulate their anxiety about exclusion from “the culture” around their whiteness and maleness; “in their unmarkedness, in finding themselves the New White Guys, these writers feel themselves excluded from a culture of exclusion, marginalized by a culture that is finally paying attention to the voices originating on the margins” (209). In the context of the novel, such an anxiety indicates the class exclusivity that is interwoven with racial and cultural prejudices. The Other is always potentially dangerous, it always represents a threat, unless he is able to raise to the class level of the main white characters and, therefore, force the race discourse to dissipate. In the novel, such characters are Gitanes and Chip’s wife, a Jewish doctor, about whom we know nothing except that she is kind to the demented Alfred and that she supports Chip’s artistic ambitions; while she works, he is endlessly rewriting his scenario without any prospect of actually realizing it.

With an argument about negative consequences of the multicultural society, Franzen undermines one of the most important elements of American fiction after the 1980s: the challenge of the dominant political, economic, and cultural structures by the inclusion of discourses about minorities and women. Franzen’s ideas can hardly be read ironically even though they are coated with a dose of humor, and they are reinstated in his most recent non-fiction. More than 20 years ago, Andreas Huyssen recognized in postmodernism the culture of democracy, radically different from the period of the “enlightened modernity” whose “imperialistic” (219) nature had been examined by philosophers such as Theodor Adorno and

Max Horkheimer. Huyssen finds in the interest for women's issues, ecology and environment, as well as in awareness for non-European and non-Western civilizations the "constitutive[s] of postmodern culture" (219); "a possibility for a newness and openness of both culture and literature" (219). Such an approach creates a "postmodernism of resistance" (220), representing a shift from postmodernism strictly focused on formal innovations to the one interested in the social context. Even after more than two decades, Huyssen's evaluation of postmodernism's nature describes the dominant themes and subjects of American contemporary literature. Multiculturalism, therefore, is as problematic as the culture that does not recognize Franzen as the cerebral authority.⁵⁵ That is, a person's significance in the culture is particularly jeopardized if he comes from a traditionally politically and culturally dominant group, or from a middle class background. It is almost needless to say that such a stance problematizes Franzen's argument about a need for writing a genuinely relevant fiction. In other words, if writers write about a multiracial and multiethnic society, it does not mean that they are fashionable—as Franzen claims—but that their texts correspond with the complex social reality.

While Franzen defines the middle class in the opposition to the array of characters, he establishes its epitome through a series of seemingly unimportant details. Green writes that Franzen's meticulous attention to the particularities of food, decor, and clothes demonstrates the novel's realistic character. He correctly contends that the manner in which Franzen treats such details "emphasizes the way commodities function as signs of distinction, both within and

⁵⁵ Franzen's argument could have been accepted if he had nuanced it. For instance, he might have claimed that the publishing industry equals one's credibility with one's ethnicity (e.g. only Russians authors write about communism, and only Latino experiences constitute a relevant immigration discourse in the U.S.). Franzen, however, writes with the same disdain about China and Chinese bird-watchers in an article written for *The New Yorker*, "Toy Story," where he is a staff writer. Franzen is sent to China to write about China and bird-watching, his passionate hobby but only an emerging passion in China. In Franzen's interpretation, the Chinese, if not primitive as a nation, are at least ignorant about birds. China is uncivilized and corrupted by communism. However, Franzen fails to see that such politics left the country largely underdeveloped and therefore an untouched oasis for bird admirers.

between classes” (106). These realistic details have a twofold function: they serve as a means of differentiation within classes, and not within a class, as Green argues; and they constitute the very idea of the middle class, as opposed to the middle class itself.

In her *Bourgeois Interior*, Julia Prewitt Brown proposes that “the bourgeois interior functions as a *medium* through which something is transmitted, a many-layered fabric across which different energies travel: psychological, political, economic, aesthetic, cultural, historical” (3). She sees in the objects that inhabit the houses of literary works a “mask” (xii), the means of expressions of, as she calls it, the bourgeois life. The objects present in the middle class homes serve not only as a valorization of the bourgeois subject and the reinforcement of the socially ascribed roles (mother, wife, businessman), but they also signify the middle class. Without them, the middle class would not be able to be either recognized or self-identified as such, which is the reason family photographs in the living room, ceramic fruit in a bowl, or monogrammed towels can be found in 19th century houses as well in those from the 21 century.⁵⁶ Drawing on Walter Benjamin’s ambivalent understanding of bourgeois from his *Berlin Childhood around 1900*, Brown concludes that the three main characteristics of the bourgeois interior are catalogization because “The bourgeoisie like to leave traces of themselves” (2); exercising nostalgia for “an earlier, more stable middle class” (11); and manifestation of the excess in the “need for more than what is strictly necessary” (22) because of the class’ longing for security. In the final trait, Brown recognizes the archetype of the bourgeois soul.

⁵⁶ Scholarly works about the middle class and the ways in which it is represented in literature are not abundant, and they are mostly concerned with the British 19th and the early 20th century literature, analyzed through the lenses of social Darwinism and Enlightenment. See, for instance, Julie Fromer. *A Necessary Luxury: Tea in Victorian England*. Ohio UP, 2008.; John Kucich. *Imperial Masochism: British Fiction, Fantasy, and Social Class*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 2007.; Stephen Hancock. *The Romantic Sublime and Middle-class Subjectivity in the Victorian Novel*. New York: Routledge, 2005.

In *The Corrections*, when Enid wants her adult children to pin the last ornament onto the Advent calendar, is a quintessential moment of such middle class soul. After months of planning the last family Christmas—how Enid sees it because of Alfred’s galloping Alzheimer disease—she is overwhelmed by the confirmed prospect of Chip’s coming to St. Jude, as well as already having Denise and Gary in the house. The tree-shaped calendar is made by a church group and used for fundraising but, “as Enid would hasten to tell you,” these calendars are “beautifully hand-sewn and reusable” (469). She based a family tradition on the calendar; each child pinned during the days of Advent one of the ornaments onto the tree; the ornament for December 24 is a small plastic Christ child. The ritual grew into a 30-year long family tradition, although it is equally important to Enid that the calendar is a quality product:

Although Enid generally fell far short in favor in her Christian beliefs, she was devout about this ornament. To her it was an icon not merely of the Lord but of her own three babies and of all of the sweet baby smelling babies of the world. She’d filled the twenty-fourth pocket for thirty years, she knew very well what it contained, and still the anticipation of opening it could take her breath away. (470-471)

For the last Christmas, Enid wants Chip to pin the Christ ornament but since he is late, she asks Denise and is disappointed when she declines. Denise is going through her own sexual and identity struggle, aggravated by the just learned fact that her father retired early and unexpectedly because he refused to be bribed by Denise’s first lover, his co-worker. Understanding the meaning of the calendar ceremony for Enid, in which she should embrace the role of a “credulous and hopeful” child (511), Denise feels incapable of the task. She suggests Enid pin the ornament, which Enid expectedly refuses because it would tarnish both the Christmas family routine and her idea of the family (bourgeois) Christmas. The next time the

calendar is mentioned in the narrative, Enid notes almost formally that there are not any ornaments left because “Gary pinned the last ornament” (526). It is suggested that Gary obliged her wish but did not recognize in it either the meaning it has for Enid or the remnant of the family custom. The nostalgia charged ornament encapsulates Enid’s awareness of her middle class and, more importantly, symbolizes its continuum that she is able to imagine and project even on her grandchildren: “For months she’d imagined Jonah pinning the Christ child to the Advent calendar on the morning of the twenty-forth” (471).

The middle class soul, as it is defined by Brown, is as well manifested by the characters’ style, meticulous analysis of the environments they inhabit and, particularly, by the food the characters are preparing, eating, or able to afford. Since the narrative is centered on the elements of commodification, the examples in the books are numerous, and some of the most vivid ones are associated with Chip and Denise.

For instance, Chip is appalled by Melissa’s second hand-style clothing, by her lack of any fashion sense. Although rich, she dresses in oversized garments and polyester suits, stripping herself not only from any femininity her body might project—and which Chip is eager to see—but also associating herself with those who refuse to care about their looks. Seemingly, her body politics⁵⁷ are revolutionary and progressive in the rich college environment, but Melissa’s fervent defense of the middle class in Chip’s classroom shows (which will be described later in more detail) that her bad style is a choice of the class that—in Brown’s words—“likes to leave traces.” Correspondingly, Denise’s lover Robin’s overalls, bad hair, and ridiculously outdated glasses are

⁵⁷ In this context, I understand body politics as a means of gender empowerment as well as a “space” for its manifestation. For further discussion, see: Janet Price. *Feminist Theory and the Body: A Reader*. New York: Routledge, 1999.; Elizabeth Grozs. *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism (Theories of Representation and Difference)*. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1994.; Judith Butler. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and Subversion of Identity*. New York: Routledge, 1990.; Katie Conboy. *Writing on the Body: Female Embodiment and Feminist Theory*. New York: Columbia UP, 1997.

a privilege gained through her class. Robin can be unkempt not only because she might not care about the image she projects in the upper class Philadelphia circles, but also because the very class itself constitutes her identity. No matter what Robin puts on, she will never cease to be a multimillionaire's wife.

But while Chip is critical of Melissa's style because of the neglect that it projects, he as well disagrees with the feminine image Denise chooses: "Denise in the photo was wearing jeans and a tank top and was all muscled shoulders and satiny pecs . . . and this was just the kind of girl-as-object-horseshit, Chip thought bitterly, was selling magazines" (52). He is deeply disappointed that his smart sister "used her body for marketing purposes" and yet he flips through the magazine—amusingly aware of his own contradiction—"in search of ads for lingerie or swimwear to rest his weary eyes on" (52). Denise dresses in short black cashmere dresses, high-heeled boots in which she tucks her tight jeans, and elegant vintage suits that suggest her sophistication, financial status, and emphasize her bodily beauty. Cashmere, extremely fine and expensive wool, as well as her fit body are the signifiers of not only her good taste but also Denise's middle class status. After the breakup with Robin, she appears in St. Jude to Gary's shock "wearing four rings and a flaming coat and reeking of tobacco" (489). The previously "stylish and talented" (489) Gary's little sister turned into a stereotypical alternative, to use Gary's euphemism for a lesbian, although what disturbed Gary so much was not her change in style. It was her lackadaisical denial of the middle class conventions: "It frustrated him that people could so happily drop out of the word of conventional expectations; it undercut the

pleasure he took in his home and job family; it felt like a unilateral rewriting, to his disadvantage, of the rules of life” (489).⁵⁸

But if anything defines the middle class status of the characters, it is the food they consume. As a college professor at an elite Northeastern school, Chip immerses himself in California wines, haddock fillets, tomatoes, white eggplants and arugula—the hip food of the 1990s— from the fresh market, and the ritualistic buying of imported cheeses every time he visits New York from his Connecticut college “that brought him against the more general failure of consumerism as an approach to human happiness” (52). When he wanted to impress his colleagues and “the occasional precocious student” (34), Chip “surprised them with langoustines, or a rack of lamb, or venison with juniper berries, and retro joke desserts like chocolate fondue” (34). The food he prepares is both exotic and sophisticated enough to distinguish Chip as connoisseur, although the comfort it provides for Chip is therapeutic. He spices up dinner conversations with the “embarrassing stories” (34) of his Midwest childhood but only because, as the narrator claims, he feels comfortable enough. The fine food serves as a protective shield because of the knowledge and financial flexibility it demands in order to be brought to the table, while the anecdotes about Chip’s interest in sciences and his sexual naïvety—not embarrassing at all, although stereotypical—function as a counterpoint of his middle class identity. They suggest that a middle class precocious child managed to rise to the occasion of his class; the food could not be a more obvious illustration of such success.

⁵⁸ This obsession with clothes and food as a signifier of the middle (upper) class is particularly present on TV, with franchises such as *The Real Wives of Orange County/New York/Atlanta*. The shows’ rhetoric can be summarized like this: “If you cannot afford a Luis Vuitton purse or Prada shoes, you cannot consider yourself rich.” The shows are plotless, reduced to the parade of designer labels and good meals, while their appeal is in the demonstration of the middle class consumer power. When Franzen critiques Cindy Meisner’s bourgeois style, he points out the difference between the petit and the “real” bourgeoisie’s taste. That difference, with the help of U.S. TV shows, can be explained as the difference between high-end fictional sophistication of *Sex and the City* and consumerist reality of *The Real Wives*.

For instance, in a scene when Enid, as a punishment for Alfred's reluctance to invest in the stock market, makes for dinner her husband's and child's least favorite foods, chicken liver and rutabagas, Chip is caught up in the "aberrated domestic economy" (Green 109). Disgusted, he refuses to try even one bite of each dish and eventually falls asleep exhausted at the table, reasoning that "food on the plate was necessary to prove refusal" (Franzen 263). When Enid remarks that Chip "turne[s] food into shame" (260), Green recognizes a sign of parental disappointment where love is mediated through homemade prepared food. Green also notes that Alfred sees in Chip's stubbornness an indication of the progressing chaos, similar to the dissipation of his train company. While one can hardly question Green's conclusion, the scene also indicates the development of Chip's relationship with food, especially when compared with his rich celebratory evening gatherings. As a child, Chip disliked most of his mother's meals, gagging on them and eventually forcing Enid to compose a daily diet of grilled cheese sandwiches. Enid's domestic economy reveals her unreasonable thriftiness as much as her expectations about the traditional daily family gatherings. It is hard to imagine Chip sharing the "embarrassing" anecdotes over a bucket of Kentucky Fried Chicken; the expensive foods provide a social and personal contentment. Alan Warde, in his sociological study *Eating Out: Social Differentiation, Consumption and Pleasure*, argues that our enjoyment in a meal depends on a setting. Testimonials of lower class British employees, who celebrated either Christmas or New Year's Eve with their company at posh country clubs or restaurants, suggest that the environment contributes to the pleasure as much as the food. The food is considered outstanding not because of its excellent taste, which is never denied, but because of the price and the environment in which it is served.

Similarly, Denise relates food to class. The paradox of her culinary success is that it is based on the peasant meal served to the upper classes, in an abandoned factory redecorated into a restaurant, the Generator (of new ideas? new cuisine? new class?). Denise is an expert in preparing sauerkraut, fermented cabbage, for which she found the inspiration during her excessive, although deeply depressing two-month trip in Europe: “She ate nothing that she couldn’t have done better herself; one night she had Wiener schnitzel and thought, yes, this is Wiener schnitzel, uh huh. Her idea of Austria was way more vivid than Austria itself” (390). She chooses sauerkraut because of her personal preferences for her “grandmother’s cooking” (389), and also because it is “palatable to Size 4 Petites . . . for chicks with toothpick legs” (389). And while her dish transforms her into a culinary star of Philadelphia, the reasons for its popularity are much deeper than its low fat content.

Sauerkraut is a traditional Austro-Hungarian and Eastern European dish, “ready to fall in bed with pork, with goose, with chicken, with chestnuts, ready to make a raw plunge with mackerel sashimi or smoked bluefish . . . “ (389). Warde writes in *Consumption, Food and Taste: Culinary Antinomies and Commodity* that the insisting on “traditional meals” in contemporary cooking reveals both its commercial success embodied in the revoking of tradition as well as “the widespread feeling of insecurity and uncertainty induced by declining normative regulation on social belonging” (64). Namely, the popularity of traditional meals can be explained by their assumed continuity and legitimacy inscribed by their aesthetic or moral values; those who prepare—or consume traditional meals in a market driven and multicultural economy—understand them as an appealing means of reaction to the prompt cultural change.⁵⁹

⁵⁹ Sauerkraut is also surprisingly cheap. In December 2009, its price for two pounds in most convenient stores does not exceed two dollars. Fresh cabbage is also very affordable (usually less than 50 cents per pound), which is

Therefore, Ward finds four distinct characteristics that are associated with the consummation of traditional foods: the item is usually recognizable as typical for a cuisine and therefore rendered familiar; longevity is typically associated with nostalgia and a need for rescue; improvisation is praised as a necessity and manifested usually as embellishment or adaptation; and the authenticity of a dish is rendered through usually a foreign, not domestic tradition.

Denise's sauerkraut encompasses all of these elements. It is devoured by Philadelphia upper classes as much it is respected by the food critics of the *New York Times* as ethnic food, although modified for American taste buds. It resonates with the folklore of the exotic Eastern and Central Europe—probably typical of many Pennsylvania and the East Coast inhabitants, as it is for Denise's mysterious grandmother—and its inscribed traditional value tends to the consumers' need for a tradition in a rapidly changed society. When Denise cooks in St. Jude for Christmas, taking charge of her mother's kitchen, she surprisingly concludes that "You forgot how much restaurant there was in restaurant food and how much home was in homemade" (513). As much as the statement seems nostalgic, it is fascinating because it emphasizes the distinction between understanding food as commodity—and therefore a signifier of class—and the food as a signifier of a domestic, common tradition. If the Christmas ornaments were Enid's symbol of her family's bourgeois status, then sauerkraut is Denise's emblem of the middle class.

Ironically, sauerkraut's (and Denise's) popularity is based on its unauthenticity, as much as on Denise's insisting on sauerkraut as her signature dish. She astutely recognizes that "central European heartiness" (389) must be adopted for the middle class American context, although her understanding of her costumers is more remarkable. When a waiter refuses to "push" her sauerkraut because, supposedly, the customers do not like it, she fires him. Her reasoning stems

contributed to its easy harvest. One must admire Denise's success in selling such an affordable food to her upper-class customers.

more from her recognition of the pliant consumer tastes—and their need to identify with ethnic, traditional food—than from her culinary self-confidence. In that sense, The Generator and its guests represent a perfect symbiosis: Denise feeds her customers with the idea of tradition, while they indulge themselves in the historical continuum without sacrificing any of their stipulations about healthy eating and weight maintenance. Most importantly—and to add to Ward's conclusions—sauerkraut served at the Generator allows the customer to conduct an excursion into a non-normative cuisine without leaving his comfortable class, or protected environment. Sauerkraut is a confirmation of her middle class success, in the same manner in which Chip is able to transform himself from a cookies-and-milk-only child into an admirable food wizard and admirer.⁶⁰

A fascinating claim Franzen makes when he equates, in the manner of the 19th century realists, is that the physical appearance and ethics of a character is equivalent his class. Reserved only for minor characters, this literary technique defines the characters' middle-class status through negation, in the same manner that the characters' white middle class status was delineated by the elimination of race (or at least its negative reception). The characters' class—when it either refers to their social status or refined manners and education—is especially detectable when contrasted to those who either cannot reach the middle class status or to those whose financial accomplishments are in disparity with their conduct and culture. Such characters often have almost a mythical status; their existence is verbalized and mediated through the main

⁶⁰ The 19th century novels—those by authors whom Franzen admires—are full of cabbage with scarce meat served to starved children in orphanages, or to the poor. Cabbage can be also found on the table in Jewish literature, while in Southern is mostly served with cornbread. Characters eat cabbage in Dostoyevsky's *Crime and Punishment*, Christopher Isherwood's short stories collected in *Goodbye to Berlin*, Michael Gold's *Jews Without Money*, Harriet Arnow's *The Dollmaker*, or Theodore Dreiser's *Sister Carrie*—to name only a few works whose narratives are focused on lower classes.

characters' stories but their participation in the narrative rarely exceeds the anecdotal (e.g. Bea and Cindy Meisner, Don Armour).

In the opening chapter of the book, Enid in detail and repeatedly describes first to Chip and then Denise a housewarming party of one of Chip's classmates from St. Jude, Dean Driblett. Enid is obsessed with catered "pyramids of shrimp" (21), the "enormous" (21) house of no less than six bedrooms, and worth at least one million dollars, as much as by Dean's business success, his four children, and his polite inquires about Chip whom he has not seen in decades. Dean's bathroom, according to Enid, is the size of Chip's New York living room. For Enid, Dean is the epitome of both the perfect middle class son who sends his mother for her birthday to the Ritz in Paris for seven days, and the model her own reckless children should adopt. For the readers, and for Franzen, he is a type of the *nouveau riche*, prominent in the U.S. with Ronald Reagan's presidency: a self-made market man who fully embraces the corporate system.⁶¹ Enid, expectedly, fails to impress Denise and Chip by either Dean's accomplishments or his demeanor; they find the shrimp constructions as vulgar as Dean's obsolete demonstration of his financial

⁶¹ Nelson W. Aldrich Jr. developed that argument in his *Old Money: The Mythology of America's Upper Class* (1989), while the seminal work pertaining to the topic is Thorstein Veblen's *The Theory of the Leisure Class*, originally published in 1899. Significant contributors to scholarship about U.S. classes are also: Barbara Blouin et al. *The Legacy of Inherited Wealth: Interviews with Heirs*. Halifax: Trio Press, 1995.; Barbara Blouin. *Like a Second Mother: Nannies and Housekeepers in the Lives of Wealthy Children*. Halifax: Trio Press, 1999.; David Brooks. *Bobos in Paradise: The New Upper Class and How They Got There*. New York: Touchstone, 2001.; Richard Conniff. *The Natural History of the Rich: A Field Guide*. New York: W.W. Norton&Company, 2002.; Peter Jr. Cookson and Caroline Hodges Persel. *Preparing for Power: America's Elite Boarding Schools*. New York: Basic Books, 1985.; Stephen & Miller McNamee. *The Meritocracy Myth*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2004.; Lawrence Otis Graham. *Our Kind of People, Inside America's Black Upper Class*. New York: HarperCollins, 1999.; Jessie H. O'Neill. *The Golden Ghetto: The Psychology of Affluence*. Milwaukee: Affluenza Project, 1997.; Kevin Phillips. *Wealth and Democracy: A Political History of the American Rich*. New York: Broadway Books, 2002.; Paul G. Schervish. *Gospels of Wealth: How the Rich Portray Their Lives*. Westport: Praeger, 1994.

success. Alfred is the one who voices their suspicion while they, as well behaved middle class children should, listen to their mother's emphatic descriptions of Dean's life style: "'It's a large house but cheaply done,'" Alfred said with sudden vigor. "The walls are like paper.' 'All the new houses are like that,' Enid said. 'You asked me if I was impressed with the house. I thought it was ostentatious. I thought the shrimp was ostentatious. It was poor.'" (22).

Enid's friend Bea Meisner is equally comic and unsophisticated. She is richer than Enid because her husband used the confident information volunteered by Alfred and sold his stocks just before the company's collapse. Alfred preferred his morals as well as the reputation that came with his managerial position at Midland Pacific railroad company, dooming Enid to years of yearning for upward mobility: "She felt that she and Al were the only intelligent people of her generation who had managed to not to become rich" (309). Bea is flamboyant and annoying, which is an expected narrative "punishment" for her husband's misdeeds and ethically problematic way of acquiring wealth. More interesting is that the curse of the *nouveau riche* is carried into the next generation.

Bea's daughter Cindy married a former Austrian Olympic skier-turned-doctor and lives in a mansion in Vienna, where Denise visits her on her trip over Europe. The description of the characters and their environment is written in the best realist tradition, along with the stereotypical characters and irony of a Balzac merit, and worth citing in a greater detail:

Cindy had gone thick around the middle and looked, Denise though, far worse than she had to. Her features were lost in foundation, rouge, and lipstick. Her black silk pants were roomy in the hips and tight at the ankles. Brushing cheeks and weathering the tear-gas attack of Cindy's perfume, Denise was surprised to detect bacterial breath.

. . . The Muller-Karltru living room was furnished with baroque loveseats and Biedermeier chairs in socialability-killing formations. Soft-core Bouguereaus or Bouguereau knockoffs hung on the walls, as did Klaus's Olympic bronze medal, mounted and framed, beneath the largest chandelier. . . . On a vaguely *Jugendstil* sideboard was a plate of bread sticks, a mangled smoked fish with the consistency of chunk canned tuna, and a not-large piece of Emmentaler. (390)

The culmination of the feast is the opening of the champagne, suggestively named *Sekt*, which both Cindy and Klaus imply is the coveted drink available only to their class. For Denise, on the contrary, it "was sweet and overcarbonated and remarkably much like Sprite" (390). Bea brings the same kind of champagne as a present for Christmas, recognized by Gary "an extremely sugary looking wine" (478). Its sweetness, and therefore an unrefined taste of Denise's hosts that contaminates everything around them, in the Vienna scene serves as a symbol of the crudeness of the new riches. In St. Jude, both Denise and Gary firmly but calmly oppose to Enid's suggestion to open the bottle: "'I thought we could have Bea's champagne tonight!' Enid said. 'No,' Denise said. 'No,' Gary said" (478). Namely, they can distinguish good champagne from bad (although not clear whether that knowledge is acquired by their class exposure or education, it is certain that it does not stem from their family) and they cannot be blinded or misguided by an excessive spending.

Yet Franzen's amusing mockery of Bea's family seems to be unjustified, especially because Franzen tries to distinguish between "good" and "bad" riches. Alfred is a Depression era child from rural Kansas, but also the embodiment of the American Dream whose success is owed to his "rigorous self-discipline, a pride in hard work well done, and careful thriftiness" as much as to his "sense of masculinity, a confident, gendered imaginary" (Green 107). His opponent

Chuck acquired his wealth by a sheer luck but his family happily demonstrates its class advantages. Chuck even disappears behind his wife, in the same manner in which Klaus is just a prompt in Cindy's life. It is unclear what Franzen, the author who yearns for a position of a cerebral authority, tries to suggest with these differences. That to be middle class carries certain responsibilities? That the middle class should humbly accept its un/deserved comfortable life styles? That Alfred's loyalty should have been recognized by a monetary equivalent? Particularly the characters of Gary and his wife Caroline, whose relationship both with each other and their children is predicated on the commodity products, annul any possible positive answer to any of these questions. While there is an abundance of wealth to be spent and its waste does not amount to much, the emotional bonds are conditioned by the very manifestation of the upper-classness: meat worth 30 dollars is tossed into the grinder as a manifestation of grudge; it is possible to buy four nonrefundable air plane Christmas tickets and then use only one; it is feasible to transform a room into the most modern photo-lab in order to finish family photo albums; or even unsuccessfully negotiate with a 10 year old and allow him to install the surveillance system in the house. The decadence of the younger Lambert's family is barely different from Cindy's admiration of kitsch.

It is therefore not surprising that the novel culminates with Enid's realization is that she is not poor. She as well realizes that it is acceptable to indulge her desire to be recognized by the only merit the capitalist society acknowledges: the position of her class and wealth. Chip is equally surprised to find in remote Poland a house with a Christmas wreath on the door, and a street almost like the one in his hometown: "The traveler didn't see how such a place could exist in a world of Lithuanians and Polands. It was a testament to the insulatory effectiveness of political boundaries that power didn't simply arc across the gap between such divergent

economic voltages” (536). The Foucauldian premises of his world are irreversibly shattered although the middle class values, which he internalized but tried to question through his liberal politics, become an exclusive right of the Western world. The trip to the East justifies that notion, almost in the same manner in which DeLillo does not recognize in Eastern Europe much more than an ex-communist area finally suitable for capitalistic trades. Brown suggests that the authors of middle class fiction exercise the ambivalence toward the objects they incorporate in their works because the middle class signifiers face “both ways: inward toward a self and outward toward a world at large” (22). Franzen, at least in *The Corrections*, does not inscribe such ambivalence in the objective world. On the contrary, his characters are relieved once they realize that it is adequate to indulge themselves in the benefits of their class position, as much as it is acceptable to embrace confidently the current social status.

Chip’s discovered appreciation for the products of late capitalism, however, is not so unexpected or ironic as it might at first seem. In the opening chapter, when Chip faces his emotional and fiscal bankruptcy, he sells his cherished theory books to the Strand bookstore, only to finance his relationship with Julia. Julia does not like intimate afternoons spent in Chip’s apartment and has an exquisite taste that even at a cinema refreshments counter “could cost him fifteen dollars” (92). Penniless but eager to please Julia, and too proud to recognize his own financial fiasco, Chip decides to sell his prized books that are not only in their original jackets but are also unreasonably overpriced. The Marxist set cost him \$3,900, while the U.K. edition of Jurgen Habermas’ *Reason and the Rationalization*, “which he found too difficult to read, let alone annotate, was in mint condition and had cost him £95” (92). The book seller, expectedly, is not interested either in the books’ content or their philosophical value, acknowledging in them only a potential profit. Franzen writes that Chip:

. . . turned away from their reproaching spines, remembering how each of them had called out in a bookstore with a promise of a radical critique of late capitalist society, and how happy he'd been to take them home. But Jurgen Habermas didn't have Julia's long, cool, per-tree limbs, Theodor Adorno didn't have Julia's grapy smell of lecherous pliability, Fred Jameson didn't have Julia's artful tongue. By the beginning of October . . . he'd sold his feminists, his formalists, his structuralists, his poststructuralists, his queers. (92)

Although the insincerity of Chip's conduct, as a self proclaimed critic of late capitalism, is apparent, the scene also reveals Franzen's skepticism toward contemporary theory applied to fiction. Hipsky argues that the passage satirizes Chip's complicity with the commodification and his capitalist exchange of fetishised commodity for the libidinal "value" of Julia. Hipsky draws on Jean Francois Lyotard's *Libidinal Economy*, in which Lyotard suggests that economy is perpetuated by forces of passion and sex. While in the scene above Hipsky recognizes the epitome of such a relationship, he overlooks a few much more nuanced Franzen's points about the nature of fiction and capitalism, which are interwoven with Franzen's understanding of class.

In his profile of William Gaddis written for *The New Yorker*, Franzen details his boredom and confusion while reading the "repetitive, incoherent, and insanely boring" ("Mr. Difficult" 264) *The Recognitions*. Franzen defines his ideal fiction in the opposition to Gaddis' style: enjoyable, full of sympathetic characters, comprehensive, not informed by contemporary theory, and unpretentious in the sense that the book does not attempt to cover the totality of human experience. He claims that theory, which for him is the source of postmodern writing, does not amount for fiction, "the most fundamental human art" ("Mr. Difficult" 258); human experience represents the essence of any artistic approach. In the context of *The Corrections*, therefore, Chip's selling of the fundamental contemporary philosophers is justified because he exchanges

mere theory for an exciting, real sexual life. Instead of spending sole hours reading incoherent prose, the sold books provide him an excess to the human experience. The paradox of Chip's position is that he can indulge himself in real life only as long as his theoretical books can be exchanged for money. More importantly, the scene parodies the Marxism, as a privilege of the American upper thinking classes. While the poor are busy trying to make their ends meet, the affluent are able to ponder the flaws of the system that they are more than reluctant to change. And why would they, as Chip's prodigious and flirtatious student Melissa asks at the very beginning of the novel, setting both *The Corrections*' tone and its middle class morale. The meaning of Melissa's words is, however, not revealed until the last sentence of the novel.

At the end of the semester, on the last day of his course Consuming Narratives, Chip shows a six-part video ad campaign "You Go, Girl" that was shown weekly at prime time to both audience and critical acclaim. The campaign follows a woman diagnosed with breast cancer and the efforts of her boss and three female coworkers to help by introducing her to the newest technology: on-line support groups and the "W----- Corporation's Global Desktop Version 5.0" (39). Chip finds the advertisement particularly appalling because it manipulates human sympathy and the fear of terminal disease in an attempt to promote a product. Although he is confident that "slick production values of a campaign like 'You Go, Girl' could seduce first year students before they'd acquired the critical tools of resistance and analysis" (40), the class fails to recognize the demonic nature of the advertisement that summarizes the coveted life style of late capitalism "to build bigger houses and buy bigger SUVs and consume even more of the world's finite resources" (43). The most disappointingly for Chip, Melissa, otherwise a particularly bright and responsive student and his future lover, refuses to disapprove of the campaign by understanding its intricacies. Unlike Chip, she sees in the commercial a celebration of women in

the workspace, an attempt to raise money for cancer research along with awareness about self-examination and, ultimately, attention that is brought to new technologies. Her argument with Chip, whom she accuses of teaching the class only “to hate the same things you hate” (42), culminates with her question: “What’s wrong with making a living? . . . Why is it *inherently* evil to make money?” (43). Even though Chip desperately invokes Baudrillard’s theory of the signifier and the signified, claiming that the woman’s pain is substituted by the company’s invitation to buy its products, and allows himself a moment to doubt his theoretical stance of a “straight white male” (45) who cannot see the benefits of the technological progress for the minorities and women, the answer to the question remains unanswered until Chip successfully returns from his Eastern European ventures. And, until Enid fully embraces the values of her class.

The order that seemed to be subverted is regained again, validating the impression that the identity quandaries of Franzen’s characters are facilitated and cushioned by their middle class status. The book opens as a parody of an apocalypse whose fiscal language sets up the ironic tone of the novel and whose “bell of anxiety” (3) is as much associated with the psychological as with social and financial dilemmas of the characters: “The madness of an autumn prairie cold front coming through. You could feel it: something terrible is going to happen. The sun low in the sky, a minor light, a cooling star. Gust after gust of disorder. . . . Red oaks and pin oaks and swamp white oaks rained acorns on houses *with no mortgage*” (3; emphasis mine). The final chapter circularly closes the novel and yet Franzen’s concerns are not initially directed at his characters but rather at the financial conditions of their environment, as if the market boom of the 1990s solely made them re-consider their identities and the position within the family: “The correction, when it finally came, was not an overnight bursting of a bubble but a much more

gentle letdown, a year long leakage of value from financial markets, a contradiction too gradual to generate headlines and too predictable to seriously hurt anybody but fools and the working poor” (561).

All of the foreigners or non-white people are removed from the narrative except Chip’s wife who represents the ultimate American stereotype of middle-classness (Jewish doctor), and none of the characters lost their middle class positions despite their emotional turbulences. On the contrary, they reclaimed their middle class position that at the end of the novel announces upward mobility. Denise works for a growing Brooklyn restaurant; Greg lost some money in the stock market but nothing significant enough that would change his position, while Chip finally reconciled his class with his desires and decided quietly that the Foucauldian dilemma is a purely theoretical concept; he married a Jewish doctor, and allowed himself to enjoy both the pleasures of parenthood and his class. The fact that he rewrites his screenplay after years of unsuccessful revisions is a privilege of his own class; his financial stability turned his creative impulse into a hobby. The only character who is guilty of fully internalizing the middle class anxiety is Alfred. Even though his cautiousness and misogyny is explained by the Great Depression experience and his strict Schopenhauerian ethical principles (e.g. desire produces pain), he is not only guilty of failing as a father and husband but also as a representative of his own class who is unable to enjoy the products of his own work. In Enid’s eyes, he is “how wrong not to cherish her and have sex at every opportunity, how wrong not to trust her financial instincts, how wrong to spend so much time at work and so little with the children, *how wrong he was to have been so negative, how wrong to have said no, again and again, instead of yes*” (566; emphasize mine).

But, once he is dislocated, literally and metaphorically, there is not only a chance for Enid for the first time to enjoy her class position, but also for Franzen to fully expose the

superficiality and harmlessness of the middle class angst. In the end, that is one of the reasons Oprah chose the book, and that might be as well one of the reasons why Franzen so angrily opposed her choice. *The Corrections* is not a subversive novel, or an asocial text—although it raises an ethical question regarding capital and humanity—and Franzen is not a rebellious author. On the contrary, *The Corrections* and its author encapsulate the traditional, middle class ethics and values.

When Junot Díaz's (1968) collection of stories, *Drown*, appeared in 1996, it was pronounced a masterpiece.⁶² Its author became a celebrity almost overnight. Díaz, a Dominican-American, was selected by *Newsweek* as one of the "new faces of '96" and proclaimed by *The New Yorker*, the magazine in which he has most often published, as one of the top writers for the 21st century. After the publication of *Drown*, secured by an auction of eight publishers and a six-figure contract, his work was supported—among other fellowships and awards—by the Guggenheim, the National Endowment for the Arts, Pen/Malamud Award, and the Rome Prize from the American Academy of Arts and Letters. Díaz's stories also frequently appeared in prestigious anthologies such as *The Best American Short Stories* (1996, 1997, 1999, 2000), *Paris Review*, and *Story*. And yet, as Díaz acknowledges, the attention and the critical acclaim brought about writer's block that lasted eleven years, until he published *The Brief and Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* (2007).⁶³ For a novel set in contemporary New Jersey that follows three generations of a Dominican-American family, Díaz, however, received even greater critical praise that was crowned by the Pulitzer Prize and included a series of recognitions, as well as a *Times* title for

⁶² The positive reviews appeared in the prominent venues such as *The New York Times*, *The Village Voice*, *The Publishers Weekly*, and even in the fashion magazines *Elle* and *Mirabella*.

⁶³ In many interviews Díaz explained that he was unable to finish a Sci-Fi book that dealt with a terrorist attack on New York City. The block was induced by the fact, says Díaz, that the reality became more fantastic than his fiction; he had started his novel before the terrorist attacks on 9/11. See: Boris Kachka. "Junot Díaz Karate-Chops His Writer's Block." *The New York Magazine* August 24, 2007 April 24, 2008. <http://nymag.com/guides/fallpreview/2007/books/36501/>; Nara Shoenberg. "The Curse of Celebrity 'Oscar Wao' Author Junot Díaz on Bad Karma, Writer's Block and Thereafter Novel." April 3, 2008 April 21, 2009 <http://archives.chicagotribune.com/2008/apr/03/news/chi-0403junotdiazapr03>; Globe Stuff. "Eleven Years Later." *The Boston Globe*. September 10, 2007 April 21, 2009 http://www.boston.com/news/globe/living/articles/2007/09/10/eleven_years_later/ Particularly interesting is Vanessa E. Jones. "A Loss for Words. Junot Díaz Was a Wunderkind When His First Book of Fiction Came Out. Seven Years Later, He's Still Working on a Follow Up." *Boston Globe*. March 4, 2003: E1.

the #1 Fiction Book of the Year.⁶⁴ Díaz became not only one of the most celebrated contemporary writers but also, with the exception of Julia Alvarez, the only writer of Dominican heritage who has “achieved visibility in the U.S.” (Torres-Saillant 112).⁶⁵

Unlike other Latino groups, Dominicans have not participated in American letters or culture to the same extent as other Latino peoples for specifically historical reasons. The momentum of Dominican immigration did not start until the mid-1960s, when the post-Rafael Leónidas Trujillo regime encouraged the exile in order to stabilize the economic and social situation in the country, and when the U.S. occupied Dominican Republic in 1965 but opened its own borders and simplified the visa process mostly in the attempt to prevent a political uproar in the Dominican Republic. While other Latino communities, in particular Chicano and Puerto Rican, energetically participated in the Civil Rights Movement and established themselves as a political, social, and cultural force in the country of their exile, “it was not until the 1970s and 1980s that the Dominicans became a noticeable presence in Latino communities” (Luis xii). The Dominican writing continues to be associated with, as Silvio Torres-Saillant describes it, “the periphery of the margins” (120), mostly because of these two factors: “the small presence of Dominicans in the United States prior to 1965 and the lower economic status of Dominicans from later migrations” (Suárez 94).

There is, however, a paradox associated with Díaz’s fame. He has reached it by writing about failure. Failure is inscribed in the narrative of *Oscar Wao*, offering a critique of the European colonial politics as well as the U.S. and Dominican contemporary politics. While novels with the same theme, such as Alvarez’s *How the Garcia Girls Lost their Accents* and *In*

⁶⁴ The list of awards for *Oscar Wao* includes the Book Critics Circle Award for Fiction, the Anisfield-Wolf Book Award, the John Sargent, and the Sr. First Novel Prize.

⁶⁵ See: Silvio Torres-Saillant’s “Preface” and “Dominicans in the United States: The Rise of a Community” in his *The Dominican Americans*. Westport: Greenwood Press, 1998. 1-9., 61-101.

the Time of Butterflies, have been focused on Rafael Leónidas Trujillo's dictatorship and the down-class mobility that was associated with exile, Díaz is more interested in the correlation of politics, history, and immigration life. Since he is particularly invested in examining the Dominican past in relation to U.S. foreign policy, the concept of macho that is recognized as essential to Dominican culture, as well as the relationship between the Spanish and English language in the U.S. context, the analysis in this chapter is focused on those three elements. Díaz points out the shortcomings of political practices that undoubtedly shape the Dominican identity in the country of exile. In doing so, Díaz rewrites the genre traditionally associated with Caribbean and Latin American literature—the dictator novel. If Franzen's *The Corrections* is about middle class angst, Díaz's *Oscar Wao* is about historical angst and, consequently, about the failure of politics that induced the wave of immigration to North America. And as much as Franzen attempts to preserve the bourgeois life of his home country, Díaz is critical of the class whose weaknesses are directly responsible for the decades long dictatorship in the Dominican Republic.

From a Nerdy Love Story to a Dictator Novel

“Oscar Wao” was first published as a story in *The New Yorker* in 2000, as a “preamble” (Sandín 123) to the novel. The story is incorporated into the novel in its entirety, without significant revisions, and is the core narrative line of *Oscar Wao*. Framing the novel, Oscar’s love chronicle unites the family histories pertaining both to the Dominican Republic and the immigrant lives in the Washington Heights. The narrator of the novel is Yunior, the protagonist of the majority of stories in *Drown*, who is as equally ghetto and nerdy as Oscar, and has a share of his own love and social problems. Although *Oscar Wao* is set up as a teenage love novel, it is actually a dictator novel, with a twist. Díaz writes the novel of dictator in footnotes.

Díaz’s book is divided into two narratives—that of the main text and that of the footnotes. While the central text follows the fictional story of Beli and her offspring, Oscar and Lola, both in Dominican Republic and the U.S. that are directly influenced by the Trujillo regime (1930-1961), the footnotes provide the historical account about the Trujillo years, of which some of the characters seem to be oblivious despite their inability to escape them. The divide in Díaz’s text, therefore, is not only visual and literal (footnotes versus the body) but it also indicates a seeming tear between the personal and the historical. And yet, the historical account of Trujillo’s dictatorship literary functions as an extensive footnote to the characters’ stories; if it had not been for his regime, Beli, the actual protagonist of the novel, would have not ended up in New Jersey. Díaz reinvents the genre of the dictator novel by dislocating it in the literal *background* of his book, enriching therefore the style of the novel that Linda Hutcheon labels as historiographical metafiction, or as fiction that interprets history and historical figures providing a speculative insight into the historical past. The footnotes, in that sense, represent the historical,

factual level of Díaz's story, while the main text follows the fictional story of Beli and her children Lola and Oscar, told by the narrator of the novel, Yunió, Díaz's fictional double. Díaz's *Oscar Wao* is, as a result, both a novel of the dictator and the novel about the dictator's times, as well as a novel about the Dominican past and the present of the exiled Dominicans. The two narrative levels are interwoven, strongly suggesting the interconnectedness between the personal and political narratives in the Dominican Republic. Despite its visual division and implied hierarchy, only when they are read together do they constitute a "complete" story of the Dominican (fictional) history; the footnotes overlap into the main text and vice versa.

The footnotes are not, therefore, a commentary to the main narrative, nor secondary to it. They are complimentary and as important as the narrative itself, even though their function is also didactic. The footnotes are aimed toward a non-Dominican reader, the one unfamiliar with the intricacies of Dominican history because it is impossible, in Díaz's interpretation, to understand the private history of Beli's family without being familiar with Trujillo's dictatorship and his caprices. More importantly for Díaz, modern American history needs to be interpreted through the experiences of immigrants exactly because they constitute a significant part of the U.S. politics, despite the fact that their adopted country is reluctant to acknowledge such an occurrence in the same manner as it fails to support the progressive politics in the Dominican Republic because of its own strategic and economic interest in the region.

The dictator novel focuses on a life of an autocrat and examines the consequences of one's limitless power to the political, social, and cultural systems of the country. The novel of the dictator is considered extremely significant for the introduction of Latin American literature on the global scene as well as for the development of Latin American and Caribbean literatures; authors, in their attempt to provide psychologically nuanced portraits of dictators, blur the

boundaries between the reader, narrator, and the plot, and often abandon the realistic storytelling and linear narrative, therefore introducing magic realism that is nowadays commonly linked with Latin American literature. The Latin American Boom (1960s and 1970s) is associated with the authors whose political fiction focuses on the tyrants of their home-countries. Scholars point out that the dictator novel is the “most clearly indigenous thematic tradition in Latin American literature” that can be traced “as far back as Bernal Díaz del Castillo’s and Francisco López de Gómara’s accounts of Cortés’s conquest of Mexico” (González Echevarría 65).

The international recognition of the dictator novel was not accomplished by the 1970s, when after a meeting in London in 1967, Mexican author Carlos Fuentes suggested to Gabriel Garcia Marquez, Colombian, and Mario Vargas Llosa, Peruvian, that they write a novel about the dictators from their own countries. Fuentes remembers that the idea came after reading Edmund Wilson’s *Patriotic Gore: Studies in the Literature of the American Civil War* (1961): “Sitting in a pub in Hampstead, we thought it would be a good idea to have a comparable book on Latin America. An imaginary portrait gallery immediately stepped forward, demanding incarnation: the Latin American dictators” (Fuentes par. 1). Cuban Alejo Carpentier was asked to write about Gerardo Machado, Paraguayan Augusto Roa Bastos about José Rodríguez de Francia, Julio Cortázar about Evita Perón, Fuentes about Santa Ana, Vargas Llosa was supposed to analyze Manuel A. Odría, while Dominican Juan Bosch, an overthrown post-Trujillo president, needed to provide a fictional account about Trujillo. The collective volume of novels—to be called “The Fathers of the Nations” (*Los padres de las patrias*)—was, according to Fuentes, immediately supported by renowned French publisher Claude Gallimard but was never fully materialized. The project failed partly because of its grandiosity and partly because of the private and political circumstances surrounding the authors. And yet, three published novels—

Carpentier's *Reasons of State* (1974), Augusto Roa Bastos' *I, the Supreme* (1975), and Marquez's *The Autumn of the Patriarch* (1975)—became books that not only drew international attention to the novel of the dictator and Latin American literature but also provided a model for the novel that will in the following years become especially interested in Trujillo. Ignacio López-Calvo explains in his excellent study, *“God and Trujillo”: Literary and Cultural Representations of the Dominican Dictator* that “Among numerous dictators in Latin American history, Rafael Leónidas Trujillo Molina, one of the most dreadful, seems to have captured the imagination of international writers like no other. . . . cold-blooded, eccentric, megalomaniacal, and openly nepotistic. In fact, his need for public adulation became pathological during the last years of his reign” (11).⁶⁶

Novels about Trujillo that received significant worldwide recognition were written mostly by non-Dominicans even though Dominican authors wrote excessively about the tyrant.⁶⁷ The exception is Díaz, recognized in the U.S. and the Dominican Republic, and Alvarez, who is not just the only female who wrote about the dictator but also—so far—the only writer of Dominican descent to be internationally acclaimed.

Besides being overly political and centered around the dictator's public and private life, there are five elements that characterize the novel of the dictator. Such a novel most often focuses on the last days of the tyrant, especially his demagoguery and political decisions that ended

⁶⁶ “God and Trujillo” from López-Calvo's title refers to the Balaguer's speech with the same title, in which Trujillo was presented as a messiah sent by Providence to save the Dominican Republic. At the airport in Santo Domingo travelers were reminded that “Dios en el cielo, Trujillo en la tierra” (God in heaven, Trujillo on earth). Trujillo as well renamed Santo Domingo into Ciudad Trujillo in 1936 and the highest Dominican mountain, Pico Duarte, into Pico Trujillo. He also introduced a new calendar that counted years of “the Era of Trujillo,” starting with his presidency in 1930. Like in any other dictatorship, hundreds of sculptures of Trujillo decorated public spaces, while signs glorified his presidency. One of the most common ones was “We Owe It All to Trujillo.”

⁶⁷ Dominican authors such as Viriato Sención, Pedro Vergés, and Marcio Veloz Maggiolo, although critically acclaimed and respected in the Dominican Republic, have not been able to introduce themselves as internationally relevant authors. López-Calvo argues that Dominican authors failed to reach the international acclaim because of their insisting on the eccentric traits of the dictator that, consequently, desensitizes the readers.

his regime. The dictator is often portrayed through a burlesque, “along with an enumeration of his variegated deviations and pathologies, which may include insanity, pedophilia, sadism, egocentrism, puerility, senility, and even speech impediment” (López-Calvo 9). “Trujillo narratives” as well critique the tyrant’s attempt to falsely recognize in the country’s Spanish and Catholic heritage the dominant cultural element.⁶⁸ Nevertheless, the element that surely contributed to the international recognition of the dictator novel and its global relevance is its desire to “denounce the connivance or collaboration of the United States in this type of regime that prevented Latin American countries from achieving true political independence” (López-Calvo 17). Trujillo (or, for that matter, any other Latin American dictator) is presented not as an omnipotent and independent political power—the impression he carefully maintains—but as controlled by the U.S. government who has its own geo-political interests in the region. Contrary to the domestic understanding of the U.S. politics, the country appears as equally vicious as the dictator (exactly because it readily conducted meetings with the dictatorship government), while the dictator’s power becomes tarnished in the light of the foreign-government help. Finally, authors of the dictator novel commonly criticize the nostalgic sentiment toward dictatorships that tends to be revived at the times of the turbulent political and social moments; in ex-totalitarian governments can be recognized a longing for a time of dictatorship, when seemingly the entire system and the governmental institutions were in order. A similar sentiment is found in

⁶⁸ The racial aggressiveness is even nowadays aimed toward Haitians, who are seen as the Dominican primitive Other. Despite the fact that contemporary Dominicans are ancestors of the Spanish and the Africans, black race was erased from the public discourse partly because Trujillo insisted on the white heritage, and partly because the Dominicans did not associate themselves with the blacks, usually members of lower social strata. More about race in the Dominican context see, for instance: Ernesto Sagás. *Race and Politics in the Dominican Republic*. Gainesville, UP of Florida, 2000.; Pedro L. San Miguel. *The Imagined Island: History, Identity, and Utopia in Hispaniola*. Chapel Hill: UP of North Carolina, 2009; David Howard. *Coloring the Nation: Race and Ethnicity in the Dominican Republic*. Boulder: L. Rienner Publishers, 2001.; Silvio Torres-Saillant. “Tribulations of Blackness: Stages in Dominican Racial Identity.” *American Perspectives* 25 (1998): 126-136.; Ginetta E.B. Candelario. *Black Behind the Ears: Dominican Racial Identity from Museums to Beauty Shops*. Durham: Duke UP, 2007.

DeLillo's *Underworld*, where characters express longing for the Cold War that, supposedly, provided a simplified understanding of the political and private lives.

In Díaz's rewriting of the genre in *Oscar Wao*, all of these elements are present. In 32 footnotes, he provides a burlesque portrait of the final Trujillo days by including vignettes about both the dictator and his closest people. Díaz also *footnotes* his text with information about, for instance, the famous Mirabal sisters who openly opposed the regime and were murdered, or specific geographical sites that are important for his fictional narrative (Hatuey, the site of the Taino genocide, where Beli is taken by her lover) and the historical account of the Dominican Republic (the prisons Nigua and El Pozo de Nagua). The final two footnotes refer to a personal experience in Santo Domingo, although it is not entirely clear whether the experience is of Díaz, who is writing *Oscar Wao*, or Yunió, who is the narrator of the novel. Even the final, private footnotes contribute to the understanding of the particular social and political circumstances in which the narrative takes place.⁶⁹ Footnote 31, in which the narrator describes his encounter with Sobeida, a *restavek* girl sold to a wealthy family in order to take care of the household and the family's children—a form of contemporary slavery—illustrates the devastating consequences of the Trujillo regime.⁷⁰ Sobeida, only seven years old, takes care of the household of eight, which includes two infants. At the age of fifteen, illiterate and submissive, she becomes a mother but “the family has got her kid forking for them too, bring in the water for his mother” (253). The

⁶⁹ One of the first authors who used footnotes as a literary device in American literature was Ernest Hemingway, who incorporated them in his “Natural History of the Dead,” while T.S. Eliot's *Waste Land* was explicated by the footnotes (although, in this case, he was encouraged by his publisher to add the footnotes). In postmodernism, footnotes are a rather common narrative element and they are used by authors such as Mark Z. Danielewski (*The House of Leaves*), David Foster Wallace (*Infinite Jest*), Flann O'Brien (*The Third Policeman*), Manuel Puig (*Kiss of the Spider Woman*), and Oscar Hijuelos (*The Mambo Kings Play Songs of Love*).

⁷⁰ See: Jean-Robert Cadet. *Restavec: From Haitian Slave Child to Middle-Class American*. U of Texas P, 1998.; Sage Jesse, ed. *Enslaved: True Stories of Modern Day Slavery*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008.; Aysha Upchurch. *Modern Child Slavery: The Coercion & Exploitation of Youth Worldwide*. New York: Youth Advocate Program International, 2002.

episode tarnishes the mythical aura that usually surrounds the regime; Trujillo is not a character from a distant and morbid past. The narrator, just as Díaz, lived in Santo Domingo as a child, in the 1970s. As a child, therefore, not only did he witness child abuse, as the ultimate example of Trujillo's regime, but also recognized in it a norm that was introduced during the dictator's era and that, tragically, continues to be practiced. Thus, despite the fact that Trujillo appears as a historical figure only in the footnotes and his appearance in the main text is reduced to a few anecdotes in the main text, his presence overshadows every aspect of the characters' lives. Clearly, "the *idea* of Trujillo is more important than the man himself" (Sirias 75) because the characters' existence is profoundly shaped by the dictator's governing of the country, even at the moments when they are, as Beli, oblivious of Trujillo's omnipresence.⁷¹ At the more subtle level, the author promotes the idea that the U.S. government decisions overshadow the lives of his protagonists, as the same as Trujillo appears to be a threatening but unavoidable presence of the Dominican Republic.

The first footnote of the book starts sardonically: "For those of you who missed your mandatory two seconds of Dominican history" (Díaz 2). The note continues with a succinct caricature of the mulatto dictator who bleached his skin, wore platform shoes, suffered from a Napoleon complex, renamed most of the Dominican Republic to honor himself, was a womanizer, and yet managed to build a tremendous army and financially and politically ruin the country—a series of recognizable traits associated with Trujillo in the novel of the dictator. Among Trujillo's "accomplishments," as Díaz puts it, are the 1937 genocide of the Haitians, the

⁷¹ Julia Alvarez, in her *In the Time of Butterflies*, makes Trujillo a relatively minor character that equilibrates between being a theme and a character. However, the idea of his presence divides the characters on those who unconditionally fight the dictator and those who decide to indulge themselves and the autocrat. Alvarez's *How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents*, although most commonly praised for discussing the complex Dominican-American identity, in almost the same manner makes Trujillo the ominous idea/character who tremendously influences a Dominican family and spurs its down-class mobility in their new, exiled U.S. home.

creation of modern kleptocracy, and “one of the longest, most damaging U.S.-backed dictatorships in the Western Hemisphere” (2). The sarcastic tone of the opening sentence and the footnote remains characteristic for all 32 annotations, establishing Trujillo and his followers as grotesque figures typical for the dictator novel. Even so, the element in which Díaz is most interested when writing within the genre is the interference of the U.S. in Dominican politics and culture.

López-Calvo argues that “many of the novels and *testimonios* about the Trujillo Era respond to the authors’ need to vent their indignation about their country’s long-standing situation of dependency, as a consequence of Spanish colonization and then of U.S. interventionism and economic control” (23). Díaz is not an exception. He introduces his political statement on the first page of the novel, in the main text, when his narrator professes that

fukú americanus, or more colloquially, *fukú*—[is] generally a curse or a doom of some kind; specifically the Curse and the Doom of the New World. Also called the *fukú* of the Admiral because the Admiral was both its midwife and one of its great European victims; despite “discovering” the New World the Admiral died miserable and syphilitic, hearing (*dique*) divine voices. (1)

The Admiral is Christopher Columbus, the discoverer of the New World and the first imposer of the colonial practices on the indigenous people. As Díaz’s footnotes explain relying on historical accounts, Trujillo’s obsession with the Spanish heritage of the Dominican people and his ordered genocide against Haitians in 1937, when his troops massacred between 15,000 and 20,000 at the border, can be traced to the Spanish colonization of the island reached by Columbus in 1492. Founded the same year, Santo Domingo was the first Spanish capital in the New World, featuring as well the first civilization symbols of the Old one: cathedral, castle, and university.

These architectural accomplishments stood for the most powerful institutions of the imposers on the predominantly Tainos people: Catholic religion, middle class, and education.⁷² Within 50 years of the Spanish conquest, the hard labor and Western diseases such as small pox reduced the number of Tainos from the estimated one million who greeted Columbus to the island, to around 500. Díaz explains categorically that “No matter what its name or provenance, it is believed that the arrival of Europeans on Hispanola unleashed the fukú on the world, and we’ve been in the shit ever since” (2). He also associates fukú with contemporary times, claiming that dictator Trujillo was the embodiment of the curse: “No one knows whether Trujillo was the Curse’s servant or its master, its agent or its principal, but it was clear he and it had an understanding, that them two was *tight*” (2-3). For instance, fukú and Trujillo’s unlimited power were the reason for John F. Kennedy’s assassination and the failure of the Vietnam War. According to Oscar’s narrator, the assassination was Trujillo’s retaliation for Kennedy’s approval of Trujillo’s elimination, while Lyndon Johnson’s decision to send the U.S. troops to the island in 1965, to prevent an establishment of a post-Trujillo, supposedly communist government, was a horrible mistake. The soldiers who participated in the founding of the Joaquín Balaguer cabinet were directly sent to Saigon, taking with themselves fukú, “a small repayment for an unjust war” (5). In short, fukú is omnipresent, contentious, eternal, and works in mysterious ways (sometimes even justly “punishing” the island’s invaders), and even if you do not believe in it, “fukú believes in you” (5).

⁷² Tainos are pre-Columbian tribes that inhabited the Bahamas and the Greater and Lesser Antilles. By the 18th century they were extinguished, by diseases and forced assimilation through mixed marriages. Nowadays, mostly Dominicans and Puerto Ricans claim their Taino heritage, and such an assertion is perceived as an attempt to reclaim the indigenous Caribbean culture. See: Irving Rose. *The Tainos: Rise and Decline of the People Who Greeted Columbus*. New Haven: Yale UP, 1993.; Ricardo Algeria. *Taino: Pre-Columbian Art and Culture from the Caribbean*. New York: Monaceli, 1998.; William F. Keegan. *Taino Indian Myth and Practice: The Arrival of the Stranger King*. Gainesville: U of Florida P, 2007.

By first Spanish and then U.S. colonization, generations of Dominicans are permanently *jinxed* because of the forced attempt to change their cultural, social, and racial profile, only in an effort to provide stability of the Spanish empire and the U.S. democracy. As other dictator novel authors, Díaz implies that Trujillo's historical predecessor is the Spanish conquistador himself, but that his successor is the U.S., with its imperial politics toward the island. Unlike his predecessors whose dictator novels were commonly "framed with the collective quest for a Dominican identity that takes shape against the background of the Caribbean experience and, in particular, in relation to the Cuban revolution and the U.S. interventions in the region" (102)—as López-Calvo describes Alvarez's *In the Time of Butterflies*—Díaz is particularly interested in his American audiences and the political responsibilities of the U.S. government, in a similar manner in which Acker explores the American colonial presence in Haiti. In that light, *fukú* functions as a collective reminder of the same dishonorable position that the Spanish conquistadors, Trujillo, and American Marines have in the Dominican collective history. Although Díaz does not mention it explicitly, he also alludes to the fact that Trujillo rose to the rank of the officer during the U.S. invasion of the Dominican Republic and that, with the support he received from the U.S. government, and by risky and questionable political decisions, established himself as the ultimate leader of the country. Footnote 5 reveals the contempt directed toward two American interventions on the island, one that helped to ascertain Trujillo's position and the other one from 1965 that allowed his close political partner Joaquín Balaguer—three times the president of the Dominican Republic (1960-1962, 196-1978, 1986-1996) and Trujillo's last puppet president—to continue Trujillo's tradition, to such an extent and with such humor that it deserves to be quoted almost in its entirety:

The pejorative *pariguayo*,⁷³ watchers agree, is a corruption of the English neologism party watcher. The word came into common usage during the First American Occupation of the DR, which ran from 1916 to 1924. (You didn't know we were occupied twice in the twentieth century? Don't worry, when you have kids they won't know the U.S. occupied Iraq either.) During the First Occupation it was reported that members of the American Occupying Forces would often attend Dominican parties but instead of joining in the fun the Outlanders would simply stand at the edge of the dances and watch. Which of course must have seemed like the craziest thing in the world. Who goes to a party to watch? Therefore, the Marines were *pariguayos*—a word that in contemporary usage describes anybody who stands outside and watches while other people scoop the girls. (19-20)

The irony of Díaz's description is obvious. Despite the American resistance to participate in every-day life under their occupation of the Dominican Republic, the U.S. political involvement helped to establish "one of the longest, most damaging U.S.-backed dictatorships in the Western Hemisphere" (3). For Díaz, there is not a difference between the first carrier of *fukú*, Admiral, his ultimate heir, Trujillo, and the U.S. government that, if not directly present on the island nowadays, continues the custom of exploitation and disenfranchization of the Latinos within its own borders. Díaz returns to this argument repeatedly in his novel. In doing so, he is more inclined than his predecessors, the novel of the dictator authors, to emphasize the magnitude of the U.S. foreign policies influence on the Dominican Republic and the U.S. interest in the Caribbean region. The frequent parallel between the Spanish conquistadors and the U.S.

⁷³ This is a rare occasion when Díaz italicizes a Spanish word. His resistance to italicize Spanish words, as well as his resistance to identify the dialogues with quotation marks, is the most discussed technical element of his writing.

government, typical for novel of dictator, here is developed into a blunt political stand against the U.S.'s "participation" in the country's politics.

The U.S. invaded the Dominican Republic twice. Both times, the occupation was explained as an attempt to preserve the order and peace in the country. And yet, in order to fully understand the turbulences of the island, as well as Díaz's argument about the U.S. diabolic political nature, one needs to start "From the beginning, [keeping in mind that] the history of the nation was plagued by foreign pirates, as well as bloody civil wars and dictators" (López-Calvo 13). After two centuries of Spanish domination (1492-1697), the country was divided into Spanish Santo Domingo and French Saint-Dominique by the Treaty of Ryswick. The French part of the island became today's Haiti in 1804, when free black slaves obtained their independence through an armed revolt. In 1821, Santo Domingo acquired its independence from Spain, becoming the Independent State of Spanish Haiti. However, the Haitian president Jean Pierre Boyer annexed the newly founded country. Finally independent in 1865, after a series of chaotic governments, a failed attempt to annex the country to the U.S., and coming again under the Spanish rule, the first autocrat Ulises Heureaux (1882-1899) stabilized the Dominican Republic by modernizing the sugar industry and therefore attracting foreign workers and migrants. Unfortunately—as Díaz sees it— by the end of the 19th century the U.S. became a new power in the region whose influence on the Dominican Republic has not yet ceased to exist.

In 1906, the U.S. saved the Dominican Republic from bankruptcy, paying its debt to the Netherlands. A year later, when the Dominican government failed to pay the debt, the U.S. forced an agreement by which the U.S. gained the direct control of the national customs for fifty years. López-Calvo argues that "this event served as a precursor of the U.S. army interventions and occupations of 1916-24, and 1965" (16). The period of yet another destabilization started in

1911, when the president Ramon Cáceres was assassinated. To the next few politically chaotic years the U.S. responded by an ultimatum, according to which the Dominican government either needed to elect a president or accept the one imposed by the U.S. government. Juan Isidro Jiménez was elected democratically but refused to accept the U.S. demands about establishing the U.S. supervision of the public affairs, finances, and a creation of a military force commanded directly by the U.S. army. The resistance of his government and the political and economic instability encouraged the U.S. to occupy the country. The occupation, actually provoked by the U.S. concern about the German influence in the Caribbean and preserving the U.S. economic dominance in the region, was stopped only after a remarkable political and guerilla resistance, as well as the general unpopularity of the U.S. government.

In 1965, four years after Trujillo's assassination, the U.S. president Lyndon Johnson feared that the country would become "second Cuba"—in which the communist revolution took place in 1959—and ordered the invasion of the Dominican Republic. Johnson explained his decision like this: ". . . we don't propose to sit here in our rocking chair with our hands folded and let the Communist set up any government in the western hemisphere" ("The Wartime Leader" par. 9). In order to protect the capitalist system, the U.S. also supported the Beleaguer government and prevented attempts to not only distance the country from the dictatorship but also to develop it economically. What Díaz, therefore, claims is that the U.S. is greatly responsible for the political and social life of the Dominican Republic. In footnote 22, when seemingly clarifying the doomed family history of the Leóns, Díaz succinctly reiterates his argument one more time, undoubtedly associating it with the curse cast on the island and its inhabitants: "There are other beginning certainly, better ones, to be sure—if you ask me I would have started with the Spaniards 'discovered' the New World—or when the U.S. invaded Santo

Domingo in 1916 . . . “ (211). The curse, therefore, is not a matter of providence but a consequence of the colonial and political interest in the strategic and economic exploitation of the Dominican Republic.

Díaz makes fukú one of the central motifs of his main narrative thread, often explaining his characters’ actions by the inherited doom and the predestined nature of their lives. For instance, when Oscar decides to turn to the island and save Ybón, although he knows that he will probably be killed in an irrational demonstration of power and machismo, he explains that “the curse . . . made me do it” (194); when a chain of horrible events that include the imprisoned father, dead mother, and two mysteriously dead sisters hits the Cabrals, Beli’s family, fukú is evoked as an explanation; and even the Chinese brothers in whose restaurant Beli works decide to change its name when they realize that the one mentioning the Admiral can potentially ruin their business. Almost any narrative segment that is logically unexplainable, or associated with the grim reality of the Trujillo years, Díaz explains with fukú. It is as if he suggests that his characters, and his countrymen, are predestined, as well as that a regime such as Trujillo’s would not be possible in any other country than the cursed one. Either Trujillo would have been thrown out of power or, in a country that is not predetermined to fall, he would have never had a chance to establish himself as an autocrat.⁷⁴ *Oscar Wao*, for that reason, is as much a novel about a curse and the attempt to counterbalance its powers as it is a dictator novel.

Díaz opens the *Oscar Wao* with almost a dictionary explanation of fukú: “They say it came first from Africa, carried in the screams of the enslaved; that it was the death bane of

⁷⁴ Scholarship tries to explain the reasons for both Trujillo’s governing success and the relative support among his countrymen. Although Díaz attributes the Dominican political and social fiasco to the mythical fukú and the charisma of the dictator, scholars have concluded that the Trujillo’s three decades long dictatorship was rooted in the support from the peasants; his dictatorship had agrarian origins. See: Richard Lee Turtis. *Foundations of Despotism: The Trujillito Regime, Peasants and Modernity in Dominican History*. Stanford: Stanford UP, 2002.

Tainos, uttered just as one world perished and another began; that it was a demon drawn into Creation through the nightmare door that was cracked opened in the Antilles” (1). The first sentence of the novel refers to the events that marked the “modern” Dominican history (slavery and the extinction of the indigenous peoples), but it is significant that they remind Díaz of the demonic—and commonly Manichean—creation of the world. Accordingly, only “good magic” can counterbalance the authority of fukú: “there was only one way to prevent disaster from coiling around you, only one surefire counterspell that would keep you and your family safe. . . . A simple word (followed usually by vigorous crossing of index fingers). Zafa.” (7). The narrative shows that the stereotypical conflict between the evil and the good rarely has a happy ending in the Dominican context. The narrator also wonders if the book he writes “ain’t zafa of sorts” (7) since he narrates “a fukú story too” (6). The paradox is that his fukú story is multileveled: it is as much a story about two countries (U.S. and the Dominican Republic), as it is about a family caught up in Trujillo’s curse, and immigration that started 400 years ago, with the first Africans forcefully brought onto the island. It is also a love story of Oscar Wao. Zafa, on the other hand, seems to be not so much an attempt to annul the consequences of the cast spells but a challenge to explain both the Dominican history and Dominican peoples, as well as to confront the prevalent receptions of Dominicans, and Latinos, in the contemporary U.S. context: “U.S. Latinos are not outsiders, despite the hyperbolic media images, but insiders who are pushing U.S. culture in a different direction, in order to change it and change with it” (Sandín and Perez 2).

Díaz finds such “pushing” in magic and religion. Magical elements are a recurring segment in *Oscar Wao* that is best understood through Sandín’s interpretation of “allegorical realism.” Sandín defines allegorical realism as a literary practice opposed to the magical realism

of the older generation of Latin American authors (e.g. Carpentier, Marquez), and typical for contemporary U.S. Latino authors. Since U.S. Latino authors are distanced from their home, both geographically and physically, they are also detached from the magical, the element that is accessible to the magical realism authors. The significance of allegorical realism is found not only in the fact that “it transcends polarities (primitivist/modern, irrational/rational, native/assimilated), but [also] that it marks a new relationship with the ‘magical’ ruins of the origin that U.S. Latinos and non-Latinos alike find workable” (Sandín 12). Allegorical realism embodies a fundamental conflict present in the works of contemporary Latino authors, induced by their U.S. identity and the identity of their countries of origin. It, reminds Sandín, can be established by an attempt to perform a ritual as well as by only a word that invokes the entire underground structure of magic. In *Oscar Wao*, such words are fukú and zafa. Although imploring magic into his prose is not new to Díaz, in *Oscar Wao* it is used to emphasize his political agenda; the centuries-long colonization of the island started with the Spanish conquest only to become more nuanced and complex with the involvement of the U.S. government.⁷⁵ Magical elements actually affect action. Even though Sandín correctly contends that the magical elements invoke the older oral and folklore traditions indigenous to the U.S. Latino cultures and bridge the gaps not only between the two generations of Latinos but also between Latinos and non-Latinos in the U.S., Díaz uses them to astutely critique the politics practiced on the island after its “discovery.” Even more remarkably, the inclusion of magic vividly illustrates the complex cultural heritage that includes a seamless juxtaposition of the African and European religious rituals, as well as the colliding cultural practices.

⁷⁵ In *Drown*, in story “Fiesta 1980,” Yunior’s mother blesses her children before they go on a car trip but also tries to keep appeased Eshú, the god of crossroads and the protector of travelers, by throwing him the mints out of the car. Eshú is an African god, and one of the main gods of Voodoo.

The scenes in which such concurrence is the most prominent are those associated with Beli's encounter with the Dominican Secret Police and her miraculous survival. As a beautiful and rebellious 16-year-old, Beli becomes a lover of one of the Trujillo's closest men and, as it turns out, husband of Trujillo's daughter. Naïve and disinterested in the domestic politics, Beli is unable to recognize in older Dionisio the Dominican macho type that is remarkably reminiscent of the most famous Dominican charmer, Porfirio Rubirosa.⁷⁶ She is also incapable of imagining that her lover leads at least two lives: one political, associated with the Trujillo family, and one private, in whose center is, at least temporary, Beli. More importantly, she does not comprehend the magnitude of the meeting with the enraged Gangster's wife (as Díaz insists on calling him, straightforwardly offering his understanding of the Dominican government), who presents herself only by her last name: "Soy Trujillo" (Díaz 141). Desperate, Beli tells everybody about her pregnancy and the relationship with Dionisio, especially when he disappears to prevent a possible leftist revolution initiated by Cuba. Unaware of the political turbulences of 1961, which led to Trujillo's assassination, she thinks that he had abandoned her. The story reaches the Trujillo daughter who startles Beli in a park, surrounded by "two very large and capable officers" (Díaz 141) that should take Beli to a doctor. When Beli successfully resists both physically and verbally, she does that out of ignorance. Beli does not know what the woman's name represents

⁷⁶ Although Díaz insists on the distinction of Dionisio and Rubirosa by writing a long footnote (4) about one of the most famous world playboys, the comparison of the two is inevitable, as much as is a recognition of a stereotype of the Dominican politician. Rubirosa married Trujillo's daughter Flor in 1932, only a week after the two met, and was later granted a diplomatic spot in Germany. The couple, however, divorced when it became obvious that Rubirosa was unfaithful. And yet, Rubirosa managed to be in Trujillo's grace until the dictator's death and was officially a Dominican diplomat. Rubirosa was also romantically linked to actresses such as Kim Novak, Zsa Zsa Gabor, and Marilyn Monroe. The combination of his charisma and the political power he embodied as a diplomat formed an appealing international image of the Dominican Republic; Rubirosa established a playful and macho image for the dictatorship Dominican Republic. See more: Shawn Levy. *The Last Playboy: The High Life of Porfirio Rubirosa*. New York City, New York: Fourth Estate, 2005.; Zsa Zsa Gabor. *One Lifetime Is Not Enough*. London: Headline Book Publishing, 1991.

and she is not aware of the implications the bodyguards symbolize. On the contrary, she protects her romantic relationship and the child she carries as the ultimate validation of her involvement with the Gangster. Of course, such a resistance toward the government—after all, Beli opposed a Trujillo—cannot go unpunished; she is treated as a dissident. In the end, she practically puts herself in the hands of her torturers, the Secret Police. Unable to recognize the difference between the black Gangster's car and a secret police vehicle, and falsely thinking that the Gangster came for her, she happily enters the car which in the dark looks exactly like his lover's. And while "they drove east" (145), the Secret Police men disfigure Beli's face by beating it. In the cornfields:

They beat her like she was a slave . . . About 167 points of damage in total and it was only sheer accident that these motherfuckers didn't eggshell her cranium, though her head did swell to elephant-man proportions. . . . All that can be said is that it was the end of language, the end of hope. It was the sort of beating that breaks people, breaks them utterly. (147)

This motif of the death among sugar canes forms something of a political and historical backbone of *Oscar Wao*. Díaz explains that "As some of you know, canefields are no fucking joke, and even the cleverest of adults can get mazed in their endlessness, only to reappear months later as a cameo of bones" (149). The genocide of 1937 was done mostly among sugar cane fields where not only the majority of Haitians worked, but they also spread toward the border with Haiti, to the west. If found in the fields, Haitians were accused of illegally crossing the border, and therefore executed. The cruelty of Trujillo's plan is that most of the Haitians were employed in the fields and therefore easily "prosecuted." During Trujillo's reign, the political opponents were taken into the fields and left there, exactly as Beli was taken by the secret police.

In almost the same manner, in the 1990s, Oscar loses his life in a sugar cane field, confirming yet one more time Díaz's idea that private matters are interwoven with political power. Dragged and killed by a former police officer, Oscar's death reinforces the power of the political in the Dominican context.

Although Díaz claims that "How she survived I'll never know" (147) such physical torture during which, inevitably, Beli loses her child, he actually offers an explanation. Phrasing it carefully and pointing out that the story can be understood as a part of Beli's imagination, and that "Dominicans are Caribbean and therefore have an extraordinary tolerance for extreme phenomena. How else could we have survived what we have survived?" (149), Díaz explains by a myth Beli's extraordinary survival. For that purpose, he introduces a talking mongoose, an animal ancient to Africa, which leads Beli by her songs out of the cane field (*Sueño, sueño, sueño, como tú te llamas; Yo me llamo sueño de la madrugada; Dream, Dream, Dream, what is your name, My name is the dream of dawn.*) The animal that "might have been an amiable mongoose if not for its golden lion eyes and the absolute black of its pelt" (149) persuades Beli to crawl out of the field for the sake of the future son and daughter; Beli's will and strength are rooted in her future, in her "promised children" (150). Díaz also adds a footnote to Beli's phenomenal escape from the field—and from death—glorifying the mongoose as one of the greatest travelers (from Africa, to India, to the Caribbean). He reinstates the myth about the mongoose's origin in the underworld, of an animal that is associated both with the death and life. In other words, the mythical creature saved Beli in a situation where all political and legal powers ceased to exist.

The scene also refers to Trujillo's rapidly dissipating relationship with the Catholic Church. Until 1959, when the Church started to distance itself from Trujillo in the climate of

extreme terror and repression, Rome supported him unconditionally. Trujillo celebrated Catholicism as the official religion of the state (and therefore insisted on the continuity with the Spanish heritage), and backed up its economic investment in building churches. As a consequence, Pope Pius XII decorated Trujillo with the Great Cross of the Papal Order of Saint Gregory. The fact that in this scene a mythical being saves Beli—and therefore overpowers both the Church and Trujillo—signals the autocrat’s political descent. In 1962, the Church openly accused Trujillo of repression and distanced itself from its government.⁷⁷ By extension, the Dominican Republic and its repressed people managed to live only because they were protected by the myths and legends brought from Africa. To fully explain Díaz’s allegory, one could say that the spirit of Africa manages to save the Dominicans in the repressive political and religious atmosphere of the white colonial heritage.

Díaz is careful not to dismiss absolutely the importance of Catholicism, especially because of its five century long dominance on the island, and its undeniable, although oppressive, contribution to Dominican culture. When La Inca—a Catholic—realizes that Beli is taken by the police to be killed, she starts to pray. La Inca’s prayer is an act of powerlessness, as much as is Beli’s resistance to the secret policemen is caused by her ignorance. La Inca prays because she is “stranded out in that growing darkness, without a name, an address, or a relative in the Palacio” (144). In other words, she does not have any connections that could possibly help her with making a case for Beli, the lover of a Trujillo daughter’s husband:

Shrugging off her weariness, she did what many women of her background would have done. Posted herself beside her portrait of La Virgen de Altagracia and prayed. We

⁷⁷ For more, see: “Trujillo and the Catholic Church.” *God and Trujillo*. Ignacio Lopez-Calvo. Gainesville: U of Florida P, 2005. 22-23.; Emilio Betances. *The Catholic Church and Power Politics in Latin America: The Dominican Case in Comparative Perspective*. Plymouth: Rowman & Littlefield, 2007.

postmodern plátanos tend to dismiss the Catholic devotion of our viejas as atavistic, an embarrassing throwback to the olden days, but it's exactly at *these moments, when all hope has vanished, when the end draws near, that prayer has dominion*. (144; emphasis mine)

La Inca's prayer is simultaneous with the beating of Beli, and it is implied that she and the women who joined her contributed to Beli's exceptional escape from the field onto the road, where a group of travelling musicians found her and took her to a hospital. Díaz writes that the intensity of La Inca's plea to the Catholic god was such that more than "a few women suffered *shetaat* (spiritual burnout) and collapsed, never again to feel the divine breath of the Todopoderoso in their neck" (145). Therefore, Díaz's strategy turns from the one favoring the non-White cultural and religious heritage into the one against the regime(s) that use White practices as a means of political, cultural, and racial repression. Or, in other words, the Dominican Republic needed miracles in order to fight against Trujillo—no matter their origin—because legal and political methods were nothing but a failure. To extend the argument, to overpower the U.S. influence in the country was possible only with a use of magic.

Despite the strong political implication of elements of allegorical realism in *Oscar Wao*, similarly to his collection of stories, "there is no final celebration, nor any greater insight for the protagonist. In this sense, Díaz remains true to his political belief that things are not well in the inner cities and that he will not portray them as such" (Kevane 73). Although the previous quote illustrates Díaz's political disillusionment expressed in *Drown*, it can be equally successfully used to explain the novel. Despite the astonishing survival of Beli in the cane field, and regardless of the power of La Inca's prayers, Beli is forced to leave the country. The Trujillo daughter is after Beli, even though Trujillo was shot on the night of Beli's coming out of coma;

the supremacy of the dictatorship supersedes its death, and the blurring of the political and the private seems to be one of its strongest legacies. While Beli recovers in La Inca's house, two secret policemen come to seek her again. La Inca compels them to leave by waving a machete in front of their noses, but the next night "no one" (Díaz 159) shoots through the front door of the house. Beli cannot resist Trujillo's attacks. But when Beli finally escapes to the U.S., she does not encounter a comfortable and successful metropolitan life, but "the cold, the backbreaking drudgery of the factorías, the loneliness of Diaspora" (Díaz 164). The emotional and financial collapse is complete: she is yet one more time left by a man, her husband, after only two years of marriage, with two children, and a broken heart. She faces a failure of the immigrant life that was directly caused by the dictator who was unequivocally supported by the country of her exile. She is as well a victim of the government that, supposedly, while guarding the values of capitalism and democracy, perpetuated the economic and political submissiveness of the Dominican Republic. The escape, for Dominicans—claims Díaz—does not exist whether they stay in their native country or come to the U.S. Beli's children, although granted the political and individual freedom, face the identity confusion that is induced by the cultural heritage associated with their native country.

This argument Díaz supports by yet another trait of the dictator novel, the description of Trujillo as a *bon-vivant*, and by reexamining machismo that is in the core of all of his male characters, especially Oscar Wao. Díaz explained in an interview that he was "obsessed with this idea that all these folks were dealing with this grand narrative of this Trujillo masculinity. . . . I'm fascinated by this stuff because I grew up in a United States where this masculinity is the absolute operational model" (Jay par. 14).

The Fall of the Family, The Curse of the Country

In his speech from 1955, “The Evolution of Democracy in Santo Domingo,” Trujillo claims that “Independently of the government party’s influence, public influence has evolved freely toward the formation of a well-defined labor movement and toward constitutional recognition of women’s political and civil rights” (161). The actual situation did not comply with this observation even though women were legally equal with men. In fact, Trujillo acknowledged women as legal subjects in an attempt to improve his image after the 1937 massacre of the Haitians. Shoshana B. Tancer writes that Trujillo was “surprised” (219) by the international outcry against his action and decided to focus on building the image of the Dominican Republic as a forefront of human rights. He chose as his main emphasis women’s rights, reasoning that “by granting women the suffrage he would be the beneficiary of their votes and would simultaneously show himself to be a modern egalitarian leader” (Tancer 219). Trujillo prompted the female suffrage movement by writing a letter to three senators on November 18, 1940, expressing his wish to pass the legislation that granted women civil rights. The bill passed on December 5, “to the surprise of no one” (Tancer 219). In order to secure the positive reaction from the women, as well as the votes, Trujillo even organized in the same year the Feminine Section of the Dominican Party, whose task was to participate in the rallies and to promote the effectiveness of the dictator. When seven thousand women appeared in Santo Domingo on June 19, 1941, thanking him for the right to vote, and when a delegation of women expressed their tribute for Trujillo’s respect of women’s rights in August of the same year, the dictator received the publicity he desired. On November 10, 1941, the Inter-American women’s Commission of

the Pan American Union “congratulated him officially for his efforts on behalf of women” (Tancer 220). Before 1940, when women were granted the suffrage, their rights did not exceed those of the minor or a mentally incompetent person; they could not possess or administer property, vote, or be in public office.

The suffrage did not significantly change the position of the women, especially those from the middle and lower classes. In fact, the dictatorship systematically discouraged the participation of women in the public discourse (the Mirabal sisters were murdered for such an attempt⁷⁸) and the dictator and his inner circle abused numerous women and girls. Trujillo was famous for his “delight in both the company and the bodies of woman, although he was indifferent to their minds” (Crassweller qtd. in Tancer 222). Scholars such as Lauren Derby, Doris Sommer, and Tancer point out that Trujillo’s success was based not only on his absolute power and the fear of the revenge that might have been taken on the girl and her family but also on the reinforcing the paternalistic formula. Sommer in her *One Master for Another: Populism as Patriarchal Rhetoric in Dominican Republic* offers a Freudian explanation of such a patriarchal relationship. Analyzing the rhetoric of the national epic *Enriquillo* (1979-82), she recognizes its themes and ideas in modern Dominican novels to the extent that they become uniform and predictable. According to her, *Enriquillo* offers rhetoric in which the country is perceived as a struggling family; the people—only male—represent the husband; the land has a role of the wife who is owned both by its people and its husband; the usurper (or adulterer) stands for the ruler-dictator who “exploits the woman selfishly. National destiny thus becomes the expulsion of the Usurper to re-establish legitimate ownership by the Husband so that

⁷⁸ In 1960, the sisters died in a car accident that was supposedly set up. Their husbands, who were imprisoned, were transferred to another, distant prison and the sisters were informed that they could visit them. There are not any documents or witnesses but there are speculations that they were either first molested, killed, and then driven over a cliff, or that they were forced to drive over the cliff.

(re)production can proceed naturally,. . . . legitimately” (11-12). In other words, once the husband is no longer forced to support the bastards (traitors) that his wife produces in a relationship with the adulterer, he will be freed. Sommer concludes that understood like family relationships, political movements are actually charged with “the intense emotionality of private life” (12). In the failure of the father to overthrow the adulterer she hence recognizes “Freudian comedy,” in which the young men fight against a father-figure in order to possess the mother/wife. The irony is that the wife is desired by both men.

Tancer, on the other hand, providing an anthropological reading of the Dominican context, specifically points out that “Following the Spanish tradition he [Trujillo] preferred mullatos as sex symbols by virtue of their skin color” (222). She also notes that there are recorded instances of mostly female resistance to Trujillo’s sexual appetites; Díaz’s portrait of Trujillo’s sexual insatiability and prowess is based on these elements.⁷⁹ He also associates the private, family life with the political circumstances of the country but unlike Sommer who recognizes in the affairs of the state the simulated family relationships he, in fact, points out the extent to which private interactions were influenced by those imposed by the regime. In doing so, Díaz also gradually distances himself from the traditional, the novel of dictator’s, understanding of the intellectual and his role within the Dominican dictatorship. Commonly presented as a rebel whose political engagement and academic accomplishments are restricted by the regime, in Díaz’s interpretation such an intellectual should actually be held responsible for quietly supporting Trujillo and therefore damaging the generations of his compatriots, and—his women.⁸⁰ Trujillo

⁷⁹ Tancer mentions *Doña María Grieser Viuda Tavares*, who took her daughter home from a Trujillo’s party because she thought it was time for her to come home. She also, forced, gave a party to Trujillo but refused to be either present or greet her guests.

⁸⁰ The exception is Alvarez’s *Butterflies*, in which one of the daughters, Minerva, recognizes in her father’s “double” life that includes having a wife and a mistress at the same time a replicated relationship of Trujillo and the

does not appear anyhow different from the colonial Spaniards who treated the country with disrespect, or the contemporary U.S. government that sees in the Dominican Republic nothing more than a strategic and economic interest.

In Díaz's novel, the fifth chapter is entirely dedicated to the "fall" of the Cabrals; to the plummeting of a family that, if not entirely loyal to Trujillo, cohabited with his regime relatively peacefully. Díaz titles the long chapter: "Poor Abelard 1944-1946," making the father the focus of the family's "curse" under whose influence are even his grandchildren, born in the U.S. Contrary to the expectations associated with the Dominican political context, Díaz makes a point to explain that Abelard is not punished for his political activity but for the lack of it. The Cabrals were the "members of the Fortunate People" (213) and "were numbered among the High of the Land" (211-212). Although Abelard graduated from the medical school in Mexico City, his wealth stemmed from a "pair of prosperous supermarkados in Santiago, a cement factory, and titles to a string of fincas in the Septentrionales" (213) that he inherited from his father. He chose Soccoro, the girl of African descent, to be his wife because of her infamous beauty that transcended her low class status. Her racial background is presented as a mere annoyance during the yearly family vacations at the beach where she, "unable to risk no extra darkness, remained chained to her umbrella's shadow" (213), and where her beautiful daughters "often suffer[ed] Mullato Pigment Degradation Disorder, a.k.a. tans" (213). Soccoro was as well one of the best nurse practitioners Abelard has ever encountered: "Her workhorse-ness and her encyclopedic knowledge of folk cures and traditional remedies made her an indispensable partner in his

Dominican Republic. The father's double life disables him from a political resistance and Minerva rebels both against his father and Trujillo. In *Oscar Wao*, Díaz openly pokes fun at the motif of "The Girl Trujillo Wanted" (244), claiming that it is "so common that Mario Vargas Llosa didn't have to do much except open his mouth to sift it out of the air" (244). Díaz refers to Llosa's novel *The Feast of the Goat* (2000). Díaz's Beli even shares the last name with Llosa's main female character who returns to the Dominican Republic 30 years after Trujillo's assassination: Cabral (cabra, in Spanish, means goat).

practice” (219). She was as much professionally reliable as she provided Abelard a connection with his “native” patients and the folklore of the country. Their daughters, Jacquelyn and Astrid, inherited the beauty from their mother and the intellect from the father who was called Brains. Jacquelyn excelled in foreign languages, had a dream of becoming the next Marie Curie and studying medicine in France, while her sister Astrid shared her aspirations. The family life seemed stable and prosperous. Abelard even had weekly meetings at which, however, any discussion of contemporary politics was banned and the topics included only the abstract ones, partly because he kept his salon open to everybody, including the members of the secret police. Díaz explains that “As a general practice Abelard tried his best not to think about El Jefe at all, which was ironic considering that Abelard was unmatched in maintaining the outward appearance of the enthusiastic Trujillista” (215). In footnote 24, Díaz develops this argument insisting on Abelard’s “reputation for being able to keep his head *down* during the worst regime madness—for unseeing, as it were” (215; the author’s emphasis). Abelard is to be blamed for his political ignorance that can be hardly justified exactly because of his tremendous erudition; for not wanting to know what one surely does know.

Until 1945, the year when the Cabrals’ demise started, everything functioned perfectly. Abelard even regularly went to Trujillo’s parties to which he was invited as a member of the respectable class. There, he “arrived early, left late, smiled endlessly, and *didn’t say nothing*” (215; the author’s emphasis), and was left alone. The relative disinterest on Trujillo’s part Díaz attributes to the fact that Abelard’s family maintained a certain level of economic independence from Trujillo, and did not have any land or businesses close to the dictator’s. In spite of this, in 1945, Abelard, contrary to the custom, starts leaving both his wife and the daughter at home, explaining that his wife is “nervous”—a euphemism for crazy—and that Jacquelyn needs to take

care of her. In fact, Abelard became aware that his smart and suddenly gorgeous daughter might interest Trujillo. Lauren Derby writes that there are numerous stories about Trujillo's abduction of provincial virgins, as well about his victims that he romanced and chose during official balls and functions—exactly the same ones to which Abelard was invited. Derby emphasizes, as well, that to be chosen as an object of Trujillo's interest “elicited a certain forbidden pride” (1114) both among the parents and the high-class daughters, although the parents did everything in their power to prevent the dictator to notice their daughters. An attempt to refuse Trujillo's attention was usually punished by the dictator's disgrace expressed both to the family and the girl, and ranged from the exclusion from Trujillo's social circle to imprisoning. Such Trujillo's behavior, Derby explains, is based as much on the consumption of women as on his control of the state:

His charisma was founded as much on the concrete numbers of women he acquired (and their class status) as it was on violence and the near mythological fear he inspired by eliminating men. And whereas his insatiable sexual cupidity incited ignominy, it also brought him respect and was a key element in his legitimacy as a caudillo-turned-statesman. (1113)

In that historical light, it is easy to understand Abelard's attempt to prevent Trujillo to see Jacquelyn. However, it is more challenging to comprehend his evasive technique, his hope that Trujillo would forget about his family and his daughter. As Díaz puts it, “The way Abelard saw it—his Trujillo philosophy, if you will—he only had to keep his head down, his mouth shut, his pockets open, his daughters hidden for another decade or so. By then, he prophesied, Trujillo would be dead and the Dominican Republic would be a true democracy” (227). The extent of his inaccurate understanding of the Dominican political organism has tremendous consequences and it is somewhat ironic that the only character who seems to fully realize the potential danger of

Abelard's indecision is his lover, Señora Lydia Abenader, "a widow and his number-one lover" (220). Paradoxically, she is also the most aware character of the political affairs but her marginalized position of Abelard's mistress limits her intellectual and political influence to the boudoir; she is not more than a stereotype that allows Abelard's anxiety to be exposed. When faced with the inevitable and approaching likelihood that his daughter will be officially invited to a Trujillo party, Abelard is tormented by what to do. Lydia's answers simply and straightforwardly: "Jesú Christo, Abelard, she said tremulously. What options are there. This is Trujillo you're talking about" (229). Her suggestion is to send Jacquelyn to Cuba, her idea of an ideal country, where her family would take care of Abelard's daughter. Invoking the concept of Cuba as an "escape" country Díaz plays with the knowledge gained through the historical perspective: one must wonder if Jacquelyn would be safe in the post-revolutionary Cuba. Abelard rejects Lydia's suggestion, claiming that Jacquelyn will need a visa, and that Trujillo might notice such a request. To Lydia's shocked question about the chances for that happening, Abelard responds with "You never know . . . In this country you never know" (221). The fatalism he invests in a possibility that his daughter will be spared Trujillo's attention is the same one he invests in the dictatorship. He fails to acknowledge extremism of a dictatorship that does not exclude its ruler's interest in women.

The fall of the Cabrals, from that moment on, is foreseeable as much it is obvious the inaptness of Abelard's passive approach to the dictatorship. Abelard's lack of action stems from his feeling of exception—and in a similar manner his grandson Oscar is paralyzed by his erudition—as much as Beli's physical resistance to the Secret Police is motivated by private and not political reasons. However, Díaz does not allow any sympathy for his character.

Tancer writes the two most important Spanish values carried to the New World were a disdain for any kind of manual labor because it was considered beneath the dignity of *hidalgo*, and the insisting on the purity of lineage. Both Abelard and, more interestingly, Soccoro, have internalized those values. As a result, in Díaz's interpretation, they fall victims to Trujillo's regime. For instance, when Soccoro "chains herself" to the umbrella shadow at the beach, she does that not because she is afraid for her status—which is already protected by her class and family connections—but because she would undermine the image that she associates with both the Dominican norm and the class she represents. Díaz explains such a sentiment in a manner that needs to be quoted in its entirety even though it explains the supposed warning inscribed in Beli's body. Conceived while her father is imprisoned, and becoming the reason for her mother's death, Beli's birth only continued the "bad luck" of the Cabrals:

The family claims that the first sign [of fukú] was that Abelard's third and final daughter, given the light eary in in her father's capsulization, was born black. And not just any kind of black. But black black—kongoblack, kaliblack, zapotebblack, rekhablack—and no amount of fancy Dominican racial legerdemain was going to obscure the fact. This is the kind of culture I belong to: people took their child's black complexion as an ill omen.

(249)

The tragic prophesy is associated with race. Soccaro fails to acknowledge that her older daughter becomes a prey for Trujillo exactly because of her racial background that he, as Tancer explains, links to Jackie's supposedly passionate, mullato body. Also, Soccaro's inability to recognize the predator's nature of both the regime and Trujillo seems to be a conscious decision. Díaz explains that while Soccaro was able to manage, without a blink of her eye, bursting arteries and the tiresome demands of her occupation, she "*stubbornly and willfully refused* to acknowledge there

might be a problem, *all the while dressing* Jacquelyn in the most suffocation of clothes” (219; emphasis mine). Soccaro chooses to not to acknowledge the potential danger, even though her comprehension of it is expressed in her conservative choice of clothes for Jackie. Similarly, Abelard’s reluctance to take any action against Trujillo, and therefore save his daughter from his sexual appetite, is not only unreasonable but it also underscores his evasive approach to life. Without too much of Abelard’s own hard work, he manages to maintain a comfortable life and also be present at the very edge of Trujillo’s circle: nearby but not engaged in the dictator’s affairs. The wealth came in a form of inheritance and even Lydia, his first love who refused to marry him, becomes his lover eventually. Díaz suggests that both Soccoro and Abelard purposely choose to misjudge the potential dire consequences induced by the political context—despite being exposed first-hand to its mechanics—and that they, therefore, fall victims to their own disillusion. It is as if Díaz says that the entire family is punished exactly because the elder Cabrals thought they are not punishable. His argument turns into an ethical one and, consequently, it is impossible to sympathize either with Soccoro or Abelard: “When has this country ever been human, Abelard? You’re historian. You of all people should know that” (229). Díaz even writes that Abelard was genuinely surprised by his mistreatment in prison, demanding lawyers and insisting on his class background that does not qualify him for beatings and torture: “. . . I come from a very respectable family you have to communicate with my wife and my lawyers . . . I cannot believe that I’ve been treated so despicably and I demand that the officer in charge hear my complaints” (240).⁸¹ Unlike most novel of the dictator protagonists that embody resistance toward the regime’s oppression and when unsuccessfully act on it generate

⁸¹ Captain Sagura, one of the main characters in Graham Green’s *Our Man in Havana* (1958), a satirical thriller set in the Batista Cuba, explains that only certain classes and ethnicities are predestined to physical torture. According to him, those would be low class Cubans, Eastern Europeans and Asians, but never middle and upper class Cubans or British, Scandinavians, and Germans.

compassion in their audiences, Soccoro and Abelard's choices create an atmosphere of complicity with the regime. Their actions without doubt evoke the upper classes' political apathy that was justified by comfortably lead lives.

Nevertheless, Díaz's narrator tries to present Abelard as a dictatorship rebel, offering two other possible reasons for the family's fall. Ironically, neither story can be proved and remains to be mythical as much as the narrative about Trujillo's vindictiveness motivated by his sexual appetite. Ultimately it is up to the reader—which Díaz is careful to point out—to decide which explanation she will adopt; Abelard's and Soccor's ethical responsibility, on the other hand, is not diminished. After his efforts to keep Jacquelyn away from Trujillo are punished by sentencing him to 18 years in prison, the death of his wife, and sudden demise of his daughters under unexplainable circumstances (Astrid was killed in church while praying by a stray bullet that nobody knew from where came, and Jackie "committed suicide" in a shallow pool three days after she was accepted to a medical school in France), Díaz finds the family punishment disproportional with the "crimes" they committed. Although he primarily attributes the Cabrals' downfall to fukú, the more reasonable explanations include a daring joke and Abelard's literary ambitions focused on Trujillo himself, suggesting the gradual but unavoidable fall of the patriarch.

Supposedly drunken Abelard made a joke about his Packard and the trunk in which he transported his bureau from his office to the house. While fumbling with the keys in attempt to open the trunk, Abelard pronounced his hope that there are not any bodies in there. Once the trunk was open, the story goes, he put his head into it and declared that there are not, indeed, any bodies in the trunk. The retold joke's punch line aggravates into "Nope, no bodies here, *Trujillo must have cleaned them out for me*" (235). The joke too closely reminded Abelard's company of

the infamous Packards that were, especially during Trujillo's early years, the symbol of his racist and clandestine politics. During the Hurricane of 1931, as Díaz explains, Trujillo's government transported political opponents, the "victims of the hurricane" (234), to the bonfires where volunteers burnt the dead. Most of the victims were dry, and recognized as obvious sympathizers of Trujillo's political opposition, according to the promotional materials they still held in their hands. Trujillo, in fact, won his first elections by brutal methods. The critical implication of the joke is politically subversive because it exposes the illegitimate ways of Trujillo's coming to power—and therefore a dangerous topic both for Abelard's and his companions—but it also illustrates the supremacy of the dictatorship that manifests itself as a self-imposed censorship. Even if the episode was blown out of proportion and Abelard was attributed the words he has never uttered, the fact that he is capable to openly critique regime only when greatly inebriated does not present his character, or his opposition to the regime, in the best light. There is, as well, a certain irony in the detail that his political disgrace should be attributed to the-word-of-mouth and not his own audacity.

The other possible reason for Abelard's fall, and therefore the collapse of yet another two generations of his family, is a book. According to that "less-known" (245) version of the family narrative, Abelard worked on the book "about the Dark Powers of the President, a book in which Abelard argued that the tales the common people told about the president—that he was supernatural, that he was not human—may in some ways be *true*. That it was possible that Trujillo was, if not in fact, then in principle, a creature from another world!" (245). Díaz's narrator, interestingly, is quick to reject that version because "The Girl Trujillo Wanted might be trite as far as foundation myths go but at least it's something you can believe in, no?" (246). There are not any Abelard's manuscripts or notes that would support the story, while the version

about Trujillo's vindictiveness provoked by his sexual greed can be historically supported. It is important to note that Trujillo murdered Dominicans for writing critical books about his government; such is the case of Jesús Galíndez.

A Spanish exile from Franco's regime, Galíndez worked for Trujillo's government until he fell into disgrace because of his sympathies toward workers. In 1946, he exiled himself yet one more time, to the U.S., where at Columbia University he wrote a dissertation, *Report on Santo Domingo*, in which he classified, among other things, Trujillo's government as a "poorly disguised dictatorship" (López-Calvo 21). When he refused to take a bribe from Trujillo in exchange for not publishing the dissertation, he was kidnapped from a New York City subway on March 12, 1956 and presumably taken to the Dominican Republic and murdered. Galíndez is considered one of the most prominent Dominican dissidents and the example of his personal heroism and principles is unavoidably mentioned in any scholarship regarding the Dominican political resistance. Abelard seems to be incapable of such heroism and stamina, which is the reason Díaz's narrator so easily dismisses this version of the family's fall. On the other hand, it is fair to conclude that Trujillo would support—and not banish—a book in which his mythical background is confirmed. As Derby explains, Trujillo's power was centered on his almost mythical sexual appetites and the autocratic control of the state. However, most of the dictators' political power is mythologized by stories about his if not demonic, then at least supernatural origins.⁸² In the end, it seems it is not tremendously important which version is true. Díaz is invested in the extent and the forms of the intellectual complacency, who are as much responsible for internalizing the Spanish norms (hence his constant referring to fukú) as for

⁸² In Eastern Europe, numerous accounts about the devilish nature of Lenin, Stalin, and Josip Broz Tito, the former-Yugoslav communist autocrat, still can be heard. The legends about Lenin and Tito are usually focused on their ears that reveal the Devil, while Stalin's political decisions, based on purges, more than suffice for a demonic origin.

rejecting to openly oppose the Trujillo regime and therefore tolerating the U.S. presence in the country. Thus it is not unexpected the “wrongdoings” of the male ancestors appear as an identity crisis of the future generations. Oscar Wao seems to reiterate his grandfather’s recklessness about his own family, and act against his father’s dismissal of his mother. The fact that Oscar yearns for a perfect, romantic love in this light is not as absurd—or surprising—as one might initially think.

To Be Macho Is Not Such a Great Thing

When discussing *Drown*, critics have concluded that Díaz introduces “the character of the emotionally unavailable Latino father who is frequently absent from home and is, . . . an inveterate womanizer” (Sandín 126). The type of macho is not unfamiliar in Latino literature where “‘Macho’ is accepted—and excepted—single word description synonymous with Latino men and male culture” (Rivera 502).⁸³ Díaz builds his narrative on such a social and cultural understanding of machismo, but with a nuance that has been recently recognized in machismo studies. He offers a revision of the macho concept that is centered on his protagonist, Oscar Wao, critiquing the colonial practices brought into the Dominican Republic as well as ultimately exposing stereotyping applied to Dominican immigrants (and Latinos).

Machismo did not originate in Latin/o culture nor is it customary to Latin/o traditions. Rafael Ramírez writes that machismo “was popularized in the social literature of the fifties and sixties and was initially represented as a Latin American phenomenon that appeared in its crudest

⁸³ The epitome of a macho character is César Castillo, the protagonist of *The Mambo Kings Play Songs of Love* by Cuban author Oscar Hijuelos. Somewhat of a stereotype, his love for music is equaled only by his love for beautiful women.

form in the peasant and working classes” (7). Initially understood as ethnocentric and classist, the understanding of machismo was modified in the 1970s, when incorporated into feminist discourse and into everyday language of both genders in Latin America and the U.S. The common understanding of the macho man as immature, narcissistic, aggressive, promiscuous, irresponsible, and—above all—disrespectful of women have persisted. Ramírez, who analyzes machismo specifically in the Puerto Rican context, finds such an approach “reductionist” (23) because it assumes that all of the Latin/o men are one homogenous category and because it does not pay attention to discourses within which it is manifested.

When analyzing the origins of Mexican masculinity, Alfredo Mirandé concludes that “machismo and the cult of masculinity, in their most extreme and negative form, were introduced to the New World by the Spanish conquistadores” (57). He opposes the explanation according to which machismo is the expression of powerlessness and weakness of the natives. Developed as a response to the Indian inability to protect their women from the Spanish pillage and rape, machismo would be, among Indians, nothing but a masked sense of impotence and inferiority. Basing his conclusion on the archival descriptions of the Spanish conquest, written both by Indians and the Spanish, Mirandé claims that the insisting on masculinity and patriarchy was imposed on the native population in the same way as were “Catholicism, horses, pork, and deadly diseases such as the ‘great plague’” (35). Brutal and excellent soldiers, “it is clear that despite the Spaniard’s arrogance and cruelty, or perhaps because of it, the extraordinary feat of the conquistadors established them not only as warriors and fearless soldiers but also as symbols of masculinity” (Mirandé 48). Mirandé, nevertheless, suggests that the adoption of negative machismo was a gradual process in which the conquistadores embodied many of the traits associated with the masculine cult; they had power and they were *chigones* [troublemakers]. On

the contrary, the Indian idea of masculinity—which even permitted women to be divorced—was more subdued and emphasized modesty, virtue, responsibility, caring for children, and judiciousness. As Mirandé puts it, “A good man in Indian society was not loud, boastful, pretentious, irresponsible, or vain” (57).

Such an understanding of machismo is also found in Richard Rodriguez’s autobiographical *Hunger of Memory*, where he suggests that “Machismo was a word never exactly defined by the persons who used it. (It was best described in the ‘proper’ behavior of men.) Women at home would repeat the old Mexican dictum that a man should be *feo, fuerte, y formal*” (128). The three Fs stood for ugly, strong, and formal, of which the last characteristic is the most remarkable because it characterizes the male endurance and emotional restraint. Even though it is not manly to be verbally proficient, Rodriguez calls attention to the fact that to be macho is to take care of one’s family and one’s affairs. It is not manly to whine, but neither is to belittle women or womanize.

In his novel, Díaz incorporates an analogous understanding of machismo, pointing out that the way machismo is understood by his characters represents a failure to understand one’s culture, and failure to practice one’s supposed cultural heritage in the context of the other. Whereas Franzen expels from his narrative all non-White and non-middle class characters in order to delineate their social status, Díaz confronts his characters with the cultural elements that function as original to the Dominican (Latino) culture but are imposed by the colonial practices. Critics, especially Sandín and Dalleo, have concluded that Díaz’s characters in *Drown* carry “double-masks”—they appear what they are not because they want to be socially accepted as Latinos in the urban, North American context (e.g. Yuniór-macho)—and they explained such an identity mimicry by Franz Fanon’s and Carl Gustav Jung’s theories. In Díaz’s novel, culture is

also double-masked. To be macho is to accept the behavior of the oppressors, and behave in accordance with those expectations. An attempt to revise it is as much admirable as it is futile, which makes the Dominican male perpetually confused and unable to establish his identity.

In the novel, as in the story, Oscar's narrative is told by his roommate from Rutgers, Yunior. Although Dominican—and therefore supposedly predestined for the “success with ladies”—Oscar's trouble start in elementary school, when he was seven. Overweight and nerdy, he cannot have a girlfriend because they are either appalled by his looks or his bookish language that is foreign to his environment (e.g. “I said *copacetic*. Everybody, . . . misapprehends me.”). Díaz opens the first chapter with the description of Oscar's looks against the expected Dominican stereotype: “Our hero was not one of those Dominican cats everybody's always going on about—he wasn't no home-run hitter or a fly bachatero, not a playboy with a million hots on his jock. And except for one period early in his life, dude never had much luck with the females (how *very* un-Dominican of him)” (12). Oscar is neither a baseball player, a romantic singer, nor a lover—the three labels associated with the Dominican male. He does not have more than two friends, who betray them when they find girlfriends; he is too weird. Oscar cruises through high school with the help of *Star Trek* and cartoons but when he comes to college, instead of engaging himself in sexual encounters and social activities—as, supposedly, any average teenager does—he finds the same solitude and rejection in his new environment. Writing multi-volume Sci-Fi novels does not abate his isolation and depression that eventually erupts in an unsuccessful suicide attempt. The remaining two years of college and his employment in the public school system afterward are so romantically uneventful that Oscar

manages to become a 25-year-old virgin.⁸⁴ Then he decides, out of boredom, to spend a summer in the Dominican Republic.

On the island, he is mesmerized by everything, from girls to culture, and for the first time in many years actually participates in life. He also falls in love with a 36-year old prostitute, Ybón, who is romantically involved with a Dominican policeman. And that is when trouble starts. Urged by everybody, from his parents to Ybón herself that he should redirect his romantic interest, Oscar falls for her even though she is an aged, internationally experienced prostitute. It seems that Oscar decided to fall in love—or test the power of his love—exactly because of the complexity of his subject. Torn between the terrifying treatment she receives from the Capitán, the police officer, and Oscar's intrusive, but non-physical attention, she finds in Oscar a listener and a confidant. Oscar, in return, gives her his unconditional attention and, consequently, is so severely beaten up by the policeman that he barely survives. And yet, as soon as he recovers, he heads back to the island despite the vocal protests of his entire family, and Yunion as well. In the Dominican Republic he reaches his love ecstasy but not for long. After 27 days of love and a romantic deflowering weekend interrupted by Ybón's nightmares about the Capitán, Oscar is dragged out of his car at a stop-light into a sugar cane field. Oscar's romantic story resonates with the schematic love romances (e.g. an outcast finds a love and the couple lives happily ever after when he decides to sacrifice everything to his new emotion)—with a radically different ending—and is seemingly out of tune with the rest of the narrative. Even Oscar's love story cannot escape the burden of Dominican history and politics.

⁸⁴ Judd Apatow's critically acclaimed and widely watched comedy, *The 40-year-old Virgin* (2005), has a similar premise: a nerdy salesman at an electronic store cannot lose his virginity because he is too much of a child with his collectible action figures and his love for custom painted trains. The movie argues for the man's right to remain childlike, while Oscar's sexual inactivity signalizes his physical and intellectual inaptness.

The final words of the novel “The beauty! The beauty!” (Díaz 335) establish an intertextual relationship with Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*’s last words: “The horror! The horror!” Sandín correctly concludes that in the ending of “Oscar Wao”—that serves as the literal ending of the novel— can be recognized a yearning for death that is acknowledged in the last paragraphs of the Conrad’s narrative. Conrad makes an argument for returning to the original mother of Africa and recognizing the horror of his own soul, induced by the contact with the “dark” continent, while Oscar tries to restore an order (masculine and historical). Sandín, furthermore, claims that both characters die not because they are outsiders but because “they are outsiders forcibly trying to recover an origin that they assume others have” (125). Oscar Wao not only assumes an identity that everybody else has but his identity is imposed by the white culture, by the Spaniard legacy, and then recognized in the U.S. context as the quintessential characteristic of the Latino male, both by Latinos and their white counterparts. It is not an identity of the Dominican Republic male but an identity forced on the men of his culture by their colonizers; he internalizes an imposed identity. Oscar’s father, who is mentioned only as one of the elements of Beli’s unappealing immigration life, leaves Oscar’s mother because of the implied machismo that does not superimpose any responsibility toward the wife or the children. Even Yunior does not seem satisfied by his numerous adventures and gives an impression of performing rather than internalizing the “essence” of Latino manhood. The numerous romantic and sexual quests he compares repeatedly with his relationship with Lola, Oscar’s sister, who is the only woman who leaves him exactly because of his macho attitude. And in the end, he is regretful and nostalgic for the time he spent with Lola. Therefore, to be a macho is not desirable despite the social expectations of the Dominican male. Moreover, how Díaz sees it, machismo should be abandoned because it is hurtful for those who practice it. The beauty that Oscar

recognizes is in the unrestrained emotional and physical love, focused on the one's desired subject.

On the other hand, Oscar's exclamation about beauty is also his final reconciliation with the Dominican Republic. Born and raised in the U.S., Oscar is a "double outsider," to borrow Juan Flores' term, both in the country of his origin and in the country where he lives. In the Dominican Republic, his social status and cultural and political practices of the U.S. mark him as a stranger, while in the U.S. his skin color indicates him an Other (and contributes to Oscar's alienation). It is indicative that when initially confronting with the Capitán, who catches Ybón giving Oscar the first kiss of his life, Oscar naïvely invokes his American citizenship: "I didn't do anything, Oscar quailed. Then he blurted out, I'm an American citizen" (295). Oscar's emphasis on his citizenship should prevent the Capitán from any illegal actions and pose a threat of legal repercussions, as Abelard's class status should stop any radical measures. What Oscar does not know, and therefore reacts out of the lack of knowledge, in the same manner as when Beli opposes the Secret Police, is that Ybón's lover is "one of those bad men that not even postmodernism can explain away" (295). Díaz describes him as merciless and hunger for power, as well as angry because he was born after the Trujillo era during which, supposedly, he would use his skills to his and the regime's advantage. He was, nonetheless, active under Balaguer and "because he was methodical and showed absolutely no mercy to the leftist, he was launched—no, vaulted—into the top ranks of the military police" (295). In more than 20 years, it is bluntly suggested, nothing changed in the Dominican manifestation of political power. Oscar's invocation of his U.S. identity is, nevertheless, moving when one remembers his depressing life in the U.S., and tragic because in the Capitán he intuitively recognizes an uncontrollable and brute political force.

The Capitán's relationship with Ybón is not an emotional but based on a sense of ownership; nobody can touch his girl not because he loves her but because she *belongs* to him. Oscar, who validates his relationship with Ybón through Capitán's resistance, fails to understand the policeman's motives. His misunderstanding of the situation is parallel to his grandfather's misjudgment of the Trujillo regime. Oscar's imagined position of a naïve romantic should reassure Capitán, to show him that a *real* Dominican man does not exercise crude power but emotions. Abelard, on the other hand, retreated in front of Trujillo's sexual prowess in hope that it will be exhausted. The paradox of Oscar's realization of love—but also the beauty of his comprehension of life— is that he is simultaneously introduced to the political, manipulative system of the Dominican Republic. To be punished, as the same as Beli, he is dragged into a cane field. Unlike Beli, he is not saved by a mythical mongoose even though he gives his murderers a long, poetic speech in the best Don Quixote manner about the dangers of those who try to prevent real love, and people who can do whatever they dream to be.

The Capitán's men "waited respectfully for him to finish and then they said, their faces slowly disappearing in the gloom, Listen, we'll let you go if you tell us what *fuego* means in Spanish. Fire, he blurted out, unable to help himself" (322). Although it is not entirely clear whether Oscar is unable to help himself because he is in a helpless position, or unable to stop his logorrhea, his private account with the Dominican Republic force is a repeated version of his mother's. At this point, it does not matter that Ybón is a passive, often drunk recipient of his love, or that that Oscar's murder was predicated on his attempted suicide. Almost ritualistic, Oscar's stubborn and conscious walking into his own death is justified by his sacrifice for love as well as for his tragically gained understanding of his "home" country. The beauty he gained is also the beauty of the repetition, the troublesome history of the island that cannot escape a single

generation of its people. Therefore the fukú that Díaz persistently associates with the Cabrals, and later Beli's children, is not, in fact, a curse of one family. The Cabrals are only illustrative of the thousands of families that have suffered under the Dominican government, under the fukú that is brought to the entire people by the Spaniards and a series of dictators supported by the U.S. government.

When Yuniór nostalgically closes the novel imagining that Lola's daughter will become his friend, and grow into a strong woman familiar with the Dominican fukú that she will be able to diminish, he recognizes in her the power of change, the countereffect to the failure of exile: "she'll take all we've done and all we've learned and add her new insights and she'll put an end to it" (331). Díaz exposes the damaging effects of machismo, exactly because of its double-masked, confusing nature for the Dominican male; machismo appears to be a Dominican characteristic while it is, in fact, a colonial practice recognized in the country of exile by both Dominicans and Americans as quintessentially Dominican. Proclaiming the girl a potential carrier of the both national and the ethical values and changes, Díaz as much acknowledges the strength of women as he declares the failure of the male behavior practiced by Dominican men and expected from their impostors. La Inca challenges the family fukú by finding Beli and raising her as her own daughter; Beli stands up to the Dominican secret police, while Lola refuses to recognize in Yuniór's affairs a machismo as the ultimate gender model of the Latino world. Although all of these characters, with an exception of Beli, are rather functional and underdeveloped, one must recognize in them yet another potential zafa, a counterbalance to fukú. If writing within the Latin American traditional genre allows Díaz to critique the U.S. political practices and emphasize the U.S. paradoxical but undeniable participation in Dominican history, than redefining the macho concept permits him to expose the grim consequences of such

involvement. It, as well, allows him to voice his concerns about a rather pessimistic present of the Dominican immigrant in the U.S.

So far, the only sign of positive assimilation Díaz has recognized in the language, in the mixture of the Spanish and English that challenges the monolingual English speaker and marks the unique identity inscribed in the Spanish. Although interviewers often admiringly indicate that Díaz talks in the same, unique mixture of Spanish and English in which he writes, such a blend in his prose initiated them not only to proclaim the author—inaccurately—a linguistic innovator but also generated a discussion that reveals a paradox embodied in American mainstream culture: despite the tremendous Latino presence in the U.S., and the dominance of the Spanish as the “second” U.S. language, the Latinos/as existence in the country is still somewhat surprising to the mainstream America.

We Have Never Ever Seen Spanish like This: Díaz's Language

Díaz is considered a technical and literary innovator of Latino literature. The “novelties” he employs in his prose have become a standard of both postmodern and Latino writing. Although Díaz's contributions and significance to the entire corpus of Latino and American literature cannot be denied, the failure to recognize Díaz's writing as a part of a longer literary practice indicates the myopias to which both Latinos and Latino literature are exposed.⁸⁵

Incorporating Spanish words in fiction without signaling their foreignness, not marking dialogues by quotations, and writing for bilingual (and often educated) audiences—all attributes of Díaz's style—can be associated with modernistic experimentations as well as traced to Latino authors such as Tomas Rivera and Roberto Fernandez. Rivera published in 1971 a masterpiece “. . . y no se lo trago la tierra.” written in a colloquial Spanish dialect typical for Mexican immigrant workers of the 1940s and 1950s, while Fernandez in his *La vida es un special* (1981) uses the dialect of the working Cuban class in Miami.⁸⁶ Paravisini-Gebert and Raphael Dalleo, on the other hand, see in Díaz's stories “revisiting” of Piri Thomas's *Those Mean Streets* (1967). Although Díaz's prose challenges linguistic norms of texts published in the U.S. and enriches the entire corpus of American literature by an original style, his writing reflects the literary accomplishments and inquiry of his literary predecessors and contemporaries who include Spanish in their English writings. On the other hand, unlike, for instance, Sandra Cisneros, Judith

⁸⁵ American students study and read Latino, Asian-American, or African-American literature that are rarely a part of their American literature classes (that, most often, focused on white and male authors). Although the historical reasons for such a professional and academic “divide” of literatures are justifiable and understandable, decades of “segregated” teaching, it seems, suggest that *ethnic* literature is not *necessarily* American.

⁸⁶ Lyn Di Iorio Sandín mentions in her *Killing Spanish* that Díaz repeatedly “credit Rivera and Piri Thomas as two of his principal U.S. Latino influence” (5) but she explains in a footnote that such a connection was pronounced during a public lecture at The City College of New York in 1999. I have not found in any of many Díaz's interviews such a reference.

Ortiz Cofer, or Helena Viramontes, who use the same linguistic techniques in their texts even to a greater, more challenging degree, the marketing and recognition of Díaz's work made him acknowledged outside of the fields of ethnic or Latino literature and, therefore, his incorporation of the Spanish into an English text even more noticable. Becoming the Pulitzer Prize winner, among all other recognitions, drew attention of the mainstream, monolingual America to the language of *Oscar Wao* that suddenly seems as exotic as rediscovered.

The sporadic Spanish words that Díaz uses—and never italicizes—are together with his resistance to identify the dialogues with quotation marks the most discussed technical elements of his writing. Sandín even argues that those two traits “were so downright revolutionary when his stories were published in 1996 that almost every book written by a U.S. Latino/a writer since has copied one or both of these stylistic devices” (5).⁸⁷ His use of the Spanish language is particularly interesting, and the linguistic mode he introduced in his collection of stories is incorporated in the book as well, with nearly the same effect. The critics almost unanimously agree that Díaz's “unexplained and untranslated Spanish words, many of which are misspelled or are used in grammatically incorrect variations” (Pavarisini-Gebert 166) do not emphasize the forced disconnection of the immigrants with their “old country's” language nor are they used “to indicate and highlight difference among U.S. Latino/as, who are constantly switching between the two languages” (Sandín 5). On the contrary, they undermine the social marginalization of the characters, despite Díaz's emphasizes that “Spanglish is the language of Latinos on the mainland and should no longer be considered a foreign language” (Kevane 84). The language suggests

⁸⁷ Marcel Proust first marked dialogues by a dash, instead of quotation marks, as well as James Joyce and Samuel Beckett. To distinguish a dialogue with a dash is a typically modernist characteristic. More recently, authors such as Alon Paton, Nadin Gordimer, J.M. Coetzee, and Jose Saramago do not use quotation marks at all what prompted even the *Wall Street Journal* to protest. See Lioner Shriver. “Missing the Mark.” *The Wall Street Journal*. October 28, 2007 April 21, 2009 http://online.wsj.com/article/SB122489468502968839.html?mod=googlenews_wsj

their alienation and exile that stems from “its marginalization from mainstream, middle class American society, from disempowerment that is endemic to national and immigrant minorities in the United States” (Pavarisini-Gebert 166). Such a use of Spanish also validates his Dominican characters exactly despite the fact that they do not speak “proper” English. If they do not know how to use grammatically perfect English, Díaz suggests, it does not mean that their existence should not be noticed. Lucía M. Suárez, writing about *Drown*, claims that the recurring theme of invisibility of the characters “intersects with African-American experiences” (96), particularly Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man*. Díaz’s insisting on the mixture of Spanish and English can, as well, be traced to the African-American authors who incorporated the African-American vernacular in their prose in order to validate the African-American experience (starting with Charles Chesnutt, Zola Neale Hurston, and Richard Wright). In his interviews, Díaz often praises Toni Morrison as his literary idol and although he does not mention her insisting on vernacular, there is a noticeable similarity in both Díaz’s and Morrison’s treatment of language.

Díaz himself numerous times described his use of Spanish in an English text as authentic to his community but insisted, above all, that such a combination represents a political and social force. He claims that:

For me allowing the Spanish to exist in my text without the benefit of italics or quotations marks a very important political move. Spanish is not a minority language. Not in this hemisphere, not the United States, not in the world inside my head. So why treat it like on? Why “other” it? Why de-normalize it? By keeping Spanish as normative in a predominantly English text, I wanted to remind readers of the mutability of

languages. And to mark how steadily English is transforming Spanish and Spanish is transforming English. (Céspedes and Torres-Saillant 904)⁸⁸

The position Díaz expresses is not unprecedented in Latino, or even ethnic, writing. Evelyn Nien-Ming Ch'ien in her *Weird English* analyzes styles of an array of American multilingual authors, including Díaz, and claims that the ways in which they use English and their native language reveal their discomfort with the dominance of English, and their stances about contemporary ethnic and immigration politics.⁸⁹ Ch'ien recognizes in Díaz's treatment of Spanish a reform "of what constitutes American language by asserting that his Dominican and homogenized Spanish is American" (204). The issue of language in Latino literature is one of the most vital because "Given language politics in the US, a writer's linguistic choice can be a political act, but it also speaks to the reality of the market place" (Torres 76). In short, a level of the Spanish language incorporated in a text depends on the writer's imagined target audience as well as his publishing house. According to Lourdes Torres, who concludes that "English is clearly the dominant code" (76) of Latino authors, two lexical strategies can be recognized in Latino writings. The most common is applied by authors associated with mainstream presses who understand their readers as monolingual and therefore include solely those Spanish words that are culturally recognizable from the context, or they provide an immediate translation. Torres emphasizes that while this strategy creates "a more ethnic text" (76), it also perpetuates mainstream expectations of Latino writings and makes the monolingual reader falsely believe that he is interacting with a foreign language and content. The other approach, which includes

⁸⁸ Díaz rejected to be interviewed for this project, claiming that he has given too many interviews and that he needed to focus on his own writing.

⁸⁹ For further reading about code-switching see: Gary Keller. "The Literary Stratagems Available to the Bilingual Chicano Writers." *The Identification and Analysis of Chicano Literature*. Francisco Jimenez, ed. Tempe: Bilingual Review Press, 1979.; Frances Aparicio. "On Sub-Versive Signifiers: U.S. Latina/o Authors Tripitalize English." *American Literature* 66 (1994): 795-801.; John Lipski. "Spanish-English Code Switching in Speech and Literature: Theories and Models." *The Bilingual Review/Revista Bilingue* 9 (1982): 191-212.

Spanish words and phrasal calques, prefer authors who write for the bilingual reader and tend to subvert the commodification of the Spanish language. Their works are usually published by smaller, university presses and although their target audience allows them to explore the richness of Spanish dialects, their recognition in the culture is often limited to academia and the “cultured,” mostly because of the boundaries associated with university presses; to find their books often requires an effort that surpasses a visit to a local “mainstream” bookstore of the Barnes and Noble type. Díaz, recognizing in both of these approaches disadvantages—the excessive implied exoticism of the Spanish language and exceptionalism of the educated—introduced a linguistic tactic that cherishes the distinctiveness of the Spanish dialect without alienating the average monolingual reader.

Although Díaz is very vocal in his interviews about the political implications of his linguistic choice, emphasizing his need to challenge the cultural and linguistic dominance of English in the U.S. context, his fiction is just “peppered” (Paravisini-Gebert 15) by Spanish words. He uses mostly nouns and only sporadically short sentences that should not challenge an average monolingual reader. On the other hand, his Spanish is enriched by slang typical for Caribbean Spanish, which “would not be found in most dictionaries” (Torres 80) but is possible to grasp within the context. For instance, when Díaz describes the extent of his protagonist’s pain after his heart is broken for the very first time by a 7-year-old ex-girlfriend, the meaning of the Spanish sentence is comprehended from the context. Oscar is so inconsolable that not even his cartoons *Space Ghost* and *Herculoids* can provide any solace, and when his mother asks him about the reason for his devastated mood, “Oscar *whimpered*, Girls, Moms de Leon nearly exploded. Tú ta llorando por una muchacha? She hauled Oscar to his feet by his ear.” (Díaz 14; emphasize mine). Díaz provides a clue for his monolingual reader by bluntly stating that his

character is crying. Since Oscar is crying because of the girls, and his mother is physically punishing him for such a reaction, it is obvious that she strongly disagrees with Oscar's emotional response. One does not need to be a Spanish speaker, or a skilled Spanish speaker to recognize the phonetic writing of the verb (*estás llorando* would be a grammatically correct version), to understand that his mother berates him for weeping. Díaz's hint and the mother's action are equivalent to her Spanish "explosion": You are crying because of a girl?! The scene continues with her sister's begging directed to their mother to stop the violence, but the mother "threw him on the floor. Dale un galletazo, she panted, then see if the little puta respects you" (14). The suggestion of the Spanish phrase, again, is provided by the context, which in this case as well includes the cultural stereotyping of the Dominican Republic as a predominantly male and violent society: macho. Oscar's mother, herself, exercises physical power and it is fair to conclude that her proposal corresponds with her own reaction to her son's troubles. The very next few sentences clarify the meaning of the Spanish phrase that translates as "Slap her [over her face]." The narrator explains that "If he'd been a different nigger he might have considered the galletazo. It wasn't just that he didn't have no kind of father to show him his masculine ropes, he simply lacked all aggressive and martial tendencies. . . . Oscar had like a zero *combat* rating" (15; emphasis mine). It is suggested that Oscar should be violent with women if he wants to be well treated by them; however, Oscar lacks that trait. In such a context, it is easy to understand the stereotypical suggestion about slapping a woman (especially if one engages his corpus of Latino clichés).

This is not to say that all of the Spanish words Díaz uses are fully understandable from the context—even though their positive or negative meaning is always suggested—but their sporadic utilization does not make Díaz's text as challenging as it might seem. At the same time,

his limited use of Spanish allows the monolingual reader to familiarize himself with the language and look up the words in a dictionary. In many interviews and at readings, Díaz explained that he wants his reader to read his books as he did when he came to the U.S. as a nine-year-old boy—with an open dictionary: “I wanted everybody to at one moment to kind of feel like an immigrant in this book, that there’d be one language chain that you might not get” (Gross 6).⁹⁰

Nevertheless, it cannot be denied that his incorporation of Spanish in the novel that is aimed toward mainstream readership and published by a respectable mainstream press (Riverhead Books) challenges linguistic norms of texts printed in the U.S. To paraphrase Torres, Díaz experiments with language in more modest ways. But Díaz’s own insisting on explaining his linguistic innovations confirms an interesting contradiction regarding the position of the Dominicans (and Latinos) in the U.S.⁹¹ Although Latino minority is the biggest in the country and it is predicted that the country will be 25% Latino by 2050, Latino authors are still forced to perpetually justify both their use of the Spanish language and the ways in which they incorporate it in their writings.⁹²

Díaz explains in an interview why one of his early stories published in *The New Yorker*, “The Sun, the Moon and the Stars” (1998) he italicized Spanish. It was an editorial decision against which he learned to fight by legal means: his meticulously composed a contract. He says that “*The New Yorker* forced me to put italics in, but after that I stipulated that as part of my

⁹⁰ “An Annotated Bibliography” of *Oscar Wao* already exists on the Internet. Although amateur, it includes simplified dictionary explanations of both Spanish and English phrases and terms. See: <http://annotated-oscar-wao.com>.

⁹¹ In the 2009 season of *The American Idol*, by far the most popular TV show in the U.S., a Puerto Rican contestant Jorge Nunez was instructed to “lose his accent” and pronounce properly English lyrics. In one of the show’s opening finales he demonstrated his skills and abated his accent, although the executive producer Simon Cowell, recognizing the demeaning moment of the English-dominant culture, apologized publicly for such an approach and described it as “patronizing.”

⁹² The census estimate from 2009 indicates a change in immigration that is caused by the dire economic situation in the U.S. According to the newest approximation, the country will be 24% Latino by 2050. See: http://www.census.gov/Press-Release/www/releases/archives/facts_for_features_special_editions/005338.html

contract that if they didn't accept the stories' non-italics that's that—they can't publish it. . . . What I should have done is stand my ground and said they couldn't publish it" (Díaz qtd. in Ch'ien 207). It is indicative that such a decision had legal repercussions, although in the future his Spanish will remain romanized. While one might benevolently explain *The New Yorker's* editorial request by keeping in mind that it comes from a linguistically conservative venue that is reluctant not only to disobey the grammatical rules (all foreign words in English should be italicized) but also challenge its readers, it is important to understand that the magazine's reaction is typical for the American mainstream industry. Díaz's success, conversely, allows him to accentuate the issue that haunts Latino community since the 1960s to the degree that surpasses the level of Spanish included in his own fiction, exactly because of his gained "visibility" in the mainstream culture. The complexity of that situation is that he is recognized as a linguistic and stylistic innovator—and that he even accepts such a classification—although he is not. His future books will reveal if he playfully agreed to be recognized as a modernizer of Latino literature in order to advance its recognition in the U.S., or for more intimate reasons associated with his own artistic process.

Conclusion: A Note about Happy Endings

Despite the novels' exposure of failure in the U.S. context, all the novels end happily. Acker's *Abhor* is free in her hope and spirit, convinced that a brighter future will inevitably come one day; DeLillo's characters find a replica of the terrifying Cold War circumstances that marked their existence and therefore resist any historical or individual change; *The Corrections* culminates in a family reunion and the celebration of the middle class values that the characters refused to recognize as the essence of their identities, while Oscar Wao's heroic death is a moment of transcendence by which Oscar finally establishes his machismo and his Dominicaness, allowing his sister's middle-class life and Yunior's writing career. All is well that ends well, at least according to these authors.

And yet, the happy endings in the analyzed novels resist such a simplification and point out three things: a) simmering racial, political, and social problems that remain unchanged, although challenged, both in the fictional narrative and American contemporary society; b) they emphasize the issues of racial, social, and cultural discrepancy exactly because of their reoccurring history of failure; c) and they announce a possibility for a renewal which, although not always imminent and inclusive, is foreseeable and projected onto the future. This last characteristic is especially significant because it indicates that American culture as a whole can be improved through the inversion of the elements represented in the novels. For instance, Franzen's white America should embrace those who are excluded from *The Corrections*' narrative world even though they are already an undeniable part of the American culture since the very beginning of the Republic. The improvement of Díaz's multicultural U.S. can be accomplished through the recognition of U.S. colonial history. If one would act in the opposition

to Acker's, DeLillo's, Franzen's, and Díaz's narratives, one would contribute to the full and final realization of the ideals inscribed into the American Constitution. The perfect U.S. would finally exist.

William Dean Howells remarked at the beginning of the last century that the American public wants tragedies with a happy ending, while a survey conducted by *World Book Today* in 2004 revealed that most readers would “rather read a novel that ends happily ever after” (Macintyre par. 1). Only one in fifty readers does not mind a sad conclusion. The endings of Jane Austen's *Sense and Sensibility*, Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird* and Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* are recognized as the happiest endings in literature, but the conclusion of Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* “was a clear winner” (Macintyre par. 2) among endings that readers want to change. Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*, George Orwell's *1984*, and Margaret Mitchell's *Gone with the Wind* are the endings that readers also want to revise. Although the survey triggers questions about the audience's expectations and the prospects of the politically and socially charged narratives, the survey reveals—as well as Howell's remark that includes a simplified definition of melodrama—the American taste for the melodramatic. Melodrama is in literary theory described as a populist genre exactly because of its insisting on happy endings that somewhat artificially close a series of tragic events, and because of its often entertaining, non-intellectual style. Invested in the emotional response of the audiences, the genre is interested exclusively in the well being of protagonists. Even if the entire world disappears in a cataclysm, the surviving protagonists assure its happy ending, which allows the audience to feel uplifted and buoyant. The melodramatic finale secures a happy life for the main characters even after the closure of the narrative and, by extension, allows the audience to project optimism onto their own lives. If tragedy, as Aristotle claims, purifies and educates by its catharsis, melodrama

provides hope and announces a happy future to its audiences. Hence, when the last page of the novels is read, the feeling of contentment arises. In the narratives of Acker, DeLillo, Franzen, and Díaz, the happy ending illustrates the extent and the ways in which American social and political problems can be solved. They, to a certain degree, call for a social action.

Happy endings are considered quintessentially American, and in that sense Acker, DeLillo, Franzen and Díaz write within American literary tradition. Melodrama is commonly associated with the American contribution to literature and film industry, and the *happy ending* is incorporated in many languages without translation. Those American happy endings I enjoyed as a teenager are in their nature melodramatic, as much as they are American. Despite its intellectual pretensions and high-brow content, fiction written by, for example, E.L. Doctorow, John Barth, Richard Russo, Paul Auster, Barbara Kingslover, Dorothy Allison, Thomas Pynchon, Ishmael Reed, Philip Roth, Leslie Marmon Silko, John Updike, Sandra Cisneros, Thomas Pynchon, and Gerald Vizenor, commonly culminates in happy endings. It is not unusual that the country that roots its ideology in the American Dream insists on the fairy tale-like endings. However, those happy endings—as well as the authors' concerns for a wide set of political and social issues—reveal the social engagement of which, supposedly, postmodernism is void. Not only can the U.S. be improved through the acknowledgment of its failed policies and the individual betterment accomplished, as these authors suggest, but the narratives also expose the authors' genial social concern. Even though the styles of Acker, and DeLillo and are essentially postmodern, with their linguistic plays, mixing of different genres, and the incorporation of the visual into the text, the novels' narratives *converse* with and about the most pressing U.S. social and political problems. Their texts, therefore, function on two levels: as postmodern in their aesthetics and the period in which they are created, and as socially engaged

and prescriptive in the ideas they introduce and convey. If Foucault's argument about literature mirroring the social power structure in which it is produced is considered one of the foundational ideas of the postmodernism and poststructural thought, then it is impossible to insist on the apolitical and the elitist as the crucial elements of the American postmodern novel. If that were the case, American contemporary authors would not be overwhelmed by failure of the American Dream and politics, and would not insist on corrective happy endings.

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