FOR MARISSA
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What is the political value of time? Is the future, as Elizabeth Grosz’s feminist work suggests, a source of hope and change—the only possible time for radically new ideas and events to emerge onto the scene? Or is the future just an ideological pipe dream that infinitely defers political change and reinforces the conservative status quo, as Lee Edelman argues in his polemical No Future? Is the future an empty canvas onto which we can project our utopian dreams and desires, or does the very act of such projection make us complacent to the more pressing concerns of our time? And what about our responsibility to the past, which might not be the site of politics, but which nevertheless informs our understanding of exactly what kind of political work needs to be done? Is history a source of inspiration and guidance, or does its intimate connection to the present threaten our ability to move beyond it? Qualified Hope not only makes the overarching claim that politics can only succeed when treated as a function of time, but it also contends that no single panel of time—future, present, or past—sufficiently grounds politics.

For example, when Homi Bhabha asserts that the political question “What do I belong to in this present?” best captures the problem of
modernity, he also notes that an “ambivalent temporality,” caused by an irreducible tension between the smooth time of forward progress and the contingently fractured time of any given present moment, makes answering this question virtually impossible (204). If we experience time exclusively as a forward flow into the future, then we can unproblematically locate political change and action in the future; and if we experience time exclusively as an isolated present moment, then we can most assuredly strategize a course of political action without worrying about the demands of the past or the contingencies of the future. But if we experience time as both motion and fracture, then the temporal ground of politics, and of subjectivity itself, becomes both contradictory and compromised. Bhabha’s notion of “temporal ambivalence” thus points us toward an epistemological problem that has substantial implications for both individual and collective action, a problem that I will refer to throughout this book as the time-knowledge paradox. A quip from Van Veen, the narrator and protagonist of Vladimir Nabokov’s Ada, nicely articulates this paradox: “[N]o wonder I fail to grasp Time, since knowledge-gaining itself ‘takes time’” (538). Reducing time to the present makes “grasping time” easy, but it compromises time’s constant flow; and as Van notes here, allowing for the flow, for the fact that things “take time,” compromises knowledge. Moreover, this paradox applies not just to knowing time, but to any attempt to know, interact with, and relate to the content of our world. Things are easy to know when removed from time, but removing them from time ignores a crucial component of their existence and thus circumscribes our knowledge.

Taken separately, Grosz’s and Edelman’s ideas about the proper relationship between politics and the future represent an inability to account for the time-knowledge paradox that produces Bhabha’s “ambivalent temporality.” Taken together, they embody this paradox, as Grosz’s work sacrifices political content for the sake of time’s flow while Edelman rejects temporal form for the sake of politics in the present. Basing her conception of time on an evolutionary model in which new species are created not gradually but all at once, Grosz argues that time’s movement into the future can completely break from that which came before. This in turn allows her to posit a future so new and surprising that we cannot even conceive or predict it in the present—a “future yet unthought” that is politically empowering precisely because of its radical emptiness. But such an immanent vision of feminist politics requires us to ask, “[H]ow does one maintain an openness to alterity or novelty without sacrificing the intelligibility that comes with boundaries, context, discipline, familiarity, and a shared language?” (Pagano).

Edelman would say, “One doesn’t.” A committed Lacanian, he sees
time's move into the future as an always-already futile attempt to reconcile the Symbolic and the Real, a reconciliation made impossible by the Other's irreducible and inescapable externality. Edelman contends that because Lacan's foundational lack can never be filled, any hope that the future will be better than the present—a hope that he identifies with the figure of the child in contemporary culture—is just a lie that we tell ourselves to feel better about our failings in the present. If the widespread equation of children and futurity only perpetuates a suffocating heteronormativity, then the political work of queerness belongs to the present, where its radical negativity names "the resistance of the social to itself, a resistance that the discourse of futurism, linked as it is both to reason and law, must appropriate either as liberal reform or consign to the space of the monstrous, the unthinkable, the perverse" ("Post-Partum" 182). Seeing deferral and inefficacy where Grosz sees the radically new, Edelman thus rejects time's form—its continual passage—in favor of the content-based changes that he insists on in the present (e.g., resisting antigay zoning laws and expanding the fight against AIDS).

In short, Grosz gives us time without knowledge, Edelman gives us knowledge without time, and both limit the temporality of politics to a single panel of time, effectively sidestepping the challenges posed by Bhabha's "ambivalent temporality" and the paradox it bespeaks. Neither is ignorant of the paradox, but they both make the compromise that their respective politics require. Rather than choosing between time and knowledge, Qualified Hope argues that modernity's "ambivalent temporality" need not entail such irresolvable contradiction if approached through a temporalized process of qualification. Although qualification produces a more convoluted conception of time's political value than either Grosz or Edelman offers, we should embrace such complication for its willingness to account for the ambivalent nature of temporal experience. In short, Qualified Hope will ultimately demonstrate that "qualified" can simultaneously resonate negatively (hope as provisional and tentative) and positively (hope as capable and well-equipped).

Identifying a political treatment of time that transcends the compromised positions of Grosz and Edelman requires two things: new temporal experiences that explode the dichotomy between flow and fracture, duration and instant; and new modes of knowing grounded in the forms of those new temporal experiences. To find both of these things, Qualified Hope turns to literature. In doing so, I am, like Grosz and Edelman, treating temporal experience as a form of knowledge. However, whereas they limit their understanding of temporal experience to time's linear chronology, I focus on the temporal experience of reading. Since reading is an experi-
ence determined by literary form, its temporality is necessarily qualified, no longer confined to the linear temporality of real-world experience. In making this literary turn, Qualified Hope draws on Paul Ricoeur’s crucial observation about the difficulties that any theoretical discourse faces when thinking about time: “The striking fact about the theory of time [is] that any progress obtained by the phenomenology of temporality has to pay for its advance in each instance by the ever higher price of an even greater aporicity” (Vol. 3, 11). Convinced that “speculation is powerless to contribute to the aporias of time,” Ricoeur argues that only fiction and poeisis can engage the time-knowledge paradox without reiterating its self-contradicting structure (Vol. 2, 4). This is because literary form need not adhere to the linear forms of temporal experience that make time and knowledge so antagonistic and mutually exclusive. Instead, because it has recourse to imaginative forms which ensure that its production of knowledge is rarely transparent or aleatory, literature’s innovative forms are free to shape knowledge in ways that purely theoretical discourse cannot. In the productive activity of reading, one is neither entirely outside nor entirely inside a work of literature. Rather, one is always in both places at once because literature demands that we simultaneously engage it epistemologically, ontologically, and phenomenologically. Implicitly arguing that form precedes and directly shapes content and thus knowledge, I contend that literary form is political not, as the Russian Formalists would have it, because it is able to alienate and defamiliarize, but because, as a governing influence on how we know, it also determines what we know. Confining the possible forms of temporal experience to either flow or fracture limits time’s political value to either the future or the present. But expanding the form of temporal experience by, for example, embedding durations in instants as Thomas Pynchon achieves in Mason & Dixon, populating and temporalizing the present with the past as Art Spiegelman’s In the Shadow of No Towers manages, or insisting on the simultaneity of past, present, and future as Leslie Scalapino’s experimental poetry does, in turn expands our ability to conceive the political value of time. Pynchon’s unique temporal forms reconcile the competing temporalities of globalization, Spiegelman’s challenge the detemporalizing effect of post-9/11 preemption, and Scalapino’s imagine a feminist politics separate from the logic of “choice.”

In its particular focus on postmodern American literature, Qualified Hope makes two distinct yet related historical arguments. One addresses the periodization of twentieth-century literature; the other concerns the emergence, in the United States and after World War II, of two difference-based conceptions of “the political,” each of which has specific effects on the literature of the period. First, by identifying postmodern American
literature’s persistent commitment to the political value of time as a mode of experience, I stand on its head our conventional understanding of modernism as the time of time and postmodernism as the time of space. Descriptions of modern and postmodern literature typically associate modernist innovations such as stream-of-consciousness, perspectivalism, and free indirect discourse with attempts to represent time-consciousness or temporal experience, while postmodernist innovations such as pastiche, fragmentation, and metafiction are read as rejections of time as a mode of organizing experience. One thinks here of canonical modernist authors such as Proust, Woolf, Joyce, Eliot, and Faulkner—variously influenced by Henri Bergson’s comprehensive philosophy of time and Sigmund Freud’s expansion of human consciousness—who experimented with literary form to get closer to the truth of memory, time itself, or the mental and physical experience of living in time. Conversely, a mistrust of teleological progress narratives is frequently (and accurately) cited as a dominant characteristic of postmodernism. Manifesting this suspicion, postmodern literature fragments time, flattens history, and shifts its attention to space, making recourse to parataxis, juxtaposition, and collage. Further reflecting this shift from time to space as the dominant mode of experience and knowledge, a proliferation of critical works during the late twentieth century announced themselves as “geographies,” “maps,” or “cartographies” of their object of study. Relatedly, more politicized scholarship also began organizing itself around border/boundary metaphors, producing the field of border studies and other period-defining metaphors such as liminality, border crossing, and “third space.”

Fredric Jameson captures this spatializing tendency in the definition of postmodernism that opens his first tome on the subject: “It is safest to grasp the concept of the postmodern as an attempt to think the present historically in an age that has forgotten how to think historically in the first place” (Postmodernism ix). Jameson here contends that postmodernism wants to think about history, but it does so only in ways that sap history of the very temporality that makes it historical. Thus, as Linda Hutcheon and many others have pointed out, postmodernism is deeply interested in questions of time, particularly in the form of history, but this interest always manifests itself spatially. Postmodernism is so deeply suspicious of time and the idea of experience altogether, or so the argument goes, that it approaches time or history only after first breaking it apart, reducing it, and flattening it into easily manipulable parts. Consequently, postmodernism’s sense of time lacks temporality, and its understanding of history ignores historicity. Contrary to these evaluations that focus on what postmodernism has “forgotten,” Qualified Hope instead highlights its “attempt
to think the present historically,” taking seriously this literature’s very real desire for timely knowledge and arguing that its formal innovations represent the need to rethink, but not reject, the political value of time. Just because postmodern literature fragments time and flattens history does not mean that it lacks a specific temporality or that it has rejected time as a viable mode of experience. To suggest as much is to throw the baby of temporal experience out with the bathwater of teleological thought.

In fact, an array of socio-political developments, centralized in the United States after World War II, so challenged and perverted the nature of temporal experience that postmodern authors had good cause “to think the present historically” and develop a politics of time. These events include the deployment of nuclear weapons and the ensuing paranoia and fear that pervaded the Cold War; the globalization of capital facilitated by monumental advances in computer technology; the 9/11 attacks and the preemptive U.S. war on terror; and the decades-long civil rights struggle that spawned other social justice movements such as the women’s movement, the Chicano movement (El Movimiento), and the gay-rights movement.

Just as many have said of 9/11, after the United States dropped two nuclear bombs on Japan in 1945, everything changed. Entirely new and utterly unfathomable, the bomb radically altered our understanding of violence and destruction. While the immediate horrors of the bomb negated time and anything else within its radioactive reach, the specific fear produced in its aftermath, along with the Cold War politics that both managed and perpetuated that fear, had clearly temporal contours. First, the threat of nuclear annihilation suffusing the Cold War truncated one’s sense of time and the future. Concurrently, however, this apocalyptic temporality distended the future, instituting a temporality of waiting that constantly supplanted the moment of annihilation with a moment of life. The result was a temporal experience in which the present was perpetually overdetermined by a simultaneously foreshortened and deferred future, a truly “ambivalent temporality” that challenged an entire nation’s ability to relate to and interact with other nations around the globe.

While the threat of nuclear war clearly problematizes the political value of a future that might never even arrive, the technology-driven globalization of capital and commerce erases both the past and the future, collapsing them into the present to accelerate the instantaneous exchange of “information.” Because transnational corporations and global markets cannot function on the same time, technology intervenes to make the temporal discrepancies as slight as possible. The constant acceleration of daily life aims to decrease the amount of time required to do any given task, and as that time moves
closer to zero, increased instantaneity permits global simultaneity, a radically new experience of time in the present. Instantaneity, once conceived as the absence of time, has become a temporal experience all its own, as any given moment is taken up with the simultaneous performance of multiple tasks. At the same time, however, technology’s acceleration of the present creates new windows of dead time never before experienced: waiting two minutes for Adobe Reader to open and download that online *American Literature* article I’ve been dying to read, or the first minutes of a plane flight when all portable electronic devices must be off. In such moments when our temporal experience is not one of pure instantaneity, duration returns to remind us that the future need not always be now.

After the attacks on September 11, 2001, the future was now, but for a different reason: the doctrine of preemptive war required that the United States respond to the future before it even had a chance to occur. If for Grosz the radically new and unknown proves liberating, for the United States and its global war on terror, the future’s unpredictability continues to be its primary enemy. Conversely, the overdetermined future that Edelman finds so smothering would, from the Bush Administration’s perspective, look like a clear sign of victory and success. Despite reversing the political value of time in these ways, the “War on Terror” still leaves the United States with a stark, all-or-nothing choice: it can subscribe to a real-time model of temporal experience, a wait-and-see approach that might get everyone killed; or it can preempt time, acting in the present to make sure that the future plays out according to its plans and desires. Further problematizing post-9/11 temporal experience, the time of trauma, marked by the continued presence of the past, only heightens the temporal ambivalence of the present for anyone living in the wake of the attacks. When the horrors of the past abut a future that is either frighteningly unknown or dismayingly preempted, temporal experience once again offers little stable ground from which to mount a politics despite the deeply political implications of time itself.

A similar difficulty plagues the temporal politics of any social justice movement trying to parlay past oppressions into present and future political gains. In such cases, the past is full of the violence, oppression, loss, and trauma that the movement wants to overcome yet honor through remembering. Meanwhile, the future presents itself as a wide-open space of infinite possibility, the location of hope for a tomorrow better than today. This double motion, back to the past and forward into the future, presents unique complications to one’s sense of time in the present. Sometimes history overdetermines the present, yielding a politics that merely reiterates the structure of past oppression. In response to such historical
overdetermination, the future looks quite tempting, but a too-quick rejection of the past in favor of the future makes Bhabha’s question “What do I belong to in this present?” equally unanswerable. Pulled in two directions, the present runs the risk of being evacuated, leaving an individual with no stable footing from which to launch political struggle in the first place. I highlight this array of postmodern temporal experiences, all of which manifest a “temporal ambivalence” that makes answering Bhabha’s question of modernity maddeningly difficult, to suggest not only that time remains a primary concern in the second half of the twentieth century, but also that it takes on heightened political stakes. It is precisely because of time’s political implications that a significant cross section of postmodern American authors rejects the era’s spatializing logic, searching instead for new ways to think about and experience time. Certainly, these historical events complicate temporal experience, but that is no reason to conclude that temporal experience should not remain a crucial variable in any attempt to know each other and our world. Consequently, the authors of the texts addressed in Qualified Hope respond directly to at least one of the temporal challenges described above, looking for specifically temporal solutions to what are clearly temporal problems. And in so doing, they develop innovative literary forms that deliver new experiences of time—all of them qualified in some way—that in turn produce new ideas about and approaches to the political themes highlighted above. Rather than insisting on the primacy of a single panel of time and thus compromising thought accordingly, they show us that “ambivalent temporalities” are perfectly qualified to ground a political vision. Although some literary forms outmaneuver the time-knowledge paradox more successfully than others, taken together, this collection of authors—Don DeLillo, Thomas Pynchon, Jonathan Safran Foer, Art Spiegelman, Nathaniel Mackey, Leslie Scalapino, and Dagoberto Gilb—represents a group of postmodern American writers who insist on the abiding political relevance of temporal experience.

Different Politics of Difference

In the socio-political events described above and among the authors whose work Qualified Hope reads, we find two different understandings of “the political.” The first notion of politics—engaged here by DeLillo’s treatment of the Cold War, Pynchon’s interest in globalization, and Foer’s and Spiegelman’s respective portrayals of life after 9/11—emphasizes epistemological concerns: How is reality ideologically and technologically mediated?
To what extent can we understand the meaning of an event? What criteria allow us to establish a claim’s truth-value? The second approach—with which Mackey’s commitment to African-American civil rights, Scalapino’s feminist politics, and Gilb’s depiction of Chicano border consciousness are all in conversation—focuses on ontological issues: What does it mean to be black, female, or Chicano? What criteria should be used in constituting a given identity? What is the nature of the difference between one identity and another, between self and other? Another way to think about the difference between these two political modes is to note that each group asks Bhabha’s question “What do I belong to in this present?” in a different way. When those concerned with the politics of the Cold War, globalization, or 9/11 ask the question, they are wondering whether or not the inevitable mediation of experience and knowledge leaves them irreparably alienated from the political sphere in general. When those concerned with the politics of social justice movements ask the question, they are trying to determine the relationship between individual and group identity, as well as the relationship between one group’s identity and that of other groups.

At first, the differences between these two political modes appear stark. Seeing as how the four authors in the first group are all white men and the three authors in the second group are people of color or female, I seem to have described a naive divide between poststructuralism and multiculturalism, theory and identity. But, of course, thinking of the difference in these terms never works; multiculturalism certainly has no shortage of theories, and poststructuralism has plenty to say about identity. Similarly, DeLillo, Pynchon, Foer, and Spiegelman are intimately concerned with race and gender issues, while the works of Mackey, Scalapino, and Gilb constantly highlight the artifice of linguistic mediation. An underlying premise of Qualified Hope, therefore, is that these two groups wrestle with the exact same problem but simply approach it in different ways, one epistemologically and the other ontologically.

That core problem is the problem of difference. For the first group, difference is a necessary fact of language, or any other form of mediating representation. Consequently, when they think about politics, they are preoccupied with all the ways in which forces such as the government, corporations, or technology mediate and thus manipulate their experience of the world. This is why difference for them is an epistemological issue: an irreducible gap between truth and the world compromises their knowledge and alienates them from the political sphere. For the second group, difference is a necessary fact of being. Consequently, when they think about politics, they are invested in either overcoming or respecting difference in
the name of equality. Difference for them is ontological in a way it is not for the first group—in a way that it could perhaps never be for white men in the United States. After all, if, as a minority, you are the majority’s “other,” its embodiment of difference, then your politics of difference is always already a function of your being and identity. Conversely, it is easier to focus on the differential effects of language and other forms of mediation if you are not marked as different yourself. Ultimately, however, the same problem—the relationship between difference and identity—plagues both groups; they just attach “difference” and “identity” to different concepts. For the epistemologically inclined, representational mediation is their “difference,” and true or stable knowledge functions as their “identity” principle. For the ontologically inclined, people and their bodies are the primary sites of “difference,” and “identity” designates a stable and coherent subjectivity.

Qualified Hope does not privilege one politics of difference over the other. Instead, the book is divided into two parts: Part I, “The Culture of Politics,” which addresses works by DeLillo, Pynchon, Foer, and Spiegelman, engages an epistemological politics of difference. Part II, “The Politics of Culture,” which includes chapters on Mackey, Scalapino, and Gilb, examines an ontological politics of difference. I keep the two groups separate to acknowledge that the differences between them are meaningful, even if they are both struggling with the same problem in different forms. Finally, I have been careful thus far to assert that my collection of temporally inclined authors “engage” or “are in conversation with” these epistemological and ontological approaches to politics without wholly placing them in these camps. This is because their common investment in a politics of temporal experience places them in a different camp altogether—a camp that locates difference neither in language nor in being, but in time. In other words, some of these authors thematize politics as an epistemological problem of representation while others thematize it as an ontological problem of identity, but they all insist that these problems will never be solved unless the phenomenological form of temporal experience becomes the new ground of politics.

The basic “problem of difference,” regardless of its epistemological or ontological form, is its iteratively circular relationship with identity. In The Seeds of Time, Fredric Jameson names this problem “the antinomy of identity and difference,” describing it as “a static reversal and repetition in which identity turns into difference, and difference back into identity in an unproductive way” (68). On the epistemological side of things, this occurs whenever knowledge becomes its own object: when the difference between the real and what we know about the real becomes the thing that we know
(i.e., we know that we do not fully know the real). Whenever this happens, difference becomes an identity that in turn requires another level of difference to be known, an iteratively circular process that can be repeated infinitely. On the ontological side of things, difference de-essentializes identity but then quickly establishes itself as a difference-based identity that once again requires difference’s de-essentializing power if it hopes to avoid being hypostatized as the essence of antiessentialism. For example, to say that the truth of African-American identity is its differential construction quickly becomes as essentializing as a belief in a true black identity. According to Jameson, such tedious vacillations between identity and difference, whether epistemological or ontological, point to “the paralysis of postmodern thinking” and force us to ask, how can we “coordinate our very limited positions, as individuals or indeed as historical subjects and classes, within a History whose dynamics representationally escape us?” Suggesting that postmodernism only thinks of time as an “eternal present,” Jameson argues that identity and difference spin their wheels precisely because they fail to account for the temporal form of experience and knowledge.

In *The Armies of the Night*, a historical novel about the anti-Vietnam War demonstration at the Pentagon in 1967, Norman Mailer struggles to describe an event whose “dynamics representationally escape” him because of their inherently temporal nature, thus creating a novel that perfectly exemplifies the epistemological challenges that the time-knowledge paradox poses for both politics and literature. As an experiment in New Journalism, Mailer’s novel sets up a homology between the political logic of the protest and his own artistic production. Both are trying to create something new—the protestors want a change in the course of the Vietnam War as well as a new conception of Leftist politics, and Mailer searches for a new aesthetic, some amalgam of history and the novel that best captures the truth of the event being represented. To create these new things, however, both must confront the temporal dynamics of their respective actions. For instance, Mailer describes the march as a test of the New Left’s ability to articulate a meaningful argument against the war despite the disparate political contingents that compose (and thus compromise) it: hippies, pacifists, anarchists, old Communists, and black nationalists. While the Old Left, a unified coalition of Communists of various stripes, could rely on Marx’s “unassailable logic of the next step” (86), the New Left, believing that “authority could not comprehend nor contain nor finally manage to control any political action whose end was unknown,” refuses to say what the future should look like (88). Pursuing a “revolution which preceded ideology” and rejecting “the sanctity of the original idea” (88),
the only truth that guides this politics is “the intimate truth of the way [the revolution] presented itself to your experience” (87). Consequently, the success or failure of the march will be “the result of episodes one had never anticipated, and the results might lead you in directions altogether unforeseen” (86). This very Groszian approach to politics adheres to a temporal logic grounded in the formal experience of the revolutionary process, and Mailer views his own aesthetic project in exactly the same terms: “Just as the truth of his material was revealed to a good writer by the cutting edge of his style . . . so a revolutionary began to uncover the nature of his true situation by trying to ride the beast of his revolution” (87–88). Such an aesthetic thus depends less on “the substance of one’s ideas” and more on “the style of one’s attack” in and over time (25).

In their execution, however, neither the protest nor Mailer’s novel achieves the ideals of this fully temporalized aesthetic, since to be meaningful and intelligible the unknown must become known and style must accede to content. For example, the protest’s organizers predetermine the meaning of their event when they decide that the Pentagon represents the best “symbol” of the march’s politics. This attempt to make the march symbolically meaningful entails a shift from locating difference temporally to locating it representationally. Once this shift occurs and meaning rather than form becomes primary, the iterative cycle of identity and difference begins. As Mailer explains, the Left claims that the protest means one thing (e.g., the vast number of protestors represents a sharp rebuke to U.S. action in Vietnam while the violence perpetrated against them suggests an increasing totalitarianism within the government), and the government claims that it means something different (e.g., such acts of free speech are precisely what the U.S. action in Vietnam is defending) (240). As soon as politics has to mean something, the different identity positions in question—in this case, the Left and the government—can appropriate the differential gap at the heart of any act of representation to make the event mean whatever they choose. Even when the organizers arrange for a period of unorganized and unscripted civil disobedience in which “individuals will act on their consciences and in their own personal styles,” they do so as a way to tell the radical fringes of the New Left that they are not being ignored; the meaning undermines the very spirit of the action (234).

Like the aesthetics of the protest, Mailer’s own literary aesthetics also shift from locating difference temporally to locating it representationally. The text oscillates between historical and novelistic accounts, frequently blurring the lines between the two, to ensure that the “style [is] in each case the most appropriate tool for the material of the experience” (88). Believing that the “novelistic” first section, “History as a Novel,” has cut
through a media-created “forest of inaccuracy” that would otherwise “blind the efforts of the historian,” Mailer begins the second section, “The Novel as History,” by officially “passing the reins” to the historian. And halfway through the “history” of the second section, Mailer remains attuned to the experiential truth of his material and switches back to novelizing: “the novel must replace history at precisely that point where experience is sufficiently emotional, spiritual, psychical, moral, existential, or supernatural to expose the fact that the historian in pursuing the experience would be obliged to quit the clearly demarcated limits of historic inquiry” (255). But the moment he makes this metanarrative turn and begins representing his formal techniques, telling us what they mean and are intended to accomplish, he reduces them to thematic content in the same way that the unknown elements of the protest are reduced to merely symbolic meaning. And once the generic experimentation becomes a representational or thematic element of the text, difference and identity can do little more than spin out of control: the event can never be fully known; Mailer’s metanarrative knows that it can never fully know the event and makes that its primary theme; and we can imagine a meta-metanarrative that knows that it does not know that it knows that it does not know, and so on. In the same way that time falls out of the equation once politics focuses on meaning rather than form, whenever a metanarrative thematizes the process of making meaning, it must stand outside itself, something that is possible only when time, itself a constitutive element of meaning, is ignored.

Ultimately, although Mailer clearly understands the importance of temporal form to both political and aesthetic production, The Armies of the Night reveals just how difficult it is to locate difference in time and still yield an effective politics or an intelligible novel. Also, it more broadly demonstrates the problems with any meta-epistemological approach that takes the limits of knowledge as its primary focus, which is precisely what a vast body of postmodern literature and theory, preoccupied with meaning’s inherent instability, does. Although the structural and poststructural linguistics that ground postmodernism’s interest in the instability of meaning have much to say about time (I am thinking here of Saussure on “auditory” signifiers, Jakobson and his syntagmatic axis, Levi-Strauss’s insistence on diachronic analysis, and the deferral half of Derridean différance), most articulations of such instability detemporalize the meaning-making process, reducing linguistic indeterminacy to spatial terms. The result is the meta-epistemological claim: even if knowledge remains uncertain, we at least have certain knowledge of knowledge’s uncertainty. But, of course, the initial observation regarding knowledge’s uncertainty also applies to and thus undermines the secondary metaknowledge of that uncertainty,
and so on. Once we slip into meta-epistemology, the object we want to know becomes inaccessible and only our knowledge of that inaccessibility remains, something that occurs only because knowledge jettisons time to better know itself. Meta-epistemology’s iterative structure requires that the object of knowledge remain static and removed from both its own temporality and the temporality of our encounter with it, thereby ensuring postmodernism’s inability to account for temporal experience, ambivalent or not.

As Mailer’s novel exemplifies and as Linda Hutcheon has explained, these problems appear in postmodern literature as a persistent concern about the relationship between literary form and historical content. Given its hyperawareness about the artifice of language and the social construction of reality, can postmodern literature engage meaningfully with the world, or is it just so much narcissistic belly-button gazing? Hutcheon argues that postmodern writers, unable to resolve this tension, achieve political engagement through self-reflexive formal innovations which, in accounting for the artificiality of their discourse, render that engagement always-already provisional. In this account, meta-epistemological awareness requires that all political engagement contain an element of complicity. Believing that complicity need not preclude political relevance, however, Hutcheon contends that irony allows postmodern authors to negotiate this paradox fruitfully: “It is the function of irony in postmodern discourse to posit . . . critical distance and then undo it. It is also this doubleness that prevents any possible critical urge to ignore or trivialize historical-political questions” (Politics 15). Irony helps postmodernism remember that its own discourse about the artificiality of discourse is itself artificial while at the same time allowing it to remain straight-faced about its political aims and commitments. Citing Stanley Fish’s famously ironic warning, “Ye shall know that truth is not what it seems and that truth shall set you free,” Hutcheon acknowledges that postmodern self-consciousness can easily institute itself as a new master narrative—that is, as a new identity (quoted in Hutcheon, Poetics 13). Nevertheless, she maintains that as long as no single discourse claims mastery and authority over any other, making claims about the artifice of discourse achieves a productive politics of provisional complicity rather than a self-defeating politics of contradiction and hypocrisy. I would argue, however, that we only have to accept Hutcheon’s political vision of provisional complicity—a vision that has become a touchstone for any work on postmodernism and politics—if we also accept postmodern literature’s general failure to account for time. But as the authors gathered together in Qualified Hope suggest, not everyone has abandoned the possibility of a meaningful difference located in time.
Provisional complicity represents an admirable last-ditch effort to salvage something meaningful from the circular dead ends into which epistemologically oriented postmodernism has theorized itself. But as the ultimate reabsorption of difference into identity, knowing the artifice of knowing leaves us nowhere to go but in self-reflexive circles, and time has more to offer.

Tellingly, things do not look much better for the strain of postmodern thought concerned with ontological difference and the politics it entails. Ishmael Reed’s *Mumbo Jumbo* makes exactly this diagnosis of ontological difference, but it also counters the ontologically rigid positions taken up by the text’s cast of characters by insisting on the political relevance of temporal form. Describing a millennia-old struggle between oppressive and liberating energies, *Mumbo Jumbo* depicts a moment in the United States in the 1920s when the battle has become racially divided. Fighting for creative expression, alternative religious beliefs, and a generally anti-Western, anti-Enlightenment approach to knowledge, Papa LaBas and Black Herman, two voodoo ministers, join forces in support of Jes Grew, an indeterminate and uncontrollable “psychic epidemic” that most commonly manifests itself through dancing. Arrayed against these black characters, Hierophant 1, the leader of the Wallflower Order, and Hinckle Von Vampton, the Grand Master of the Knights Templar, are commonly committed to suppressing Jes Grew and the pleasures it entails. A third party to this conflict, a black Muslim preacher named Abdul, also fights against Jes Grew but does not align himself with its white enemies.

All of these characters conceive politics as a function of an individual’s ontological identity, regardless of whether that identity is essential or constructed. In an argument that Papa LaBas and Black Herman have with Abdul, for example, they support Jes Grew because of its connection to “something so deep in the race soul.” While acknowledging that their voodoo work connects them to something “basic,” something that black people have “submerged in their talk and in their music,” Abdul counters their essentialist argument with a vision of his own antiessentialist self-construction: “I had no systematic way of learning but proceeded like a quilt maker. . . . I would hungrily devour the intellectual scraps and leftovers of the learned” (37–38). Complicating things, however, the essentialist position comes from the polytheistic voodoo ministers while the monotheist Muslim preacher advocates antiessentialist perspectivalism. Accordingly, black essence is defined by a religious tradition that “bountifully permits 1000s of spirits, as many as the imagination can hold,” while one of the constructed elements of Abdul’s antiessentialist position involves the belief that whoever “worships other gods besides Allah shall
be forbidden to Paradise and shall be cast into the fires of Hell” (35). The white religious traditions in the text, represented by the Wallflower Order and the Knights Templar, suffer a similarly paradoxical divide. Both are Atonists, believing in one true God and, by extension, one right way for the world to be. A millennia-old schism exists between the two groups, however, because Hinckle Von Vamoto’s Order deviated from the one true path and began “acquiring African powers as a result of [its] contact with the Arabs” (68). Like Abdul’s constructed approach to religious belief, they borrowed from various traditions to constitute their own belief, but their antiessential essentialism (a constructed approach to believing in one true God) conflicted with the Wallflower Order’s essential essentialism, causing an abiding rift.

This is what Jameson’s “antinomy of identity and difference” looks like when applied ontologically. Differentially constructed identities are nevertheless essentialized (LaBas’s and Herman’s essential polytheism), and essential identities are nevertheless constructed (Abdul’s and Hinckle’s polymorphous monotheism). When these characters calculate their response to the social, cultural, and political phenomenon that is Jes Grew, they base their decisions on identity—on their essential or antiessential approach to being. But as this loopy relationship between identity and difference demonstrates, each theory of being embeds its own contradiction, effectively undermining the original grounding of any decision to either support or suppress Jes Grew. Because identity and difference constantly turn into each other, the characters are never sure about the dominant feature of their identity. Are they antiessential or essential, permissive or oppressive? In addition to diagnosing the failure of a politics of ontological difference, Reed also suggests that improvisation might be one way to embrace a temporal form of difference that overcomes the antinomy, a point Black Herman makes to LaBasis after LaBas fails to exorcise a Voodoo loa from a woman named Earline (130). Although improvisation certainly sounds a lot like the constructed approach to identity that Abdul and Hinckle advocate, improvisation never makes ontological claims in the same way that their antiessentialism does. Instead, the dominant feature of improvisation is its temporal form; it describes the way something is, not what something is, over a period of time. Similarly, Jes Grew never becomes a thing that can be touched or seen; its presence is always a trace of its being, manifest in a host of formal symptoms that remain untreatable. For instance, we learn early in the novel that “Jes Grew is seeking its words. Its text”—specifically a text known as The Book of Thoth that comprises Jes Grew’s “liturgy.” But Jes Grew never finds its text; it never coincides with its ontological object and instead remains a mode of being in the world.
Of course, this emphasis on textuality requires us to ask similar questions about the ontology of the novel itself: is it a thing or is it a mode of being in the world? Whereas Mailer’s metanarrative turns the form of The Armies of the Night into its content, effectively ontologizing the creative process and excising it from time, Reed resists that metafictional impulse, never permitting his text to be the text that the novel is about. Since Mumbo Jumbo is a novel that not only represents Jes Grew but also manifests its improvisational aesthetic sensibilities, we might be tempted to read it as Jes Grew’s liturgy, as The Book of Thoth. However, Mumbo Jumbo’s plot describes Abdul’s destruction of The Book of Thoth, and Mumbo Jumbo’s own construction—an amalgam of newspaper headlines, handwritten letters, historical images, gnomic diagrams, academic citations, and unattributed sketches—prevents the text from ever establishing its own ontological identity. Although Reed’s intent clearly lies behind each and every textual artifact, the generally paratactic relationship among those artifacts makes the reading experience one in which readers improvise rather than interpret textual meaning. While Henry Gates finds political liberation in the radical indeterminacy of such a reading experience (312), Theodore Mason has argued that these improvisational techniques cannot be considered political because they work only while the novel is being read (103). Implicitly noting the circular relationship between difference and identity, Mason correctly contends that Gates’s exuberance for indeterminacy runs the risk of becoming determinate and hegemonic itself (106). In countering Gates’s epistemological approach, however, Mason’s ontological vision requires that politics be a thing and fails to imagine it as a way of being, which is precisely Reed’s point in Mumbo Jumbo. Just because the novel does not tell us what that looks like does not mean that it cannot show us what it feels like.

Critically, this need to see what politics looks like manifests itself as an insistence on the value of recognizing otherness as such, whether that otherness appears representationally, embodied by characters and their experiences, or formally, as a text’s material resistance to its readers. Such arguments, which locate difference ontologically and in turn ignore the political value of temporal experience, have most recently found a home in the ethics-based criticism that has proliferated in literary studies since the early 1990s. (According to the MLA index, the number of publications containing the search term “ethic*” increased 800 percent between 1970 and 2000.) Whether difference is located within a text or defines the text itself, both scenarios create detemporalized encounters in which the imperative to recognize difference effectively preempts time since the thing being recognized must preexist the ethical encounter. For example,
in Satya Mohanty’s influential reading of Beloved, the possibility of ethics hinges entirely on Paul D’s ability to “recognize” a certain set of truths about Sethe’s situation: in particular, the truth “that both motherhood and the gendered division of labor on which slavery was built are objective historical and social facts that shape what he knows and what he does not, that—consequently—influence the moral judgment he makes” (“Epistemic Status” 42). This notion that ethics somehow involves learning something already known echoes Mohanty’s disturbing justification for his politicized mode of textual analysis: “I am interested in progressive politics and would like to believe that my values and commitments are not rigidly determined by my social background or my narrow personal interests” (“Values” 803). Is it any surprise, then, when Mohanty’s readings find precisely the ethical politics that they set out to discover? Something remarkably similar occurs when a text’s irreducible materiality becomes the source of ethics, when the thing being recognized is a textual otherness manifest as the impossibility of total recognition or understanding. In such accounts, recognizing textual otherness supposedly initiates a Levinasian ethical encounter between the self and the other’s (i.e., the text’s) opaque irreducibility. As Simon Critchley explains of such textual encounters, “[A]lthough you cannot know the other, you can know that you do not know the other, and . . . this produces a disorienting, enriching fall into ethics” (13). However, whether we are recognizing the irreducible otherness of people or of texts, such moments of recognition fail to move politics beyond the antinomy of identity and difference because the temporality of the ethical encounter remains preempted.

**The Phenomenology of Production**

Indeed, if time were permitted into the equation, we could do much better than the logic of provisional complicity that comes from making politics a function of knowledge and the presumptuously preemptive logic of recognition that comes from making politics a function of being. The most obvious way to retemporalize politics would involve adopting a real-time approach to gaining knowledge and producing meaning. This is a turn that Louis Althusser, constantly criticized for the spatializing structuralism of his thought, made late in life when he began theorizing what he called “aleatory materialism.” In an interview with Fernanda Navarro, he used the metaphor of train travel to distinguish between idealist and aleatory philosophy. An idealist philosopher boards a train only after determining where he has come from, where he is, precisely where he is going, and at what time
he will arrive. The philosopher of aleatory materialism, however, boards the train and rides without consulting signs or timetables and without considering where the train has been or where it is going. This model clearly resolves the antinomy of identity and difference; knowledge could never become meta-epistemological or paradoxical if it were, so to speak, always just riding the train. And yet producing knowledge immanently in the pure flow of time simply reverses the extremity of someone such as Edward Soja who insists on the primacy of space. As the train metaphor suggests, the aleatory’s radically open temporality demands a complete nonknowledge of the past and future, effectively reducing time’s horizon to the present instant and negating epistemology altogether. Any such turn to real time undoes time’s spatialization, but it does so at the expense of knowledge, trapping us once again in the time-knowledge paradox: being in time compromises knowledge, while stabilizing knowledge compromises temporal experience. In the first case, politics loses its ability both to ground itself in the past and to imagine a better future; in the second case, a meaningful and effective politics falls victim to iterative loops of identity and difference.

When Elizabeth Grosz unites immanence and difference, making difference “internal to the function” of time’s immanence, she is trying to solve this paradox by transforming its “either-or” logic into “both-and” logic. As I have been suggesting, however, as long as this transformation maintains the original paradox’s treatment of difference as either epistemological or ontological, and as long as time’s immanence only flows forward into the future, the paradox will remain unresolved. This is why, rather than locating difference epistemologically, ontologically, or simply within aleatory time itself, Qualified Hope locates difference in the form of phenomenological experience, particularly in the formal experience of reading. Linked to experience, this difference is temporalized, but its temporality does not come from time’s immanent self-differing—that is, from its linear march into the unknown future. If it did, then we would be left with the naively transparent relation between experience and knowledge that prompted postmodernism’s rejection of phenomenology in favor of epistemology and ontology in the first place. Instead, Qualified Hope’s return to phenomenology carries with it the lessons that postmodernism has taught about the indeterminacy of meaning and the constructedness of reality. Consequently, it asks, “How do we know?” without finding an answer transparently tied to real-time experience. Instead, “experience” in Qualified Hope refers to the temporal forms of an action or event—specifically reading—with the full understanding that these forms are always ambivalent and convoluted, never linear or purely immanent because of the unique literary forms that produce them. In locating difference in the
form of the phenomenological experience of reading, I am examining how the unique temporalities of innovative literary forms shape a reader’s experience of the text, particularly the experience of producing an understanding of the text. In turn, whenever the temporal form of a text teaches us new ways of producing knowledge, something deeply political is going on.

It is precisely this attention to the temporal form of knowledge production that Peter Osborne emphasizes when he notes that the aporia “between cosmological time [i.e., difference] and existential time [i.e., immanence] will always be socially mediated” (Politics 66). Rather than linking political possibility to utopic projection or aleatory openness, Osborne emphasizes the production of possibility rather than its location, arguing that any act of production is determined by its “temporal structures.” Osborne explains: “[T]he fundamental categories of historical experience . . . are not the products of different totalisations of historical material across a common temporal frame. . . . They are alternative temporal structures, alternative temporalisations of ‘history,’ which structure experience temporally . . . in what are, politically, significantly different ways” (“Politics” 45). Here Osborne describes a difference located in the phenomenological form of experience—in this case, the meaningful difference between the subject and her historical conjuncture, a conjuncture necessarily constituted by a temporality unique to its particular modes of production.24 Such phenomenological difference is embedded in the form of any given production of meaning and becomes timely through the unique temporalities of that specific experience. Without reverting to Deleuzian immanence or relying on a detached and detemporalized moment of recognition, Osborne here offers a temporally constituted version of political value in which the form of temporal experience precedes and produces historical content.25

But how exactly might these ideas translate to literature? Linda Alcoff helps us take that step when she theorizes representation and reference as “specific constellations of human practice.” Foregrounding the production of representational meaning, she writes:

Representation is not an association between a linguistic term and a bit of the world, but a kind of momentary constellation in which active human practice is involved though not unilaterally determinant over the outcome. . . . The terms representation and reference, used in this context, do not convey an appropriation of being; they convey a productive, always partial and temporally indexed, description of a virtual reality, that is, a composite of temporary constellations. (72)
This description, which applies equally well to writing and reading, treats the stakes of one’s interaction with language phenomenologically; it suggests that the determination of truth is less important than “the dimensions of the multiple forms of knowing and practices by which truths are ascertained” (75). In other words, she is asking “how,” not “what” or “whether,” we know; and the moment “how” becomes the issue, knowledge no longer falls prey to postmodern subjectivization and time becomes foundational rather than relativizing. Taking Alcoff’s conception of representation as a linguistic version of Osborne’s temporally determined politics, Qualified Hope treats reading as one such phenomenological conjuncture for the production of meaning, knowledge, and, by extension, politics. As literature is at liberty to produce particularly imaginative “temporal structures,” each “constellation” of reading has the potential to produce temporal experiences that can enhance our ability to think about an array of political challenges.

Reading, Literary Form, and the Political

Such a scenario clearly requires a theory of reading in which the unique and temporally defined interaction between reader and text produces a work’s meaning and the reader’s understanding of it. Throughout Qualified Hope, I draw on the recent work of Derek Attridge who, in thinking about the ethical potential of reading, describes reading as an “act/event.” In doing so, he usefully balances the increased agency someone such as Roland Barthes gives to the reader with the magical powers that someone such as Gary Saul Morson gives to the text. For Attridge, a text’s meaning is produced whenever the knowledge a reader actively brings to a text works in tandem with the unknown otherness to which a text subjects its readers. Reading thus becomes a site of production that includes both what a reader does to a text (the act) and what a text does to its reader (the event).

Attridge names the feature of a literary work that elicits and demands the “act/event” of reading “textualterity,” but this difference, this otherness that defines the relationship between reader and text, is phenomenological, not epistemological or ontological. That is, the difference of “textualterity” is not “just a matter of perceptible difference. It implies a wholly new existent that cannot be apprehended by the old modes of understanding and could not have been predicted by means of them; its singularity, even if it is produced by nothing more than a slight recasting of the familiar and thus...
of the general, is absolute” (“Innovation” 22). Attridge here articulates an existential, experiential, and fully temporalized difference grounded in the phenomenological conjuncture of reading, not in a text’s epistemological reflexivity or ontological opacity and not in time’s immanent self-differing. Although this difference is indeed temporalized by time’s self-differing—hence Attridge says that it “could not have been predicted”—it does not depend on that unpredictability, on the inherent unknowability of the next moment. If it did, then reading would be an event and not an “act/event,” merely a surprising thing that happens to us because we do not know what will happen next in the plot. Even more disturbing, there would be no reason to reread since we would come to the text heavily laden with foreknowledge that would preclude our eventful surprise.

But as anyone who has ever reread a book knows, a text not only means more when read a second time; it might even mean differently. This is because meaning is not a function of a purely temporal difference, of not knowing what will happen next; instead, there is just as much “act” to reading as there is “event.” Consequently, Attridge locates the expansive possibility of textual meaning not in literature’s content—in the array of different paths along which a text might unfold—but in a reader’s differential interaction with literary form, an interaction that necessarily changes with each instance of reading: “the cultural context in which and by means of which the reading takes place, constantly change” while “the knowledge of what is to come in a text one has read before and the memory of the experience of earlier readings are both aspects of the singular event of re-reading” (“Singular” 61). Despite being a singular event, the reading experience need not be a single event since the “act/event” of reading produces understanding from the temporialized form of the reading experience. Rather than paralleling the linear unfolding of textual content over time, however, this temporialized form emerges from the productive interaction between the text’s temporal form and the reader, whom Attridge describes as an amalgam of “cultural context,” prior knowledge, and “the memory of the experience of earlier readings” (Singularity 88).

Treating literary form as a productive source of meaning is absolutely crucial if we want to account for time without linking our knowledge of a text exclusively to time’s immanent self-differentiation. Once Morson makes such a link, he is forced to conclude that rereading, with its diminished sense of suspense and its departure from the irreversible presentness of real life, represents “an occupational hazard of literary critics” (“Narrativeness” 69). In effect, Morson’s theory accommodates only those transparent literary forms that are most isomorphic to real experience, effectively jettisoning the relevance of form in the text’s production of meaning.
and relying exclusively on content. But grounding readerly understanding in textual content isolates knowledge in the present moment of that content’s appearance on the page, providing for only the most narrow of temporal experiences. Instead, because even the most realist of literary forms are rarely linear and transparent, I contend that reading almost always requires a more complicated conception of time. Although this is generally true of all literature, Qualified Hope focuses on a set of authors writing after World War II who deploy particularly complex forms in direct response to the vexing temporal experiences emerging from key socio-political events of the era. Finally, treating reading as an act of production dependent on the singularly dynamic interaction between readers and literary form resists criticism’s all-too-frequent reduction of form to theme, which occurs whenever fractured narrative form is treated simply as a critique of the phenomenological knowledge gained through temporal experience. By paying attention to the temporal form of the reading experience and not to the real-time temporal unfolding of textual content, Qualified Hope forges a different path, viewing even the most ostensibly spatialized forms as sources of phenomenological knowledge produced out of the temporalized interface between form and the activity of reading.

To offer an example of just what this approach to reading looks like, I turn now to Vladimir Nabokov’s Ada, a text that manipulates the temporality of its form so that readers produce meaning temporally without reducing time to the presentness of linearly unfolding content, as Morson does, or to the presentness of an isomorphic performativity between text and reader, as Barthes does. Nabokov’s novel suggests that temporality, as shaped and produced by the text’s narrative innovations, stands as the only viable catalyst for achieving a meaningful, nonparadoxical relation between history and language. Despite knowledge’s obvious limits, Nabokov contends that knowledge can nevertheless speak of more than its own paralysis and contingency if it approaches the problem phenomenologically. Consequently, the text admits this negative or meta-epistemological knowledge but does not resign itself solely to its domain. Because meta-epistemology’s iterative vacillations occur whenever the object of thought is also the form of thought, and vice versa (as when Van Veen cannot know “Time” because knowing “takes time”), Nabokov mediates thought about time through a medium other than time’s own linear form (301). In Ada that other medium is the novel and the expansive sense of form it allows. However, in the Texture of Time (the name Van gives to his nonfictional treatise on time, the draft of which appears as Part Four of Ada) that medium proves to be space, much to Van’s chagrin. The novel thus presents two versions of temporal knowledge: a failed nonfictional
version embedded in a successful fictional one. Crucially, the reader’s resulting knowledge manages to be more than negatively meta-epistemological.

Part Four rides on the tension between thinking about time as the form and object of thought, and this tension plays itself out in Van’s struggle to give his consideration of time a positive, determinate form uninfluenced by the spatial metaphors that would otherwise ossify that form. Van wants to know Time, but his struggle to have anything other than meta-epistemological thoughts about it constitutes the section’s main content. He believes firmly in the project to determine what time is, but he knows only what it is not (space, metaphor, motion, measurement, or the future). Because Part Four fails to resolve these problems, I suggest that Nabokov offers it as an instructive failure. Van refuses to resign himself to the limits of his knowledge and instead just lets the tension simmer. Although the section concludes with Van telling Ada that he has conceived his treatise, *The Texture of Time*, to be a text “with illustrative metaphors, gradually increasing, very gradually building up a logical love story, going from past to present, blossoming as a concrete story, and just as gradually reversing analogies and disintegrating again into bland abstraction,” Ada responds skeptically, reinforcing the unhappy lesson of Part Four: knowledge of time must be mediated, and mediation usually takes the form of spatialization via metaphor. Ada concludes, “We can know time, we can know a time. We can never know Time. Our senses are simply not meant to perceive it. It is like—” (563).

It is like what? Perhaps it is like, or even simply is, the novel that we are reading. Alfred Appel convincingly argues that “the similes and metaphors she is about to grope for comprise the novel’s first 532 pages, a considerably extended metaphor,” and the book’s final pages, a parody of the marketing blurb that might appear on the back of the novel, clearly fulfill Van’s hope that his treatise will dissolve into “bland abstraction” (165). Considering that Nabokov wrote Part Four first, that this section provided the novel its originally intended title, and that Van’s description of his treatise aptly applies to *Ada* itself, Ada’s words seem to be an invitation to read the novel, metaphors and all, as an alternative medium through which to know time. Although creating timely knowledge through reading will not yield the precise knowledge Van so desires, it will elicit a knowledge grounded in temporal experience that avoids both paradox and pure presentness. The specific formal element Nabokov uses to produce such understanding in the reader involves the novel’s manipulation of genre, which occurs as part of its extended parody of the history of the novel. Just as the fictional novel *Ada*
embeds the working notes to an ostensibly nonfictional treatise on time, the novel’s postmodern wordplay, artifice, and metafiction intersect with the verisimilitude of a nineteenth-century realist novel. The work’s subtitle, *A Family Chronicle*, suggests biographical properties, and once we discover that Van is writing and narrating the chronicle with supplemental commentary from Ada when both are nonagenarians, the “chronicle” begins to feel even more like memoir or autobiography. Further amplifying the illusion of realism, a family tree appears at the beginning of the novel, and rather than offering the customary disclaimer about the purely fictional nature of the book’s characters, an editorial note preceding the narrative straightforwardly claims that with the exception of a few characters, “all the persons mentioned by name in this book are dead.” This simple editorial comment transforms the novel’s narrator, editor, and characters into “real” people, and it becomes the central clue in any attempt to figure out precisely when and where the text we read is being written in relation to the events that unfold within it. The editor’s ability to add this note implies that he exists outside the novel, but he actually shows up inside the text not too soon after the novel begins. In short, even though Van, as the text’s “author” and narrator, cannot write his own death, the editorial note leaves readers with the uncanny effect of being spoken to from beyond the grave.

Of course, including details of the novel’s composition within the novel itself highlights its artificiality as much as it does its “reality.” The first sentence of the novel, “All happy families are more or less dissimilar; all unhappy ones are more or less alike,” says a great Russian writer in the beginning of a famous novel,” not only alludes to and inverts the first sentence of Tolstoy’s *Anna Karenina*, but it also refers to itself and the “famous novel” we hold in our hands written by Nabokov, that “great Russian writer” (3). This history-of-the-novel theme continues throughout *Ada* as a way to make allusive sense of the characters’ behavior while also insisting that we recognize the artifice of what we are reading. For instance, to narrate a brief encounter between Van and Ada in the hallway of Ardis Manor, Nabokov writes, “Then Van and Ada met in the passage, and would have kissed at some earlier stage of the Novel’s Evolution in the History of Literature” (96).

When the verisimilitude of the memoir style meets the artificiality of *Ada*’s metafiction, however, the experience is one of temporal whip-lash. In this early passage, for instance, the two children are naked while rummaging about in the attic of Ardis Hall where they discover an old scrapbook with flowers collected by Ada’s mother, Marina. Ada explains to Van:
“...the paper flower so cavalierly dismissed is a perfectly recognizable reproduction of an early-spring sanicle that I saw in profusion on hills in coastal California last February. Dr. Krolik, our local naturalist, to whom you, Van, have referred, as Jane Austen might have phrased it, for the sake of rapid narrative information (you recall Brown, don’t you Smith?), has determined the example I brought back from Sacramento to Ardis, as the Bear-Foot, B.E.A.R, my love, not my foot or yours, or the Stabian flower girl’s—an allusion, which your father, who, according to Blanche, is also mine, would understand like this” (American finger-snap). (8)

With some blessed help from Brian Boyd’s annotations, we can parse the above as follows: Ada is speaking, and despite the complexity, it seems that we are supposed to believe that she says all of these words, as a child, at the moment of their discovery in the attic. (Lest we be overly skeptical, we are told later of the aphrodisiacal effect that Ada’s “spectacular handling of subordinate clauses, her parenthetic asides, her sensual stressing of adjacent monosyllables” has on Van [61].) This is the first mention of Dr. Krolik, a scientist in the region who shares Ada’s flora and fauna passions. Thus the reference to the information-laden narration in Jane Austen’s Mansfield Park calls attention to the introduction of a new character in the midst of narrative action. As if the apposite Austen allusion did not adequately make Ada’s point, the parenthetical performance of Austen’s technique—“(you recall Brown, don’t you Smith?)”—possibly alludes to Graham Greene’s 1966 novel The Comedians, as Boyd notes (44). Having allusively clarified the allusion that comments on her own linguistic stylistics, Ada goes on to note that the flower specimen is called “Bear-foot,” not “Bare-foot,” a distinction she must make both because the words are “really” being spoken and because she and Van happen to be naked up in the attic—thus the possible misunderstanding that Ada is referring to their own bare feet (“not my foot or yours”). Precocious youngster that she is, Ada apparently feels that she must further defend against the possibility that Van will think she is referring to the bare feet of the “Stabian flower girl” who appears in a mural painting, “Primavera,” displayed in the National Museum of Naples and painted by Stabiae, an artist who died in the Vesuvius eruption. In guarding against this possible confusion, Ada seems to realize that her reference is entirely esoteric, although she notes that Van’s father, Demon (who, Ada has learned from one of the servants, Blanche, is also her own father), would catch the reference in as much time as it takes to snap one’s fingers (American style).

I belabor this passage as an example of how the tension between the novel’s illusion of verisimilitude and its extraliterary excesses operates
temporally. The quotation marks are, of course, the first indicator that the words we read are the “real” words that were spoken—that the event is being reproduced seamlessly as if it had been tape-recorded. Spelling out “bear” to avoid the confusion of the passage’s pure aurality, the additional detailed reference to the children’s bare feet, and using the first and second person, which follows logically from the quotation, all place the scene firmly in the moment of its occurrence: specifically, twelve years and eight months after December 16, 1871, or, sometime in August, 1884, which would make Van fourteen and Ada twelve. At the same time, however, evidence of the passage’s metafictional artifice is unavoidable. The references to Austen (nonanachronistically) and Greene (anachronistically) demonstrate Ada’s awareness of the artificiality of her speech, as does identifying her own speech as “narrative.” And if we have been seduced by the quaint need to spell out “bear” because the entire passage is really only being spoken, then we are forced back into textuality by the complete failure to convey the aurality of the “American finger-snap” onomatopoetically. Of crucial relevance to my argument, however, is the fact that this contradiction between speech and writing is temporally indexed. The verisimilitude stays in the past present, in 1884, while the textuality seeps out of the ostensibly present present of the text’s composition (1957–63). That is, Ada’s quoted speech seems fake and contrived despite the verisimilitudinous cues, specifically the aurality. What makes it seem artificial, however, is imported from the present moment of the passage’s composition, a specific temporality that asserts itself when we ask where and when “(American finger-snap)” comes from, or when we read at the conclusion of the scene and this chapter: “Awkward. Reword! (marginal note in Ada Veen’s late hand)” (9). Of course, many texts use direct discourse to create the effect of reality and have narrators who intrude in a way that calls our attention to the artifice of what we read. And in many novels, the temporal location of the narrator differs from that of the characters and the narrated content. In Ada, however, realist illusions and metafictional artifice function differently than they do in other texts because of the crucial and complicated role that temporality plays in producing them.

In effect, Nabokov is rubbing the novel’s form and content together to produce the conditions for temporally knowing. This process can be schematized in this way: late in life, Van and Ada are together in a present moment of the novel’s formal composition, and from this present present they move the formal, compositional qualities of the novel backward and then forward again over the remembered past present of their personal history which, as the content of the novel’s form, moves temporally forward in fits and starts. This process allows the novel’s form and content
to be mutually constitutive but never entirely conflated, and it resists the epistemological problem of knowing time in favor of the phenomenological experience of temporally knowing. To understand what happens in *Ada*, readers must incorporate the temporal form of the reading experience into their production of textual knowledge, and the text’s innovative formal techniques permit them to do so without entirely submerging themselves in the gradual unfolding of narrative content. This suggests that we can get something out of reading besides either detemporalized pieces of content or the pleasure of just flowing along with the plot. Instead, the unique temporal forms embedded in experimental postmodern literature such as *Ada* can teach us different ways of producing knowledge of our world.

Or as Peter Osborne reasons, “Possibility is produced by and as the temporal structure of particular types of action, it is sustained by others, and eroded and undermined by others still. And it is produced in a variety of temporal forms” (“Politics” 46). Implicit in this claim is a description of how literature might claim for itself not just a politics, but also an ethics. That is, when possibility is produced “by” the form of temporal experience, it becomes political, and when it is produced “as” the form of temporal experience, it exemplifies an ethics. As I have already explained, the politics of temporal form has nothing to do with recognition, nor do different temporal forms correlate to a specific set of political values: there is nothing inherently Marxist about opaque signifiers or inherently conservative about verisimilitude. Consequently, I cannot here ascribe political content or value to forms of temporal experience in general. Instead, each of *Qualified Hope*’s six chapters analyzes the specific political implications that emerge from a given author’s formal intervention in a particular socio-political conjuncture: Cold War paranoia, globalization, 9/11, racial inequality, gender difference, and life on the United States–Mexico border. Within the specific context of these particular issues, we will see how innovative literary forms produce unique experiences of time that are political precisely because of the new modes of thought they make possible. Saving those particulars for the chapters themselves, I would here simply suggest that in this way, form actually proves more political than literary content, a point Ellen Rooney also makes when she contends that thematic readings provide only “what theory or ideology critique has always already anticipated.” Instead, Rooney’s focus on form highlights the temporal production of politics that occurs whenever form functions as “theory’s/ideology’s/history’s shadow and the force that permits the text to emerge as ideology’s or theory’s interlocutor, rather than as its example” (34). As “example,” literary content merely reiterates politics as they already exist,
but as “interlocutor,” literary form allows politics to emerge from a reader’s
temporalized production of knowledge.

Finally, considered more broadly, this emphasis on the temporalized
process of production also implies an ethics of reading, specifically an
ethics like that described by Alain Badiou, who argues, “There is no ethics
in general. There are only—eventually—ethics of processes by which we
treat the possibilities of a situation” (16). Accordingly, if ethics is only ever
a process, then being ethical requires maintaining a “fidelity” to that pro-
cess. The same fidelity is required of any reading experience that produces
meaning through a formal encounter with the text rather than finding
meaning in textual content. After all, books, their characters, their authors,
their plots, and their themes are neither ethical nor political in and of
themselves. But if every opening of a book—whether it be for the first or
fifth time—balances both act and event, and if every “act/event” of reading
or rereading entails the fidelity of a subject to the temporalized form of the
experience, then I think we have not only a strong and practicable notion
of literary ethics, but also a mode by which literary form participates in the
production of new political thought. This book identifies such modes in a
vital cross section of postmodern American literature and examines how
they produce a politics of time best characterized by its qualified hope in
the political value of time itself.
PART I

THE CULTURE OF POLITICS
Slavoj Žižek notes that Marx’s classic formulation of ideological mystification—“they do not know it, but they are doing it”—no longer obtains. Instead, in today’s media-saturated world of savvy technophiles and ironic consumers, a more appropriate maxim would be “They know very well what they are doing, yet they are doing it” (8). Take, for example, the movie Josie and the Pussycats, a 2001 release from Universal Studios updating the 1970s Archie comic about a crime-fighting girl band. In the movie, Pentagon officials collude with top executives from Megarecords to manipulate cultural trends and market corporate products to teenagers by planting subliminal messages on rock albums—an unholy union rendered “natural” by the refrain “what’s good for the economy is good for America.” Within the movie’s narrative, the government and corporate executives are evil while Josie and her band represent the voice of freedom and self-determination that liberates the teen-ing masses from such media manipulation. Over the course of the movie, the band moves from not knowing what they are doing—producing music that is deployed for commercial rather than artistic ends—to fully recognizing their ideological mystification. The plot thus describes a conventionally Marxist approach to breaking free from consumerist ideology.

Things get complicated, however, when we viewers of the film recognize that we are also susceptible to the subliminal brainwashing of a movie overflowing with product placements and peripheral advertising. Target,
Revlon, Cheer, Abercrombie & Fitch, USA Today, Amazon, McDonalds, Coca-Cola, Starbucks, and many more have all agreed to lend their products and logos to the backdrop of a film ostensibly about the evils of a corporately saturated media landscape. The movie does not just perform this apparent hypocrisy; it points it out to us and insists that we recognize it. For example, the conclusion of the movie reveals that the government is shutting down the secret program because “research has shown” that brainwashing is more effective through movies than through music. At this moment of revelation, the words “Join the Army” flash quickly on the screen. In addition to such shameless marketing of the U.S. Army and countless other brands, the movie also works hard to sell itself, but only after being “transparent” about its own self-promoting shamelessness. For instance, the real-life product tie-ins that accompanied the movie’s release appear in the movie as product tie-ins that help the evil music executives make even more money. In effect, since hypocrisy and cynicism are not only the movie’s content but also its form, Josie demonstrates a Žižekian awareness about ideology’s own self-awareness.

Although this is all very funny (the directors’ commentary included on the DVD displays utter incredulity at the number of people who “never got the joke”), the humor ultimately functions as a tool for commercial ends. So why would consumers want to buy commodities that are explicitly revealed to be manipulations and lies? What has happened to our collective understanding of our own ideological mystification that leads advertising executives at transnational companies to think that it would be profitable to advertise their products in a movie that vilifies the very act of advertising in movies? I see three possible answers: exposing the audience to a product or logo, regardless of the ethical associations attached to it, can achieve all of an ad’s aims; or we are supposed to value a corporation’s sense of irony, its ability to be self-deprecating, and we will reward it by purchasing its products; or the ad consciously uses our recognition of its hypocrisy against us, convincing us that we know enough of the game to feel comfortable participating in it. Although each of these explanations has some truth to it, I would contend that the third, in which hypocrisy is rendered transparent in the service of an even larger hypocrisy, compels us to identify a way to talk about the ideological tendentiousness of contemporary political, cultural, and social claims without simply reinscribing, reversing, or being appropriated by that ideology. We need to find a way to straighten out ideology’s circular and iterative structures and make them meaningful rather than pathologically ironic.

Surrounded by television, commercialism, and the constant media stream of global capital, this is precisely the problem confronting the
Gladney family (Jack, Babette, and their children, Heinrich, Denise, Steffie, and Wilder) in Don DeLillo’s *White Noise*. First published in 1984, DeLillo’s famously humorous depiction of suburban apocalypse was landmark for arguing that the “system” controls not only our present but also our future.¹ Lest we think that time, given its tendency to march resolutely forward into the future, will straighten out ideology’s self-reflexivity, DeLillo’s novel describes precisely how ideology enlists the future to merely perpetuate its control over the meaning of our lives. Although the future in *White Noise* takes the shape of an irrational fear of and anxiety about death, its weighty presence is quite real, most prominently in the form of a deadly cloud that hovers over the city after a chemical spill forces the Gladneys and other residents to flee. During the evacuation, Jack, a professor of Hitler Studies at the local college, is exposed to the chemical cloud. DeLillo leaves the moment of exposure ambiguous—the event may actually be a non-event—but Jack lives his life as if he had been exposed, much like the Unites States spent the Cold War acting as if the U.S.S.R. could annihilate us at any moment even though, as we have since learned, the United States consistently overstated Soviet capabilities.² Adding to the ambiguity of exposure, no one can tell Jack what the effects will be or how long they will take to appear. Nevertheless, his doctors agree that his exposure has made his death both immanent and imminent. Hovering over the latter two-thirds of the novel, this “airborne toxic event” greatly amplifies what is already a quite pronounced and paranoid fear of death within the Gladney clan.

Thematically, *White Noise* comments directly on the Cold War’s peculiar warping of temporal experience, particularly the apocalyptic temporality of the bomb and the more agonizing temporality of waiting created by the pervasive threat of the bomb. Written at a time in U.S. history when the government could find only science-fictional (Star Wars missile defense) or illegal (Iran-Contra) solutions to its Cold War paranoia, *White Noise* portrays one man’s attempt to come to terms with his temporally skewed and ideologically saturated reality. Just as Americans feared nuclear death from the errant push of a button, Jack both knows that he could die at any moment and does not know when that moment will come. This crisis of temporal experience simultaneously foreshortens and distends his temporal horizon, rendering the future both obsolete and indefinitely deferred; his future is preempted both because it could end tomorrow and because it could last forever. In short, Jack needs to realign his sense of time with his sense of reality.

Complicating things, however, various media forms ideologically exploit Jack’s paranoia and ensure that his fear of an unknown future
will always preempt any attempt to be at home in the present. While his wife, Babette, takes a magical pill named Dylar to numb her own fear of imminent death, Jack’s inability to know the content of his future leaves him paralyzed with uncertainty and fear. In response, he gradually allows a totalizing system of commercial ideology to mediate the content and meaning of his life, allowing “the system” to preempt his future so that he can live more comfortably with his fear in the present. In representing the Gladneys’ best attempts to cope with these challenges to temporal experience, DeLillo effectively demonstrates that ideology’s temporal dimension enhances its power, allowing it to suture its subjects all the more firmly into its network of fabricated meanings. DeLillo’s injection of impending apocalypse into an otherwise typically media-saturated landscape effectively proves that merely demystifying the media-driven ideologies of the present is insufficient for obtaining subjective freedom and authenticity. Instead, his diagnostic depiction of the interaction between technology and ideology smartly demands a rethinking of ideology in temporal terms.

It is not surprising, then, that most scholars have argued that DeLillo’s work critiques and criticizes the systems that render the Gladneys passive consumers of their culture. Nevertheless, I will be arguing the opposite. On a formal level, DeLillo cannot cope with contemporary ideology’s preemptive logic any better than Jack. Just as Jack abdicates the production of meaning in his life to ideologies of commercialism and technology, the text’s didactic narrative form preempts time, precluding readers from producing knowledge of the text. In effect, the novel’s form and style irreparably compromise the promise of its message, and the consistent treatment of White Noise as a text that paradigmatically diagnoses an ailing postmodern culture only establishes the work as a formal symptom of the very maladies it seeks to diagnose. Put in Ellen Rooney’s terms, White Noise’s narrative form “is what theory or ideology critique has always already anticipated”: it tells us what we already know about ourselves, preempting our own futures in the same way that we witness its preemption of Jack’s (34). White Noise articulates the imperative to unify time and consciousness by incorporating time into our process of understanding the world; but to the extent that the text itself fails to produce anything more than a static, ideologically skewed knowledge of time, it also reveals its own formal inability to produce knowledge of our world in a way that does justice to the radical ideology critique that its critics so clearly want to discover in it. Foreclosing a reader’s access to time and profoundly compromising her ability to critique contemporary culture, White Noise exem-
plifies Edelman’s lament that the future only reinforces the status quo and offers no productive hope for true political change.

“Don DeLillo Speaks for Me”

My argument here counters the multitude of literary critics seduced into believing that DeLillo’s work speaks as the pièce de résistance of the postmodern age. To cite one influential perspective, Tom LeClair avers that DeLillo’s oeuvre functions as a totalizing system which, far from perpetuating “the system,” actually “presents a comprehensive critique of the ideologies—scientific, literary, and political—in which he and his readers exist” (xi). In a similar vein, Timothy Aubry describes White Noise as “a text which immerses the reader in the near-deafening white noise of American consumer culture, while seeking new modes of subjectivity, resistance, and agency within and through that state of immersion.” More specifically, Aubry claims that DeLillo’s text “resists the linear, focused consciousness which is rooted in a capitalist ideology of productivity and efficiency” and “seems to resist the numbed, death-like state of perpetual distraction produced by our hyper-stimulating media and consumer culture, insofar as it involves a reawakening of the senses, a recognition of the uncanniness of the ordinary, a defamiliarization of the everyday sensory environment” (148–49).

Indeed, since its publication, scholars and critics have persistently read White Noise as a smart portrayal of a contemporary American culture psychologically assaulting its citizens with a barrage of media and technology. There have been thematic readings focusing on television, the tabloids, technology, and Hitler Studies. And there have been generic readings exhibiting much hand-wringing about the proper postmodernity of DeLillo’s novels. Two book-length examinations of DeLillo’s literary career, Mark Osteen’s American Magic and Dread (2000) and David Cowart’s Don DeLillo (2002), rarely vacillate from the party line. This overwhelming response to White Noise not only tells us something about the novel, but it also tells us something about ourselves, revealing the political commitments and attitudes of a dominant contingent of literary scholars. More disturbing, the nearly universal praise for White Noise points toward a certain level of bad faith at the heart of DeLillo scholarship, as if many literary scholars read his novels to confirm what they think they already know about the world. This effectively reduces the future to the present and excises the temporality of the reading experience, an excision that cannot
help doing the same to the form of the text being read. Such concertedly representational readings of *White Noise* jettison the novel’s formal literariness—the way the text produces its meaning—and instead eulogize DeLillo’s uncanny ability to cut to the core of our ideologically mystified world.

But what makes scholars think that DeLillo’s smart and satirical representations—his recognition of just how messed up our world is—should qualify as “critique,” “resistance,” or “reawakening” in the first place? Such interpretations clearly rely on a conventional understanding of ideology as a substitutive veil or illusion that occludes and shrouds the real, something akin to Marx’s description of the masses who do not know what they are doing and need someone to show them the error of their ways. In such a scenario, we might say that ideology functions as a blanket substitution for the real—action and meaning are isomorphic. But *White Noise* takes this definition and adds a Žižekian twist to it, portraying characters who know very well what they do but continue to do it. In this scenario, ideology functions correspondently. Instead of becoming one, the two terms of the ideological relation (reality and illusion) remain two, and we are permitted to see how ideology functions. Its differential gap of correspondence generously lets us in on its joke, but the very act of letting us in vitiates any potency gained from having recognized exactly how we are being duped.

Any reading of *White Noise* that sees the representation of ideologically mystified subjects as somehow resistant to said ideology has thus missed the significance of the Žižekian twist. Intending to portray how ideology “works,” such readings assume a position outside ideology, mistakenly adhering to a substitutive as opposed to a correspondent model of ideology. In the substitutive model, recognizing ideology undoes the substitution by positing a space of resistance external to ideology. But as *White Noise* itself contends, there is no such external space, and our belief that there is one only traps us inside ideology all the more firmly. Indeed, the characters in DeLillo’s novel recognize their ideological mystification, but this only leaves them more disempowered. For example, during the family’s repeated trips to the grocery store (where even the fruit is “self-conscious”), Jack displays a hypersensitivity to the invisible force fields mediating his experience. Murray, one of Jack’s colleagues at the college, speaks the following (although Murray usually voices the “knowing very well what one does” position, Jack’s narrative quotes him as a credible commentator on contemporary American consumer culture):

> Everything is concealed in symbolism, hidden by veils of mystery and layers of cultural material. But it is psychic data, absolutely. The large doors slide open, they close unbidden. Energy waves, incident radiation. All the
letters and numbers are here, all the colors of the spectrum, all the voices and sounds, all the code words and ceremonial phrases. It is just a question of deciphering, rearranging, peeling off the layers of unspeakability. Not that we would want to, not that any useful purpose would be served. (37–38)

Here we see the text’s characters both fully aware of the mediated nature of their experience and in full recognition of the impotence of that awareness. Although Jack expresses some anxiety about this state of affairs while Murray follows Žižek’s exhortation to “enjoy your symptom,” neither doubts the mediating structures of his world. Regardless of how they feel about these “veils of mystery,” however, the characters internal to DeLillo’s text are not empowered by their awareness of this gap between appearance and reality. In fact, the more they recognize the gap, the less grounding they have for a substantial, potent critique of the system that binds them.

The much-cited conversation between Jack and his son Heinrich regarding the epistemological certainty of the proposition “It is raining now” exemplifies the hollowness of recognizing ideology’s correspondent function. While Jack drives Heinrich to school, his son challenges him:

“You’re so sure that’s rain. How do you know it’s not sulfuric acid from factories across the river? How do you know it’s not fallout from a war in China? You want an answer here and now. Can you prove, here and now, that this stuff is rain? How do I know that what you call rain is really rain? What is rain anyway?”

“It’s the stuff that falls from the sky and gets you what is called wet.”

“I’m not wet. Are you wet?”


The incongruity between the truth of the proposition about rain and the truth of the rain as it exists in the sensuous world can be read as a problem of correspondence. I suggest that the gap of uncertainty residing between the world and the proposition about the world is actually a highly delimited space that gives the interpellated subject (in this case, Heinrich) a false sense of agency and choice, or even a sense of liberation via contingency. I say this sense is false, however, because under the influence of a highly technologized ideology, that space serves only to bind the subject to ideology even more. This deceptively accommodating space should be read as ideology’s answer, via symmetrical reversal, to the elevated status of con-
tingency and chaos in twentieth-century science and technology (e.g., the Heisenberg Uncertainty Principle, quantum mechanics, or chaos theory). The technologized ideology that dominates *White Noise* takes contingency into account and uses it to serve its own ends. The space opened up by correspondence, the space that is “difference itself,” proves to be the most controlling factor ideology has going for it. This discussion between Jack and Heinrich demonstrates that calling attention to the gap of correspondence, to the fact of contingency, only leads to a more exacerbated belaboring of the two ideological terms (real rain and illusory rain), not to a consideration of any actual difference.

Jack’s trip to the ATM offers another instance in which a character in *White Noise* succumbs to this gap of correspondence. As he performs his transaction, he speculates, “The system was invisible, which made it all the more impressive, all the more disquieting to deal with” (46). In this instance we “see” that the pure invisibility of technological ideology in fact heightens the recognition of mediation even more. The fact that Jack can recognize the system’s invisibility, which effectively renders it not that invisible, is the only reason that it can be considered disquieting; if it were truly invisible, it would be impossible even to describe it as such. DeLillo here provides another example of ideology’s correspondent function, and crucially, Jack’s awareness of correspondence is the very thing that gives the system its power over him. Correspondence creates a highly circumscribed space in which we as subjects still experience agency and choice when, in fact, choice, under the reign of a static, highly structured ideology, is always a non-choice. Ideology no longer occludes the real; rather, correspondent ideology uses our ability to recognize our own distance from the real to its own occluding ends. Correspondence diverts the subject’s attention away from the fact that if Jack needed to decide which of the two figures were his “real” account balance (Jack tells us that the figure on the screen “roughly corresponded” to his own figure, which he achieved through “tormented arithmetic”), then “the system’s” figure would always win out as “the real.”

*Seduced by Congruence*

If, in each of these examples, a character’s awareness functions as the most seductive tool in ideology’s arsenal, then why would our awareness of their awareness somehow count as resistance? How, in other words, does DeLillo’s elegant diagnosis of “the system” actually function for his readers? Can *White Noise*’s revelation of ideology’s self-revealing ever provide a space for meaningful critique? What should a reader do with the sentence “The
system was invisible, which made it all the more impressive, all the more disquieting to deal with”? If recognizing the system’s invisibility simply gives the system that much more control, then using his narrator to make this invisibility visible to his readers in turn gives DeLillo that much more of a didactic grip over the meaning of his narrative. Despite the satirical mode in which DeLillo represents “the system,” the compulsively over-analytical, self-interpreting form of such representations renders them not just impotent against but complicit with the system against which he ostensibly fights. This problem is a function of narration, stemming from Jack’s all-too-knowing depiction of “the veils of mystery” that mediate his life. Simply put, our perspective as readers is so closely linked to that of Jack’s first-person narration that his knowledge becomes tantamount to our knowledge. And although Jack is not omniscient, his knowledge of the ideological layers encasing his world is so self-aware that his understanding of ideology’s tricks suffocates the novel’s readers. Crucially, this oppressive self-awareness has a temporal dimension as well. Jack’s anxiety about his future is directly responsible for his willingness to be absorbed into the systems that determine meaning in his life. In an attempt to control his fear of impending death, he allows the future to be preempted and reduced to a flattened presentness. When his calculation of his account balance closely corresponds to the ATM’s, therefore, he is just glad that he does not have to worry about the future: “Waves of relief and gratitude flowed over me. The system had blessed my life. I felt its support and approval” (46). DeLillo’s text affords its readers the same support and approval. Transformed into just another ideologically overdetermined object, White Noise preempts our ability to participate in its production of meaning, overdetermines our modes of knowing, and flatters our own self-awareness, all while permitting just enough hermeneutic wiggle-room to allow us to feel subjective, resistant, and active.⁶

Of course, as the ATM scene demonstrates, the novel displays a sharp wit and wry humor that makes much of White Noise funny in a very silly, absurd way. Although the humor alleviates a certain bleak dourness to much of the novel’s critique, it absolutely fails to rend the “veils of mystery” that occlude via their own revelation. Because the work’s parody and satire function knowingly, the same overdetermined relation between text and reader persists. Instead of surprising us, the humor only reinforces our knowledge of what the characters are doing and of how we read what they say and do. Letting us in on the joke allows the deeper implications of the joke to stand, because, just as the characters have a structural knowledge of how ideology mediates their world, the knowingness of the humor in White Noise is also structural. When we read the conversation between
Jack and Heinrich, the humor comes not from some unexpected thing that one of them says but rather from our ability to recognize this joke as one of those jokes that depends on the incommensurability between the literal and figural properties of language. (It is no accident that Jack interprets “figures” at the ATM.) In laughing at the joke, we gain the circular satisfaction of self-knowledge, but we only validate the correspondent structure even more.

And so, humorous or not, the postmodern aphorisms suffusing White Noise announce the text’s meaning before the reader has a chance to produce it. Echoing a predictable Baudrillard essay, for example, Jack and his colleague Murray visit “the most photographed barn in America.” Murray articulates the experience in words that apply equally well to White Noise: “Being here is a kind of spiritual surrender. . . . A religious experience in a way, like all tourism”; “They are taking pictures of taking pictures”; and “What was the barn like before it was photographed? . . . What did it look like . . . ? We can’t answer these questions because we’ve read the signs, seen the people snapping the pictures” (12–13). Famously, this is what DeLillo’s book is about, but troublingly, this is also what his book has come to do and mean for its readers. Our relation to the text is structurally identical to the tourists’ relation to the barn; the form of White Noise does the very thing represented in its content.

This seductive congruence between White Noise’s content (the overdetermined reality of a contemporary American family) and its form (the overdetermined narration that relies on a reader’s prior knowledge) offers us another way to understand correspondent ideology. In the same way that hypocrisy and cynicism are both the content and the form of Josie and the Pussycats, so too are the content and form of White Noise sufficiently separate for us to get its humor but also sufficiently congruent for us to accept the meaning as it is delivered. Late in the novel Jack encounters a group of nuns who embody this exact relation between the content and form of religious belief. After Jack engages them in a conversation about the nature of belief, the nuns explain to him that nonbelievers are never entirely without belief because they at least believe that others, like the nuns, still do believe. One nun didactically explains, “It is our task in the world to believe things no one else takes seriously. . . . This is why we are here. . . . To embody old things, old beliefs. . . . If we did not pretend to believe these things, the world would collapse” (318). As the “embodiment” of belief, the nuns constitute its form, and as the thing in which nonbelievers believe, the nuns constitute belief’s content. Functioning like the closed circuit of an ideological system, the nuns control and determine the terms of others’ belief. Jack is shocked to learn, for instance, that the nuns
do not believe in God any more than he does; the nuns are merely objects that ideologically structure, support, and determine the nature of everyone else's belief in God. Just as the tourists suffer a “spiritual surrender” to the barn’s status as “most photographed,” a notion that determines both the form and content of their photographs, so too do nonbelievers surrender their spirituality to the nuns who constitute the form and content of the nonbelievers' belief. Meanwhile, outside the text, we as readers surrender the meaning-making process to White Noise’s didactic knowingness, which asserts itself as both the form and content of our reading experience. Like Jack’s own overdetermined reality, there is little question regarding how the narrative proceeds or what it means. Readers are as interpellated as the supermarket shoppers who, in the novel's final scene, try to read the ingredients on their products even though “in the end it doesn't matter what they see or think they see” because “the terminals are equipped with holographic scanners, which decode the binary secret of every item, infallibly” (326).

But perhaps DeLillo has chosen to heighten his text's didactic self-interpretation precisely because such formal overdetermination also constitutes the thematic content of the novel. Maybe DeLillo wants not only to make his argument, but to enact it as well. Suppose White Noise is an even greater work of literature than we have previously considered precisely because it not only says what it does, but also does what it says. Even if this congruence were intentional, when expunged of temporality it can be as dangerous as it is elegant, a point nicely made by Murray's explanation of technology’s ideological duplicity: “It creates an appetite for immortality on the one hand. It threatens universal extinction on the other. . . . It's what we invented to conceal the terrible secret of our decaying bodies. But it's also life. . . . It prolongs life, it provides new organs for those that wear out” (285). As “what we invented to conceal the terrible secret of our decaying bodies,” technology constitutes the content of our world while purging it of any sense of time. And as “life,” technology becomes the form through which we know that content, but it falsifies the temporal experience of living by replacing real organs with fake ones. Therefore, whether it leads to immortality or to extinction, it robs us of a life lived in and through time.

And this is precisely ideology's crowning achievement: it tricks its subjects into worrying over the two terms of the relation (“immortality” or “extinction”), paralyzing them with the inability to determine what is real and what is illusion. This preoccupation with the symmetrical difference between two terms like "reality" and "illusion" (a difference I call difference¹), effectively deflects our attention from an asymmetrical and thus
potentially temporalized difference (what I call difference$^2$). This second and more fundamental difference is the difference between (a) the content terms themselves and (b) the formal difference between them. Perpetually vacillating between two symmetrical content terms ignores the temporal experience of living. When content and form are not conflated, however, they interact productively in a way that includes temporality.$^9$ I schematize the difference between these differences this way:

- **Symmetrical difference between two content terms:** Term$^1$ (Difference$^1$) Term$^2$
- **Asymmetrical difference between content and form:** Terms$^{1\&2}$ (Difference$^2$) Difference$^1$

By conflating its content and form, ideology uses the superficial difference$^1$ between the terms to deflect attention away from the constitutive difference$^2$ between the terms and the first difference. The first difference leaves the two terms interchangeable, their relation remains symmetrically reversible, and content and form remain seductively congruent. The two terms of the second difference are not interchangeable, their relation is asymmetrical, and content and form are noncongruent. Put less abstractly, we could fill in the schema this way:

- Reality (Gap of Correspondent Ideology) Illusion
- Reality and Illusion (Time) Gap of Correspondent Ideology

Be they life and death, reality and illusion, or the two different balances of his ATM account, Jack focuses on the content of the terms which correspondent ideology has already conjoined like two sides of the same coin. Instead, he needs to identify the “other” of correspondent ideology itself, a foundational difference grounded in time’s pliable form.

So what prevents Jack from moving beyond his symmetrical oscillation between content terms such as reality and artifice, immortality and extinction? The problem is that any attempt to reconcile this first difference by counting one term with another simply reinscribes the form of that original difference; it would be like understanding the difference between reality and artifice by speaking of real artifice and artificial reality, which could in turn be understood only by speaking about an artificially real artifice and a really artificial reality. Difference$^1$ (a difference in representational content) remains susceptible to such endless reversals because it functions as a structural difference immanent to content. This difference$^1$ is negligible and superficial because the two terms are just two parts
of a single terminological identity—the reality-artifice continuum, for instance—and this is why ideology runs no risk in revealing difference\(^1\) to its subjects. Difference\(^2\), however, is a difference of nonidentity and asymmetry; it is a temporal difference created by the interaction between textual content and form that defines the reading process and produces a text’s meaning. When time is preempted, this relation cannot retain its asymmetry, and form is no longer the “enabling condition of reading,” as Rooney puts it. Heinrich actually comes close to discovering a temporally grounded nonidentity rather than just uncertainty when he notes, with regard to the proposition “It is raining now,” that “‘Now’ comes and goes as soon as you say it” (23). Here Heinrich identifies a specific temporality to the form of the proposition that renders it necessarily asymmetrical to its propositional content. As a precocious teenager, however, he finds blanket uncertainty much more appealing than the temporalized nonidentities of productive change.

Continuing with the argument between Jack and Heinrich, we should note that Heinrich’s reveling in the equivocating uncertainty of difference\(^1\) explicitly undermines the sense of time that difference\(^2\) requires. He claims, for example, “There’s no past, present or future outside our own mind. The so-called laws of motion are a big hoax.” Although time and motion are actually responsible for producing the very uncertainty about which he is so thrilled, Heinrich here contends that the fact of contingency and uncertainty renders time and its passage obsolete. A relentless and giddy nominalist, he avers that past, present, and future exist only in our verbs, and he refuses to admit the truth of the proposition “It is raining now”: “If you want to talk about this precise locality while you’re in a vehicle that’s obviously moving, then I think that’s the trouble with this discussion” (24). More confrontationally, Heinrich asks his father, “How can I say it’s raining now if your so-called ‘now’ becomes ‘then’ as soon as I say it?” (23). But Heinrich only treats temporality and motion as vacant sites of discursive unknowability; he does not understand the temporalized difference\(^2\) that they insert into phenomenological experience—the time it takes to say the word “now,” for instance—to be determinate. Or, as Hegel would tell Heinrich, temporality is not a hoax just because “now” always becomes “then”; in fact, the opposite is true. As Hegel writes in the Phenomenology, the “now” is not rendered untrue because of the fact of linguistic mediation; it simply has a new truth. “The Now, as it is pointed out to us, is Now that has been, and this is its truth; it has not the truth of being. Yet this much is true, that it has been. But what essentially has been is, in fact, not an essence that is; it is not” (106). Time’s negation of “the Now” is what Hegel calls a determinate negation (a negation of a negation). For Heinrich, however,
the contingency created by linguistic mediation means that anything goes; his is an indeterminate negation. Hegel would thus tell Heinrich that time’s negation of “the Now” actually grounds a relation of nonidentity that constitutes the very impossibility of ever gaining epistemological certainty of the nowness of now. Temporality and movement are not precluded by the fact that every positing of a “now” is always doomed to become a “then”; instead they are proved and determined by that fact.

The Gladneys’ response to the problem of déjà vu highlights their inability to grasp this important distinction. As the family sits at home listening to the radio report on the toxic spill, they learn that déjà vu is one possible symptom of exposure. While driving to the evacuation shelter, Jack’s daughter Steffie experiences déjà vu when she sees a wreck on the side of the road. Because Steffie has displayed all of the previously identified symptoms of exposure, but only after she learns about them on the radio, her parents do not know whether she is really experiencing déjà vu or if she just thinks she is because the radio told her she was supposed to. Of course, the time lag between Steffie’s hearing a new symptom announced on the radio and her experiencing that symptom mirrors the retroactive temporal structure of déjà vu itself. Jack notes that she was late manifesting sweaty palms and nausea as symptoms, and he wonders if she is “late again with déjà vu” (125). But to be late with déjà vu is itself a version of déjà vu, of living or enacting an experience after the fact of its original occurrence. Here we see another instance of the content-form circle described above: déjà vu is both the content of symptomatic knowledge and the way such knowledge comes to be known. Jack therefore wonders, “Did Steffie truly imagine she’d seen the wreck before [i.e., is her déjà vu a “real” thing] or did she only imagine she’d imagined it [i.e., is she symptomatically having déjà vu of déjà vu]? Is it possible to have a false perception of an illusion? Is there a true déjà vu and a false déjà vu?” (125–26). The same symmetrical iteration occurs when Jack asks Babette if she has ever taught Steffie about déjà vu. Babette then experiences déjà vu of that conversation: “This happened before. . . . Eating yogurt, sitting here, talking about déjà vu” (133). These iterations of déjà vu exemplify the tendency to treat time’s passage as the basis for uncertainty and undecidability, as Heinrich does when he contends that driving in the car makes “now” meaningless. In effect, the meaning of the present paralyzes itself with the possibility that it will mean something different in the future. But as Hegel instructs, that does not make it untrue—just temporally true. Disinclined to shift from an epistemological to a phenomenological framework, however, Jack fails to grasp this temporal difference, asking instead, “Is a symptom a sign or a thing? What is a thing and how do we know it’s not another thing?” (126). We
should ask these same questions of *White Noise* itself: what if, for over twenty years, the text has been treated as a thing (i.e., as a revelatory representation of the postmodern condition) when it was actually only ever a symptom of that thing? Or put more generously, what is *White Noise*’s temporal truth?

**Critiquing Ideology Critique**

The meaningfulness and potency of critique—be it scholarly, cultural, or downright riotous—is at stake in this attempt to figure out whether *White Noise* is a thing or merely a symptom. Theorists of ideology have long understood the tendency of any such analysis to become complicit with its object of critique, and many have thus tried to identify a nondiscursive difference immune to the kind of reflexive symmetry that transforms *White Noise* into a symptom of the very ideology it diagnoses. Although most of Louis Althusser’s work up through the self-criticism of the 1970s addresses ideological reflexivity with structural metaphors that merely reiterate the problem’s symmetrical reversals, in his quirky 1966 essay “Cremonini, Painter of the Abstract,” Althusser abandons the equivocating structure of spatialized metaphors to identify instead a constitutive absence at the center of all representation. Claiming that Cremonini paints difference where others paint only similarity, Althusser argues that this absolute difference—a present absence that cannot be reversed into pure presence—provides a language that can adequately critique ideology. Manifesting the negative through art allows Cremonini to resist a representational ideology that paints only the nominal terms or objects that constitute a given relation. Instead, Cremonini paints relations by painting “visible connexions that depict by their disposition, the determinate absence which governs them” (237). Only by painting a “disposition” to a relation—the “how” of form instead of the “what” of content—can the relation be truly manifest, and Althusser argues that this allows Cremonini to paint and critique ideological structures simultaneously. While Althusser’s insistence on the determinacy of this absence marks a crucial insight in any attempt to escape ideology’s circularity, the essay is not entirely clear about how such determinacy is achieved. To the extent that it refuses to be conflated with representational content, this is clearly a difference², but Althusser does not identify any asymmetry that would permanently defend it against such conflation. To my mind, a nondiscursive, asymmetrical difference like temporal form is necessary for establishing the solid determinacy of any absence, difference, or negation.
Indeed, absence alone easily loses its "determinacy" and slips into reflexive difference, as it does in Paul Ricoeur's articulation of the "is/is not" function of metaphor. In "The Metaphorical Process as Cognition, Imagination, and Feeling," for instance, Ricoeur explains that a metaphor's meaning depends as much on the dissimilarities between the tenor and vehicle as it does on their similarities. For the many theologians who have appropriated this idea, the "is" suppresses the "is not" to create a new, more powerful way of seeing the world.10 Ricoeur's primary argument in this piece, however, is that metaphor's "is not" function can never be entirely concealed and should instead be understood as a foundational present absence at the heart of all metaphor. Like Cremonini's art, Ricoeur's open-ended theory of metaphor does not succumb to the naïveté of transparent representation because the metaphor's content terms never fully absorb and reduce its negative, "is-not" form. More problematically, however, the "is not" in Ricoeur's theory of metaphor can never be a necessary, asymmetrical difference in the same way that Althusser says Cremonini's art depicts a "determinate absence." The ways in which love is a rose and the ways in which it is not are neither immanent to nor necessary for the metaphor "Love is a rose." Given the constant presence of the "is not," any metaphor's tenor and vehicle could easily switch places. That is, because the difference of the "is not" lacks determinant necessity, "A rose is love" is just as meaningful as "Love is a rose." Consequently, the formal difference at the heart of metaphor remains a reversible, discursive difference; it is a symmetrical difference1, not an asymmetrical difference2.

Similarly, in the shadow of an overdetermined, apocalyptic event horizon, the characters in White Noise cannot distinguish reality from illusion, the literal from the figurative. All of their tenors can be vehicles and all of their vehicles can be tenors. Instead of functioning as a necessarily directed, meaningful departure from the tenor, the vehicle simply mirrors the tenor in a never-ending vacillation of reflection, creating a world of reflexive signification with both too much and not enough meaningful direction. In short, necessity has abandoned the tropological relations of the Gladneys' world. In terms of ideology, such interchangeability ensures that reality and ideological illusion metaphorize each other, producing a self-contained structure that prevents time from taking any part in the process of figuration. As a potential source of asymmetrical difference and thus of determinate as opposed to reflexive meaning, these mutual metaphors necessarily purge time from their relations.

Describing ideology as a concept covering over a foundational aporia, specifically the aporia of symmetrical difference that lies at the center of
metaphor and of language itself, Étienne Balibar’s work unites the problems of ideology and metaphor. Balibar explains that for Marx and Engels, “the concept of ideology . . . is ultimately constituted by a denial of the essentially metaphoric nature of language” (167). It reasonably follows, then, that a theory of metaphor like Ricoeur’s, which reveals and engages the constitutive aporia of metaphor, can model productive ideology critique. Balibar warns against this approach, however, noting the need for a theory of ideology that remains insusceptible to the “philosophical symmetry of truth and illusion” because each new theory of ideology, like ideology itself, “reproduces in its own way the same symmetry” (156–57). Because discursive difference is symmetrically reversible rather than determinately asymmetrical—that is, because it means as much for love to be a rose as it does for a rose to be love—revealing the aporias that ideology conceals is a circular and ineffective answer to ideological mystification. As White Noise has illustrated, recognizing the metaphoricity of language does not negate ideology—it only reinscribes it because metaphor’s reversible structure makes it that much more susceptible to ideological manipulation.

Slavoj Žižek offers similar warnings in “The Spectre of Ideology,” writing that “the concept of ideology must be disengaged from the ‘representationalist’ problematic: ideology has nothing to do with ‘illusion,’ with a mistaken, distorted representation of its social content” (7). Žižek reworks the concept, explaining: “ideology is not all; it is possible to assume a place that enables us to maintain a distance from it, but this place from which one can denounce ideology must remain empty, it cannot be occupied by any positively determined reality” (17).

While Althusser treats this empty space as a negatively determined structural relation with the world and Balibar locates it in language’s inherent metaphoricity, Žižek goes on to identify the empty space of critique as a primordially “repressed real.” Although Žižek’s renunciation of representationalism is useful, he does not meet Balibar’s criterion of asymmetry: his definition of ideology—the masses know very well what they do but continue to do it—betrays an inherently meta-epistemological reflexivity to his thinking. To be sure, all three of these ideology theorists suggest that as long as the empty space required for socio-cultural critique remains symmetrically metaphorical or representationally positive, the relation between what and how something is said will be ignored while the relation between what is said and what is meant will be irremediably confused. And yet, despite this common call for determinate absence, none locates a nondiscursive difference that straightens out ideology’s circular and iterative structures and makes them meaningful.


Preempted and Aleatory Futures

While the Gladneys suffer the same dilemma that these ideology theorists encounter, it seems that the answer to the Gladneys’ problem is precisely the thing trapping them in ideology’s cycle of mystification and revelation: the future. Time, starkly represented in the novel as unknowable futurity, surely offers a nondiscursive, asymmetrical difference that precludes the reinscription of ideology’s symmetrical logic. And yet, as I noted earlier in describing the Cold War’s unique warping of temporal experience, the unknown functions here as a resounding presence, not as an absence that life moves into and fills up over time. The Gladneys know the unknow- ableness of their future so well that they could never even begin to access the aleatory future that someone like Elizabeth Grosz describes. This, in turn, saddles the Gladneys with two content terms, life and death, and the significance of their lives vacillates between those two poles rather than moving forward in time. The Gladneys know the future’s uncertainty so certainly that they hypostatize it as the only thing that they do know until it overdetermines their present lives. Jack’s exposure to the “airborne toxic event” literalizes this retrograde oppression from the future as we see when Jack explains to Murray, “I’ve got death inside me. It’s just a ques- tion of whether or not I can outlive it. It has a life span of its own” (150). Of course, Jack’s paradoxical notion of outliving death only reinforces the fact that he is going to die, suggesting the impossibility of ever escaping from the life-death system bracketing his existence. Ultimately, because the future is so frightfully overdetermined in White Noise, its potential open-endedness does not sufficiently produce an asymmetrical difference or empty space immune to ideology and its reversals, and it instead looms on the horizon as an oppressive presence: “The question of dying . . . cures us of our innocence of the future” (15).

Just as Deleuze cautions against the logic of possibility that merely reproduces the future in the image of the present, and just as Edelman rejects the child as the symbol of productive change over time, White Noise points us away from treating the future as necessarily asymmetrical to the present. Instead, as we have seen throughout the novel, even temporal experience easily succumbs to ideology’s constant reversal of known and unknown. The negative example that White Noise provides thus suggests the need to find temporal difference somewhere other than in future possibility. We might, for instance, turn to the present, a temporality that only Wilder, the Gladneys’ youngest child, inhabits.

Throughout the novel, the immediacy of Wilder’s performative pres- entness emerges as a temporality that might solve the Gladneys’ overde-
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...termined relation to the future. Wilder escapes the representational paradigm in favor of this performative one because he is prelingual: without language he cannot be knowing like the other characters, and because he is unknowing, he has no problem accepting the present as it is. Despite this nonreflexive and thus nonhypostatized relation to temporality, however, we should be suspicious of whatever solutions or resistance he might offer to ideological reversal. After all, Wilder is a precommunicative toddler, and he must go to the discouraging extremes of sublime unintelligibility and self-endangerment to break from the overdetermined circles of meaning that plague both the novel’s characters and its readers. For example, early in the narrative, Wilder, whose vocabulary has “stalled at twenty-five words,” cries rhythmically for seven consecutive hours. No one knows what has prompted the perpetual yowling, and no one knows its meaning. While sitting in the car with him for over an hour, Jack reverently contends, “He was crying out, saying nameless things in a way that touched me with its depth and richness.” Later Jack speculates, “[H]e had disappeared inside this wailing noise and if I could join him in his lost and suspended place we might together perform some reckless wonder of intelligibility” (78; my emphasis). Here the impenetrable form of Wilder’s nonlinguistic communication makes meaning and intelligibility a matter of performance. Unable to inhabit this performative mode, however, Jack notes at the chapter’s conclusion that Wilder had been in “a place where things are said . . . which we in our ordinary toil can only regard with the mingled reverence and wonder we hold in reserve for feats of the most sublime and difficult dimensions” (79). As a model of meaning making, then, the seven-hour scream runs up against the limits of sublimity, and performance remains enigmatic.

Equally performative and, to my mind, equally unintelligible, the novel concludes with Wilder’s daring tricycle ride across the highway. In this scene Wilder rides across six lanes of traffic, seemingly mesmerized and oblivious to the pleas of two female observers and a packed interstate of cars swerving and honking at him. His actions are direct and resolute, and he pays no attention to anything outside himself until he falls off his tricycle, tumbles down an embankment into a ditch of muddy water, and starts crying (322–23). Unsurprisingly, standard interpretations of this scene tend to view Wilder as a redemptive figure, ventriloquizing Murray’s claim that Wilder’s ignorance of death makes him uniquely powerful among the living. Mark Osteen tentatively argues, for instance, that Wilder’s wild ride “may even symbolize the possibility of reincarnation” or “the possibility of redemption beyond the body” (189). Similarly, David Cowart reads the event as “a metaphor for the precarious and doomed passage of
the living among the dead, whose great congress they must eventually join” (81).

While these readings view Wilder’s ignorance as a simple lack of knowledge, a function of his age, he actually appears deeply knowing throughout the novel. Gazing mysteriously into the oven door or the car radio, he is not blankly stupid, but rather sees and knows something more than the other characters could ever imagine. Because no one knows what he knows, however, his journey across the interstate remains radically underdetermined, aleatory, and contingent. It belongs exclusively to the performative temporality of the immediate present and is without predictive or retrospective overdetermination. If we think of Wilder’s aleatory ride across the highway as analogous to Gary Saul Morson’s real-time model of reading, then Wilder represents the failure of that model: the ostensibly very knowing Wilder reveals that suppressing the unavoidable fact of knowledge and knowingness for the sake of surprise necessarily renders the reading experience incommunicable. Tellingly, his uninterpretable yet apparently meaningful actions reduce his observers to the nondiscursive realm of gesticulating performance: although “they knew this picture did not belong to the hurtling consciousness of the highway,” the drivers “could not quite comprehend” what they were witnessing and are only able to veer and honk. Similarly, the two women watching “the process unfolding before them” can only speak like “foreigners reduced to simple phrases,” waving their arms wildly, searching for a way to communicate meaning, until they give up and watch silently “outside the event” (322–23).

Wilder’s screaming and his tricycle ride are perhaps the only two moments in White Noise when knowledge is under- rather than overdetermined for both characters and readers. But in these instances DeLillo’s penchant for the mystical and the romantic swings him too far in the other direction. Because we are not young children with twenty-five-word vocabularies and because we need to communicate meaningfully beyond ourselves, we have to resist the red herring of a reading model based on the unknowability of open time—a point reinforced by the fact that Wilder is not actually an unknowing innocent exempt from ideology but is instead, just like the rest of his family, deeply knowing. Rather than offering some form of redemptive passage beyond the ideological loopiness of reality, Wilder actually teaches us that we will have to figure out how to read despite knowledge, that an asymmetrical temporal difference that prevents knowledge from eating its own tail will not be able to simply reject knowledge in favor of the aleatory. In short, the problem of knowledge in postmodern America—the fact that we are fully aware of what we are doing because the future has already been mediated for us—is not easily solved with aleatory
openness or performative presentness. Time's irreversibility removes the reflexive loops of meaningless postmodern awareness, but pure immersion in time's flow also makes meaning and knowledge impossible. After all, a daring tricycle ride across the interstate does not a politics of time make.

And therein lies the conservative failure of *White Noise*: its formal performance conflates form and content, reducing temporality to presentness and exhibiting a knowingness that leads scholars to repeat the same ideological structures on a critical level. Once ideology incorporates contingency, uncertainty, and our knowledge of its functioning into its own production of meaning, little space remains for resistance, freedom, and subjectivity. Consequently, the future and its possibility are no longer underdetermined in a way that affords us legitimate choice and agency via limitless possibility, and any attempt to represent this problem remains bound to a reflexive epistemology of metaphor. *White Noise* shows a remarkable awareness of these limitations and allows us to see that any awareness of these limitations should probably be considered yet another limitation to their overcoming. Unable to overcome its own awareness, DeLillo's work instead performs and announces its own self-knowledge, but the self-satisfaction that comes with being privy to the rules of the game has seduced a generation of readers into complicit complacency.

*Just Wait?*

So if awareness and recognition have become limitations, where do we turn to counter the overdetermination of socio-cultural meaning and critique? As other chapters will suggest, and as I demonstrated in my reading of *Ada*, when not congruent to its content, literary form offers an array of temporal models that can institute temporality as the nondiscursive grounding of linguistic and cultural meaning without having to abandon the possibility of meaning and knowledge. But before moving on to such models, I want to suggest one way that even *White Noise* might be salvaged from the meaningless symmetry of its apparent social critique. Specifically, *White Noise* fails as social critique only if we think of the novel as a commentary on the present. Indeed, the novel is so fun and so clever that it seems almost natural to want it to be about us, and this is, as I have suggested, how most scholars continue to read *White Noise*. I want to conclude this chapter by suggesting instead that historicizing our relationship to *White Noise* creates the asymmetrical difference, between our present and its past, that no characters in the novel attain between their present and their future.
One essay that has done more than any other to link *White Noise* to the “contemporary” literary moment is David Foster Wallace’s landscape-defining piece “E Unibus Pluram.” Wallace’s argument here is foundational for a generation of “post-ironic” authors such as Jonathan Franzen, Dave Eggers, and Wallace himself who have taken his diagnosis of irony’s pathological tendency to co-opt anything it touches as a justification for disentangling their work from this most dominant of postwar modes. Although Wallace’s essay addresses irony and not ideology, his description of irony’s function is identical to the way I have been treating ideology throughout this chapter: as an epistemological structure prone to endlessly proliferating reversals. Wallace draws a nice homology among the structure of watching television (we are such deft viewers that we now watch ourselves watching), that of metafiction (contemporary authors are so witty that they now write themselves writing), and that of irony (which can itself be endlessly ironized). Wallace’s basic argument is that any such structure offers a poor basis for artistic creation because it distances us from the art object itself; and because that distance can itself be televised, fictionalized, or ironized, this structure clearly leaves itself open to an endless series of such distancings.

 Appropriately, the barn scene from *White Noise* serves as Wallace’s paradigmatic example of this problem. Wallace notes that the tourists watch the barn, Murray watches the tourists, the narrator watches Murray watching the watching, we readers watch the narrator watch the watching, and so on. Curiously, however, Wallace argues that Jack’s utter silence in the face of Murray’s ironic postmodern commentary successfully resists the metastatic structure of ironic and ideological reversal. Suggesting that Jack’s silence somehow places him outside the iteration of watching, Wallace writes, “The narrator’s ‘extended silence’ in response to Murray’s blather speaks volumes . . . since to speak out loud in the scene would render the narrator a part of the farce (instead of a detached, transcendent, ‘observer and recorder’).” Wallace concludes, “With his silence, DeLillo’s alter ego Jack eloquently diagnoses the very disease from which he, Murray, barn-watchers, and readers all suffer” (49). But this reading seems almost willfully blind to the very argument that Wallace’s essay wants to make about the dangerously corrosive disease of irony. Jack’s silence is not a diagnosis that has somehow managed to stand outside of and apart from the cycles of watching; rather, his muteness and Murray’s logorrhea are two sides of the same totalizing coin that has no outside from which a critique can be leveled. Because both irony and ideology are a function of knowledge and not speech, and because Jack’s silence is certainly not unknowing, any such inside-outside logic is condemned merely to repeat the problem.
But this happens only when you think that you are getting outside an ideology that has previously been trapping you on its inside, or when you are let into an ideology that has been previously excluding you. So what is stopping us from reading *White Noise* now, more than two decades after its publication, and recognizing that it no longer tells us about ourselves, that it no longer reaffirms what we already know and that we already know it, and that we are neither inside nor outside its totalizing grip? What if we acknowledge that *White Noise* has become a historical object—that it reads as an example of a moment in time when a detached, postmodern irony struggled with and failed to critique the ideological overdeterminations of technology, the media, and Cold War paranoia. To the extent that we now know that these attempts were futile, *White Noise* currently has a meaningful historicity which, if adopted as its dominant temporal form, would radically alter the knowledge produced from reading it. Moreover, that new knowledge, an understanding born of a reader’s formal engagement with the text’s historicity, might go a long way toward addressing the text’s primary political concern, namely, ideology’s co-option of the future.

To prove this, I want to briefly engage in a thought experiment. Wallace’s essay cites history as one productive source of irony. He argues, for example, that syndicated reruns are just another iteration of us watching ourselves watching and that we watch syndicated reruns because the knowledge we have from watching them previously allows us to ironize this second iteration of watching: watching them once means one thing, but watching them a second time means another. But if we compare reading and rereading *White Noise*, first published in 1984, to watching a sit-com from 1984—*St. Elsewhere*, *The A-Team*, or *Scarecrow and Mrs. King*—then we quickly see that there is something different about these two events. When we watch *The A-Team* today, we do so because it is cool and hip to like something that is dated and outmoded. But when we read *White Noise*, we do not love it in the same way we love *The A-Team*; we do not love it because it makes us cool to love it. Instead, we love it—perhaps I should say if we love it—we love it because it is literary, or because it tells us something about a particular moment in U.S. history, not because it successfully diagnoses the maladies of our contemporary moment. After all, we know full well that such a diagnosis could never be successful in the first place. Wallace is right that watching *The A-Team* today does not successfully resist the media’s all-encompassing grasp, but that is only because we want such watching to tell us something about ourselves in the here and now.

Instead, to avoid this ideological complicity and co-option, we could (and should begin to) read postmodern literature historically.¹³ Such histo-
ricized knowledge creates a necessarily asymmetrical relation between our present and the past that puts a hiccup in the chain of mirrors that ideology uses to preempt temporal experience. In a sense, I am suggesting that we can wait out ideology, a solution I offer with great timidity since it leads to the obvious question: what should we do in the meantime? In addition, although historicizing the novel solves the problem of our own ideological complicity, it would also seem to erase any basis for understanding _White Noise_ as social critique in the first place. But that is actually true only in terms of the text’s content. On a formal level we have gained the political insight that social critique must ground itself in some asymmetrical temporal form if it hopes to have any appreciable effect. In sum, _White Noise_’s failed social critique facilitates the critique of social critique itself. At the very least, therefore, we can conclude that historicizing _White Noise_’s specific brand of ideology has the benefit of helping us see that it is not the pathologically metastasizing problem that we think it is and that thinking of it as a pathologically metastasizing problem says more about our own self-importance—or about the way we read postmodern literature—than it does about the actual conditions on the ground.
GLOBAL TECHNOLOGIES

THOMAS PYNCHON’S MASON & DIXON

At the conclusion of Mason & Dixon’s thirty-second chapter, Jeremiah Dixon receives a letter from his long-time mentor, William Emerson, who has entrusted Dixon with a watch of perpetual motion that never requires winding. Emerson’s letter, in response to Dixon’s report that R.C., a member of the surveying party, has swallowed the watch, bears the taunting postscript: “Time is the Space that may not be seen.—” (326). This enigmatic statement is not just the witty banter of one surveyor to another, but is in fact the problem that Pynchon’s novel commits itself to solving. Just because time is invisible does not mean that it does not radically affect our understanding of the world. Regrettably, its invisibility makes it easy to overlook when one is, say, drawing the border between Pennsylvania and Maryland in colonial America, or even when one is reading a book about said border. Contending that time can and should contribute to knowledge rather than undermine it, Pynchon rethinks the relation between instant and duration, offering readers a fully temporalized engagement with Mason & Dixon’s narrative form.

In his letter to Dixon, Emerson explains precisely how the watch produces its perpetual motion: “With the proper deployment of Spring Constants and Magnetickal Gating, Power may be borrow’d, as needed, against repayment dates deferrable indefinitely” (317). The watch borrows against the future to run perpetually in the present, creating disequilibrium between the power put into the watch and the energy it expends. In
short, it runs on credit. Rather than indexing the dissipation of energy to its expenditure over a linear course of time (which would be the assumption of Newton’s law of the conservation of energy), any given use of energy in the present moment depends on the future’s deferral, on the assumption that there will always be more future, and hence energy, to be had. As its own engine, the watch runs on a strange economy in which it incurs and settles debts in terms of itself. But the debt settled must remain perpetually incongruent to the debt incurred because only the failure of equivalent return (a full repayment of the debt) ensures its perpetual motion. Time thus moves forward by looping back on itself without ever perfectly returning to itself; an imperfect circularity generates its forwardness.¹ Such mechanics permit the watch to not just measure time, but to be time.

Although the watch’s perpetual motion directly affronts Newton’s law, it nevertheless resonates with a basic understanding of human experience—including the experience of reading—as motion through time. But as Wilder’s tricycle ride revealed in the previous chapter, and as I suggested in the discussion of Grosz in the Introduction, perpetual motion’s immanence to experience mitigates the possibility of meaning and understanding. Dixon’s many attempts to discern the meaning of the watch’s message—which closely echo the struggle to understand Wilder in *White Noise*—exemplify this problem. For instance, when Emerson first entrusts him with the watch, Dixon feels as if he is being told something, but the narrator notes that Dixon’s history with Emerson “has been one of many such Messages, not necessarily clear or even verbal, which Dixon keeps failing to understand” (318). Assuming that the watch is some kind of “message,” Dixon goes to great lengths to interpret what “it might be confiding to him” (319). He even dreams of Emerson presenting him with a sheaf of legal papers “emboss’d with some intricate Seal, which if not read properly will bring consequences Dixon cannot voice.” In the dream, Emerson is “reading [Dixon’s] Thoughts,” and “the Watch wishes to speak, but it only struggles, with the paralyz’d voice of the troubl’d Dreamer. Nonetheless, Dixon’s Salvation lies in understanding the Message.” Only in the daylight does Dixon begin to hear the watch saying: “When you accept me into your life [. . . ] you will accept me . . . into your Stomach” (320–21). As long as no one “internalizes” the watch, its message remains compromised, but swallowing it complicates the retrieval of its meaning. Such is the paradox of producing meaning out of perpetual motion: the watch’s meaningful message can be delivered only once that message is unreceivable, and as long as the message is receivable, it will be inadequately given. In the same way, time’s immanent passage makes fully knowing it impossible, while stopping time to know it compromises time’s truth.
And this is why Emerson’s description of the watch’s peculiar economy is so important. The watch does not simply move forward linearly in time but instead functions recursively; it predicates the linear forwardness of perpetual motion on the circularity of exchange transpiring in every instant of its passing. To wiggle his way through the paradox of time and knowledge and to solve the problem of time’s invisibility, Pynchon thus creates his own perpetual-motion machine, reimagining the instant as the constitutive component of time, its motion, and its meaning. Tellingly, in the midst of Dixon’s anxiety over the watch’s meaning, Pynchon’s newly conceived instant asserts itself at two critical junctures, each time in relation to R.C., the man who ultimately “internalizes” the watch by eating it. First, we learn that R.C. “covets” the watch “[f]rom the Instant he sees [it]” (321). Then, when the members of the surveying party speculate critically about his watch consumption, he defends himself, averring that he had to make the choice “the Moment presented”: “I had less than one of the Creature’s Ticks to decide” (323).

In this formulation the instant initially ruptures or freezes time, forcing R.C. to stand outside temporal experience. For example, when his cohorts question, “Shouldn’t you’ve set it down someplace, ‘stead of swallerin’ it?” R.C. literalizes the instant’s ostensible negation of time by retorting, “There wasn’t Time” (322). On closer inspection, however, the moment of choice, purportedly instantaneous and without time, actually contains two versions of time, both instant and duration, and functions more like the pure, passing form of time itself. After R.C. rhetorically asks, “What were my choices?” the narrator intercedes, explaining that the watch “was either bewitch’d, by Country Women in the middle of the night,—Fire, monthly Blood, Names of Power,—or perfected, as might any Watch be, over years, small bit by bit, to its present mechanickal State, by Men, in work-Shops, and in the Daytime. That was the sexual Choice the Moment presented,—between those two sorts of Magic” (323). This description is odd. First, if the choice presents itself in a Moment, from where does the time to choose between two things come? Apparently some smaller unit of measure subdivides the present moment and permits the formulation of choice, while simultaneously rendering that choice a non-choice. Even weirder, this choice, isolated in a moment, itself contains both a moment and more than a moment—time as both instant and duration. The narrator claims that the moment presented a “sexual Choice” between women who cast a spell, instantly instilling the watch with its powers of perpetuity, and men who have performed the same feat “over years” and “bit by bit.” To sum up, a choice between two things presents itself in an instant that is logically only one, but that instant contains not only a choice of two,
but also a choice of two constituted by one (the Country Women’s instant curse) and more than one (the Men’s enduring work-Shop labor). Rather than an oppositional relation between instant and duration, Pynchon here splits open the instant and locates duration at its very heart. Of course, that duration is itself composed of instants which contain other durations composed of even more instants and so on. Foundational to this iterative structure, however, is Pynchon’s basic predication of duration on instantaneity; that is what makes meaning possible and allows for time’s motion. Treating the instant as constitutive of rather than hostile to duration embeds meaningful content in time without having it swept away by time’s linear flow.3

Global Instants

But why make time meaningful and knowable by rethinking the instant rather than engaging a more scientifically sanctioned, conceptual apparatus such as relativity, quantum physics, or chaos theory, as we might expect from a former Boeing employee like Pynchon? I will be arguing that despite setting Mason & Dixon in pre-Revolutionary America, Pynchon’s temporal manipulations critique the way globalization and its attendant technologies accelerate time in their pursuit of instantaneity and immediacy. In the midst of such accelerated times, a new vision of the instant will be more instructive than a recapitulation of the temporality of chaos theory or quantum physics—ideas already treated in V. and Gravity’s Rainbow. While equally global in their scope and political in their critique of violence, these prior novels do not muster the full-blown critique of late-twentieth-century globalization that Mason & Dixon does.

Of course, Mason & Dixon does not explicitly consider our contemporary global moment marked by transnational trade pacts, the growth of the Internet, or President Bush’s 2006 repeal of the embargo on Indian mangoes (a delicious prelude to the less palatable repeal of U.S. opposition to India’s nuclear program), all of which were designed to make both business and pleasure much, much faster. As the lessons of the past take a backseat to the joys of synchronicity and an insatiable thirst for progress and the future—a future which is always now—such global technologies constantly search for the transaction, exchange, or production of knowledge that is more instantaneous than the previous one. Because global instantaneity is a function of temporal acceleration, however, this “globalized” instant is not an instant that ruptures and stands outside of time, nor is it a Pynchonian instant that constitutes time by embedding duration within itself. Instead it is an instant defined simultaneously by speed and presentness,
motion and immediacy. In critiquing global time, an instant that stops time might usefully slow down its manic temporality, but then time would be stopped. Pynchon’s instant, however, does not just tell globalization to slow down; its embedded durations also allow it to retain time’s motion and passage.

This effect is most pronounced in the novel’s treatment of history and its relationship to the present. Indeed, when *Mason & Dixon* first appeared in 1997, many reviewers wondered at Pynchon’s sharp historical turn, particularly given the intensely modern concerns of his previous work. But with the increasing obsolescence of history that is a byproduct of globalization’s temporal acceleration and embrace of instantaneity, it seems clear that Pynchon’s continued interest in history has everything to do with the crisis of modernity. We could argue, for instance, that Pynchon’s decision to set his novel in the eighteenth century works to remind us of the importance of history in an era when history has become obsolete. However, because the accelerated eighteenth-century temporality presented in *Mason & Dixon* is no different from our current temporal acceleration, I suspect Pynchon is up to something a bit more complicated than telling his readers to remember the past. After all, if the past were to function as a solution, it would presumably need to offer us something different; but instead of difference, we find the Enlightenment and rampant colonialism—the two dominant prongs of Pynchon’s eighteenth-century vision—manifesting the same globalized urge to instantaneity that we experience today. The novel thus reveals that time accelerates during the delineation-obsessed eighteenth century—an era of drawing boundaries, categorizing knowledge, and marking longitude on the globe—in the same way that it does in the border-erasing twentieth century—an era of transnational capital, supersonic air travel, and technological interconnectedness. Because Pynchon insightfully highlights the formal similarity between these two times, not the superficial differences of technological content, we cannot simply see history as the antidote to a contemporary problem.

In setting his novel in the eighteenth century, therefore, Pynchon contradicts the contemporary belief in history’s obsolescence (i.e., he calls our attention to history), but he does so by showing us that there were other times in history when history was just as obsolete. In effect, he shows us that history is real by showing us that it is not. Consequently, the novel’s interface between the eighteenth and twentieth centuries has historical duration (the span of time between the two centuries), but it is also flattened into two homologous instants (the same temporal dilemmas face both moments in time). Most elegantly, this simultaneously lengthened and collapsed version of history enacts the aforementioned relationship
between duration and instant only on a larger scale, suggesting that in history time both passes and repeats itself. Everything and nothing changes.

Finally, not only does *Mason & Dixon* represent this historical interface between the eighteenth and twentieth centuries, but its parallactic narrative form also manifests the historicity of that interface for its readers. Pynchon’s rejection of a transparently isomorphic relation between time’s forward motion and that of the reading process is crucial to his production of narrative meaning in and through time’s passing. As we saw in the previous chapter, such a Wilder-esque version of timely knowledge production reduces its participants to wild communicative gestures, stranding them outside the event. Pynchon’s success lies in his resistance to this aleatory temptation. By dissociating time’s motion from futurity and connecting it instead to instantaneity, he produces a temporalized reading experience in which instantaneity embeds duration. Such temporal conditions then force time to move both cyclically and linearly, which in turn allows for the productive interface of the eighteenth and twentieth centuries that we see in *Mason & Dixon*.

In effect, the novel’s temporally parallactic narration expands the representational instant, forcing readers to embed multiple narrative durations at the heart of a single instant of reading. While different narrators deliver their stories from different moments in time, the singular act of reading unifies these multiple temporalities into a single moment. These narrative techniques unite linear and cyclical models of time into one textual form so that any instant of linear time also contains cycles of time looping around inside it; Pynchon fractalizes the temporality of *Mason & Dixon*’s narrative form, making its inside larger than its outside. My goal here is to show that this version of time effectively undoes the time-knowledge paradox and offers a productive literary response to globalization’s challenge to temporal experience. In the midst of global trends that increasingly accelerate and shorten our sense of time, Pynchon’s innovative narrative form locates a thicker, more enduring temporal experience at the very core of globalization’s drive to immediacy in both the eighteenth and the twentieth centuries. Consequently, because its temporal form sidesteps the time-knowledge paradox, *Mason & Dixon* achieves a level of social critique that the same paradox prevented *White Noise* from attaining.

*Representing Perpetual Motion*

Pynchon’s narrative innovations offer a useful response to Gilles Deleuze’s challenge to represent a version of time he names Aionic time. In *The Logic*
Deleuze describes two different forms of time: “Chronos” is the time of the limited present and causality, while “Aion” denotes the time of an unlimited past and future which perpetually subdivides the present. This perpetual subdivision empties the Aionic present, and Deleuze contends that this is the true source of aleatory time, or what he calls the time of “becoming,” the “pure empty form of time, which has freed itself of its present corporeal content” (165). Just as Pynchon detaches time’s motion from futurity, here Deleuze derives aleatory openness from an infinite subdivision of the present instant, not from the inevitability of time’s next moment. Instead of a present to which past and future are always relative (Chronos), Aionic time recasts the present as an aleatory instant of non-space, always divided into either past or future. It is the empty point where past and future touch.

Deleuze’s idea that the instant functions as time’s pure form rather than as its hostile enemy draws on a tension in Henri Bergson’s much earlier treatment of the instant and its relation to durée. Generally, Bergson describes the instant only as an obstruction of time’s flow: “real time has no instants,” he writes in Duration and Simultaneity. Despite his aversion to any concept that divides time’s pure flow, however, Bergson also describes the instant as more than just the spatialized cessation of durée. Another passage from Duration, for example, provides the foundation for imagining the instant as an infinitely subdivisible presentness as Deleuze does. Bergson says that because “the instant is what would terminate a duration if the latter came to a halt,” the instant “does not exist actually, but virtually.” Although for Bergson virtuality abstracts and thus spatializes time, he does not dismiss it out of hand as he does more egregious spatializations of time. For instance, he implies that the instant is unavoidable: “we practice it instinctively. Its recipe is deposited in the language” (54). Bergson elaborates on this rather Wittgensteinian explanation by noting the use-value of the instant: “We need this simultaneity of the instant in order (1) to note the simultaneity of a phenomenon with a clock moment, (2) to point off, all along our own duration, the simultaneities of these moments with moments of our duration which are created in the very act of pointing” (54). “Simultaneity” here suggests that instants appear wherever more than one durée exist. Any given durée “has no instants,” but multiple durées exist simultaneously and need instants to interact and intersect with each other, an idea that anticipates the move that both Deleuze and Pynchon make, locating durée within the instant.

But, of course, Bergson does not go that far, and it instead falls to Deleuze to imagine the instant, not durée, as the true form of time. But Deleuze too leaves work undone, asserting that despite the lack of obvious
referents for its unique temporal mode, “the instant . . . must itself be represented.” Conspicuously absent of examples, however, The Logic of Sense merely notes, “The present of the Aion representing the instant is . . . the present of the actor, dancer, or mime” (168). Deleuze’s reference to these particular art forms strikes me as a retreat to the kind of performative present that Wilder represents in White Noise. In the same way that those witnessing his wild ride across the interstate remain trapped “outside the event,” the audience watching an “actor, dancer, or mime” is not receiving linguistically communicable information. Consequently, Deleuze’s recourse to the performative arts only reinforces the time-knowledge paradox as it proves that knowledge must be compromised whenever time intrudes into its transmission. Put differently, Deleuze’s examples do not do justice to his theory of Aionic time. It thus falls to Pynchon to figure out how to represent this unique temporal model in which instants predicate durations rather than stopping them.

Not surprisingly, this representational challenge thematically dominates Mason & Dixon, as characters constantly struggle to reconcile the problematic relation among knowledge, time, and motion. As travelers to a new land, Mason, Dixon, and their surveying party confront a territory and a nation growing so rapidly that their interpretations of events, along with the knowledge and understanding that such interpretations produce, are constantly contested. In this America still in the process of becoming, the present and the future retain a gossamer connection to the past, but the historical events transpiring on the ground move too fast for anyone to determine precisely what they mean: the future is now and there is no time to worry about history. To achieve meaningful understanding in the midst of such accelerated time, characters must frequently sacrifice some component of their perspective on an event, a sacrifice that produces an unavoidable incommensurability between an event and its history, or an object and its representation, or space and its temporality. For example, as part of their surveying instruction, Emerson teaches his students to fly, a lesson intended to instruct them about “the great Invariance whereby, aloft, one gains exactitude of Length and Breadth, only to lose much of the land’s Relievo, or Dimension of Height,—whilst back at ground level [. . .] one regains bodily the realities of up and down, only to lose any but a rough sense of the other two Dimensions, now all about one” (504–5). The moment that perspective becomes comprehensive, the observed becomes unreal, its truth only ever “truth-like,” forcing observers to choose between totally and perfectly knowing something utterly unreal or partially knowing the truly real.
The Rev'd Wicks Cherrycoke, the novel’s principal narrator, articulates this contradiction in representational terms while meditating on consubstantiation and transubstantiation, concepts that find their political analog in speculations about the government's representation of its citizenry, a prime concern for the colonists during Mason and Dixon's tenure in the yet-to-be United States. Cherrycoke and the citizenry wonder whether the government's symbolic embodiment of the people adequately subsumes and stands in for the populace that it represents, a populace Pynchon cleverly dubs “the mobility.” In terms of governmental policy, transubstantiation seems woefully inadequate for representing such a protean target: “this giggling Rout of poxy half-wits [Parliament], embody us? Embody us? America but some fairy Emanation, without substance, that hath pass'd, by Miracle, into them?” Although these pre-Revolutionary complaints express the colonists’ desire for a more material representation than Parliament can offer, Mason quickly points out the possible failures of a consubstantial model: “whatever they [Parliament] may represent, yet do they remain, dismayingly, Humans as well” (404).

Just as an aerial perspective sacrifices time for knowledge, Pynchon here indicates that acts of representation, be they theological or political, commonly sacrifice temporal experience. Further complicating things, this discussion about political representation implies that temporalizing the represented object would only make representation more difficult. Mason realizes this when one of his interlocutors inflammatorily (or so it seems to Mason) calls for organized resistance to the “Tyranny” of the Stamp Act. Cherrycoke narrates Mason’s response:

Mason expects shock'd murmurs at this,—that there are none shocks him even more gravely, allowing him a brief, careening glimpse at how far and fast all this may be moving,—something styling itself “America,” coming into being, ripening, like a Tree-ful of Cherries in a good summer, almost as one stands and watches,—something no one in London, however plac'd in the Web of Privilege, however up-to-the-minute, seems to know much about. What is happening? (405)

Here, the perpetual motion of the mobility’s “coming into being” foils both the transubstantial and the consubstantial models of representative government. The material reality named “America” has not only space and breadth (it moves “far”), but also the kind of temporality (both “fast” and “up-to-the-minute”) that I earlier associated with globalization. As Pierre Bourdieu might say, America is “real activity as such,” and anyone trying
to figure out what kind of government can “represent” that fact must do so from “within” that real activity. Trapped in its archaic representational models, however, London will never occupy a subject position that can adequately grasp America’s accelerated motion. Instead, one can only ever ask, “What is happening?”—a rhetorical question that opens onto time rather than onto satisfactory, content-based answers.

Mason’s encounter with America’s becoming occurs in New York, as he and Dixon have taken separate trips prior to surveying the boundary line between Maryland and Pennsylvania. Although not precisely simultaneous with Mason’s “brief, careening glimpse,” Cherrycoke also narrates Dixon’s concurrent trip to Virginia where he meets Thomas Jefferson at a tavern. As the men exchange politicized toasts, Cherrycoke notes Dixon’s exposure to “the unmediated newness of History a-transpiring.” Immersed in history’s constant flow, Dixon carefully avoids stepping on any politicos’ toes and instead raises his glass “To the pursuit of Happiness,” a phrase in which the young Jefferson delights, asking Dixon if he might “use [it] sometime” (395). As this phrase produces the notion of endless possibility that goes on to drive American expansion and exceptionalism over the next two centuries, we readers are here privy to our own “careening glimpse” of history in the making.

Of course, we understand the significance of our witness to history’s production only because of our retrospective view of the event, a perspective that sacrifices the event’s temporal dimension by default. The dramatic irony of the scene requires that the characters make the opposite sacrifice: their presence in time’s flow comes at the expense of their historical understanding. And this is the kind of problem that perpetual motion creates for observers throughout the novel, a difficulty that Pynchon portrays through an array of objects that can be seen only when they stop moving. Such is the case, for instance, with a mechanical duck that develops emotions (376) and a Jewish golem that walks through the forests of western Pennsylvania (486). These two machines mimic life so perfectly that they become living despite remaining invisible while in motion, much like time itself. “[C]ertain stars in Chinese Astrology,” which lose their invisibility once they come to rest, also share this condition, and in an alternative ending to the story, Mason and Dixon acquire this property as well: “The under-lying Condition of their Lives is quickly establish’d as the Need to keep [ . . . ] a fix’d Motion,—Westering. Whenever they do stop moving [ . . . ] they lose their Invisibility, and revert to the indignity of being observ’d and available again for earthly purposes” (707). In each of these examples, motion functions as time. The narrative relates that the duck and the Jewish golem acquire their lifelike status only when time acquires “additional Properties.”
(379), and the duck’s unique relation to time explains its ability to oscillate between visibility and invisibility: time no longer matters to the duck, or time passes in some different way for the duck, or the duck moves in and out of “the Stream of Time” whenever she wants (637).

All of these examples suggest that only the static instant can make sense of perpetual motion, and yet the static instant stabilizes time only by rupturing it, an externalization that sacrifices time’s formal motion to better observe its content. This is, for example, the version of the instant that Mason and Dixon use to secure accurate measurements in their observation of the Transit of Venus in Capetown, the first assignment they share. The Royal Astronomical Society has enlisted their assistance in determining the solar parallax, a measurement that Cherrycoke defines as “[t]he size of the Earth, in seconds of Arc, as seen by an observer upon the surface of the Sun” (96). The observation involves measuring four distinct moments of Venus’s transit across the sun: the moment it first makes contact with the sun, the moment it enters the circle of the sun, the moment it touches the other edge of the sun’s circle, and the moment it disengages from the sun.9 Suggesting that the instant is not as stable as they think—and thus pointing toward a more expansive function of the instant in the text as a whole—Dixon’s recorded times of the four instants “are two to four seconds ahead of Mason’s,” which is not to say that Mason’s measurements are correct (98). Here the instant proves less reliable than they had hoped, functioning as an expanded instant through which time passes rather than as an eruptive instant hostile to time. Like the months preceding Venus’s transit that “crept unnaturally” and like the months following which “hasten by miraculously,” Mason and Dixon might both be incorrect, with the only true measurement of the event occurring within the expansive temporality of the instant itself. To the extent that these astronomical measurements underpin Britain’s colonial enterprise, allowing it to delineate and bound its territories across the globe, such variability suggests a fatal flaw at the heart of the Enlightenment and its attendant politics.

**Cherrycoke’s Cherrycoke**

In each of these cases, measurements are imprecise, ducks are invisible, and America cannot be represented because time’s aleatory motion exceeds the instant’s capacity to produce certain knowledge. One of the exciting things about locating the aleatory in the instant, therefore, involves bringing some form of bounded containment to aleatory time without compromising its motion and action: the instant remains bounded by its singularity while its
infinite subdivision by the aleatory leaves it simultaneously unbounded. To more fully consider how Pynchon achieves this double effect in *Mason & Dixon*, it will be helpful to consider how reading is itself always a simultaneously bounded and unbounded event. The intentional and interpretive eye with which we read a text bounds its meaning in the instant of textual apprehension; at the same time, however, every instant of reading depends on the unbounded possibility of textual meaning. Or as Derek Attridge would put it, reading is both an act (something that we do) and an event (something that happens to us). Wittgenstein makes this same argument in *Philosophical Investigations* when he notes that no clear dividing line exists between the intentional act of reading and the accidental event of a child who correctly speaks a series of words appearing on a page despite not being able to read. No necessary boundary line between the procedural and the random, the bounded and the unbounded, can be determined, suggesting that neither exists without the other (§163). If Wittgenstein is correct, then reading is always a mixture of intent and accident—a singularity that embeds multiplicity—just like the temporality of R.C.’s “choices” in which an instant contains both instants and durations.

This fuzzy boundary between intent and accident requires us to reconceive reading as a mode of engagement. More than just the apprehension of textual content, this approach to reading also demands a consideration of literary form and its specific temporal structure. Consequently, if we want to understand how Pynchon copes with the representational challenges posed by the relationship between instant and duration while also leading his readers to gain timely knowledge of his text, we should examine *Mason & Dixon’s* form in the context of the simultaneously bounded and unbounded act/event of reading. Broadly speaking, Pynchon recognizes that narrative cannot internalize the perpetual motion of its content in the same way that R.C. can eat a watch, and so the novel’s form does not even try to mirror perpetual motion or link it to an unbounded future. Instead of finding motion in time’s linear irreversibility, Pynchon locates it in the pregnant space of an instant expansive enough to “contain” both instant and duration, a structure of mutual invagination in which durations comprise instants that themselves contain durations and instants, and so on. On a textual level Pynchon grafts this relation between instant and duration onto the relation between the novel’s form and content. Like the instant, the text’s narrative form contains and is constituted by content and form simultaneously. In this scenario, form and content, like instant and duration, are neither identical nor mutually exclusive. Rather, they are mutually invaginated and mutually productive; each delivers both, and their commingling produces meaning.10
This structure allows Pynchon to pack narratives within narratives like interlocking Chinese boxes. Although the Rev’d Wicks Cherrycoke is the primary narrator, his narrative represents just one of many narrative perspectives and frames. The conclusion of chapter 32, for example, quickly runs through several narrative times in the course of one page:

“You wish’d release from your Promise,” Mason reminds [Dixon]. “Think of R.C. as Force Majeure.”

The Letter, in reply, proves to be from Mrs. Emerson. “When he receiv’d your News, Mr. Emerson was quite transform’d, and whooping with high amusement, attempted whilst in his Workroom to dance a sort of Jig, by error stepping upon a wheel’d Apparatus that was there, the result being that he has taken to his Bed, where, inches from my Quill, he nevertheless wishes me to say, ‘Felicitations, Fool, for it hath work’d to Perfection.’

“I trust that in a subsequent Letter, my Husband will explain what this means.”

There is a Post-Script in Emerson’s self-school’d hand, exclamatory, ending upon a long Quill-crunching Stop. “Time is the Space that may not be seen.—”

(‘Pon which the Rev’d cannot refrain from commenting, “He means, that out of Mercy, we are blind as to Time,—for we could not bear to contemplate what lies at its heart.”) (326)

In addition to narrating the dialogue between Mason and Dixon, Cherrycoke tells us of the letter, within which Mrs. Emerson narrates her husband’s misfortune. Within her narration Emerson’s voice comes through in her citation of his speech (“Felicitations, Fool, for it hath work’d to Perfection”), and he appears more materially when he appends, in his own hand, the not-so-clarifying explanation, “Time is the Space that cannot be seen.” This commentary on his wife’s commentary (“I trust that in a subsequent letter . . .”) on his commentary (“Felicitations . . .”), all quoted by Cherrycoke despite the fact that he never saw the letter, receives a final commentary from Cherrycoke (“He means, that . . .”). Just before Cherrycoke’s clarification, however, another narrator (I will refer to him as the “supra-narrator”) parenthetically intrudes to comment on Cherrycoke’s inability to “refrain from commenting” (326). This short passage presents the reader with five interlocking times: the time of Cherrycoke’s narrative; the time of dialogue between Mason and Dixon; the time of Mrs. Emerson’s letter which itself contains the time when Emerson received Dixon’s letter, the time of Emerson’s “Felicitations” to Dixon, the future time of a “subsequent letter,” and the time of Emerson’s “Post-Script”; the time of Cherrycoke’s
commentary; and the time of the supra-narrator’s commentary on that commentary. In any given moment of reading, these multiple durées are simultaneously present, requiring the reader to enter into these expanded instants and absorb the multiple durations composing the text’s form and, by extension, its meaning and a reader’s knowledge of it.

The parentheses enclosing the final paragraph of the chapter circle back to its beginning where another set of parentheses also narrates Cherry-coke’s narration:

If Mason’s elaborate Tales are a way for him to be true to the sorrows of his own history (the Rev'd Cherrycoke presently resumes), a way of keeping them safe, and never betraying them, in particular those belonging to Rebekah,—then Dixon’s Tales [. . .] seem to arise from simple practical matiness. [. . .]

“Directly before the Falmouth Packet sail’d” he begins, one night as they wait for a Star, “William Emerson presented me with a small mysteri-ous Package. . . .”

“’Twill not be an easy journey,—” quoth he, “there’ll be days when the Compasses run quaquaversally wild, boxing themselves, and you, into Perplexity,—” (316–17)

First, the supra-narrator narrates Cherrycoke’s resumed narration. Then Cherrycoke tells his frame-tale listeners that he is about to tell a story that exemplifies the “matey” stories Dixon shared with Mason, a story that turns out to be about the deferred arrival of the watch’s message. In short, an unnamed narrator narrates the narrator Cherrycoke’s exemplary narration of Dixon’s narrative about the message of a watch that never stops running.

But what temporal effect does this Chinese-boxed narrative structure have for its readers? The resumption of Cherrycoke’s story (“Cherrycoke presently resumes”) contains the beginning of Dixon’s typical story (“he begins”) as narrated by Cherrycoke. These two narrative “beginnings,” appearing in consecutive paragraphs, function like a Klein bottle in which the entrance is always both entrance and exit. The text’s single reading surface unifies the otherwise distinct temporal moments at which these multiple narrations occur. Chronologically, the watch’s narration is first, followed by Dixon’s, then Cherrycoke’s, and finally the supra-narrator’s. However, the singularized moment of reading subsumes this chronology, twisting and looping the linear duration to compress these multiple times into one expanded instant, creating a simultaneously circular and linear structure that mirrors the logic that allows the watch to run on credit.
Instead of stretching forward into the unknown vastness of infinite possibility, the narrative and its “motion” derive from the infinite subdivisibility of the instant.¹¹

Several curious moments in the chapter are symptomatic of this effect. First, Cherrycoke narrates the beginning of Dixon’s story, but it remains entirely unclear where Dixon’s story ends because so many different narrative times combine to form the same story. For example, immediately after Cherrycoke signals the beginning of Dixon’s story, Dixon tells Mason what Emerson said: “‘Twill not be an easy journey,—’ quoth he.” Just as Dixon assumes the narrative mantle, however, Cherrycoke quickly reappears with “Emerson told him,” a line in which “him” names Dixon. Eventually, this oscillation of narrative voice between Cherrycoke and Dixon gives way to pure dialogue, making it impossible to know if we are reading Dixon’s narration to Mason or Cherrycoke’s narration of that narration. Even more complicatedly, the ambiguity of the word “Now,” in the first line of the paragraph after the dialogue between Dixon and Emerson (i.e., the moment that would ostensibly mark the end of Dixon’s narration), blurs the transition from Dixon’s to Cherrycoke’s narration: “Now what seems odd to Dixon, is that ten years ago . . .” (318). Although clearly narrated by Cherrycoke, “Now” could refer to the present time of Dixon’s dialogue with Emerson, to the present time of Dixon’s narration of his story to Mason, to the present time of Cherrycoke’s narration; or it could be a conjunction, lacking all temporal reference and meaning simply, “in view of the fact that . . . .”

Another narrative quirk unifying these multiple narrative temporalities involves Cherrycoke’s tendency to ventriloquize the speech of his story’s characters. In two different instances, this ventriloquization follows a rhetorical question. First, as we have already seen, when R.C. asks about his choices, Cherrycoke’s narration follows his direct speech: “‘What were my Choices?’ R.C. nearly breathless.” Here, Cherrycoke’s words intervene while we wait for R.C. to catch his breath, after which point he will presumably continue to defend himself with more than just a rhetorical question. Instead of R.C.’s words, however, we read the description of the two choices, narrated by Cherrycoke but sounding exactly like a continuation of R.C.’s speech. The phrasing and syntax are seamless, creating the illusion that the person narrating the choices was present at the time, but the nonsensical choices instead call attention to Cherrycoke’s absence from the event. A second ventriloquization occurs in the paragraph succeeding R.C.’s watch consumption. Mr. Barnes, another member of the party, notes that they are in “The Wedge,” a space left over from some imprecise surveying of Maryland’s eastern border with Delaware. (The two borders, much like all
other pairs in the novel, fail to unite into one contiguous border.) Barnes asks rhetorically, “‘Has anyone consider’d where we are?’” after which the narrator again fills in the openness of the rhetorical question by explaining, this time with quotation marks even though the words do not belong to Barnes, “All know that he means, ‘where just at the Tangent Point, strange lights appear at Night [. . .]’” (323). Such narrative peculiarities are not simply a function of omniscient narration, however, because Cherrycoke frequently uses his absence from an event to explain his inability to narrate. Instead, I would suggest that only the narrative’s complex temporal structure, in which multiple durations are present in the same instant, can reconcile the fact that Cherrycoke both can and cannot narrate events he never witnessed.

In fact, this peculiar form of non-omniscient omniscience marks Cherrycoke’s entire narrative, which begins with a telling caveat to his listeners: “I was not there when they met,—or, not in the usual Way. I later heard from them how they remember’d meeting. I tried to record, in what I then projected as a sort of Spiritual Day-Book, what I could remember of what they said,—tho’ ’twas too often abridg’d by the Day’s Fatigue” (14). This qualification of what will clearly be an unreliable narrative contains another curious element: what does Cherrycoke mean when he says he was not present “in the usual Way”? The answer appears in a later scene when Mason tells a story at a bar in England. Cherrycoke narrates Mason’s speech, but then the supra-narrator steps in to remind us parenthetically that Cherrycoke was not actually present to hear Mason’s story. Instead, Cherrycoke “was there in but a representational sense, ghostly as an imperfect narrative to be told in futurity” (195). Although he is not sufficiently present to avoid having the supra-narrator swoop in and parenthetically narrate the fact of his absence, here we see that even when absent from events, Cherrycoke is always at least representationally present.12

Just as Cherrycoke “projects” the representational existence of his Spiritual Day-Book, the expanded instant permits events throughout the novel to always-already contain their future narration. Temporally, like Deleuze’s notion of Aionic time, the future here functions as a subdivision of the present rather than as an extension of it. For instance, speculation about how an event will be narrated in the future consistently subdivides that event’s present happening: “Afterward, none in the Household will be able to agree which was which” (98); “Whenever she tells the story after that, she will put in [. . .]” (368); “Mason and Dixon, happening to be lost at nightfall (as they will later tell it) [. . .]” (412); “Mr. LeSpark, as he will come to tell the Tale” (430); “a mischievous glint in her eyes that [. . .] others will later all recall” (446); and “Later, not all will agree on what
they have seen” (485). In each of these cases we see the future's possibility deprived of its aleatory extension and instead contained within the present moment of the event as “imperfect narration.” The effect of this structure is further elaborated when Mason tells Dixon that he had the privilege to enter the eleven days that the Calendar Reform of 1752 removed from the calendar. He says that those who jumped ahead eleven days became ghosts that haunted the eleven days not from the past, but from the future (560). Pynchon's reformulation of the instant thus has important implications for futurity: the future in *Mason & Dixon* is never a blank slate of possibility. Instead, since Pynchon locates such aleatory openness in the instant, the future is always-already written and contained in the present.

This same structure obtains for the relation between Cherrycoke and the supra-narrator. Just as Cherrycoke is only “representationally” present for many of the events he narrates, so too is the supra-narrator an always-already “representational” presence in the frame tale. As the narrator of Cherrycoke's narration, he must logically inhabit a narrative instant somewhere in the chronological future, but the absence of information regarding his narrative position (so often parenthetical and always in the frame tale) allows the present moment of Cherrycoke's narrative to subsume that ostensible futurity. This possibility arises when Mason encounters Dr. Samuel Johnson and Boswell in a pub, and Mason nostalgically tells Boswell, “I had my Boswell once [ . . . ] Preacher nam’d Cherrycoke. Scribbling ev’rything down, just like you, Sir.” Then Mason has the meta thought, “Have you [ . . . ] ever . . . had one yourself? [ . . . ] . . . a Boswell, Sir,—I mean, of your own” (747). Indeed, Mason's curiosity forces us to ask whether Cherrycoke has a Cherrycoke, and to the extent that his narration is so frequently narrated, the answer seems to be yes, at least in a “representational sense.”

Complicating matters even further, while Cherrycoke's Cherrycoke appears most frequently in the frame tale, various instances in which Cherrycoke appears in the third person in his own narrative (i.e., not in the supra-narrator's parenthetical narrative where we are used to seeing Cherrycoke in the third person) suggest the supra-narrator's representational presence in each of the novel's different narrative temporalities. In one instance Cherrycoke appears in the third person in his narrative description of Mason's journal. Mason writes, “Should I seek the counsel, God help me, of the cherubick Pest, Cherrycoke? He will take down ev’ry Word he can remember” (434). In this case Cherrycoke's third-person appearance is plausible if he had access to Mason's journals, although we do not know if he did or not. However, the same slip into the third person also occurs elsewhere without any plausible explanation: in quotation marks, Mason
says to a ghost seeking a chaplain, “Of course. Our Reverend Cherrycoke”; absent quotation marks, while in counsel with the ghost, we read “The Rev’d cannot help having a fast look over at the Visto” and “The Rev’d runs thro’ the possibilities” (537); when Cherrycoke meets Mason and Dixon on the ship to Capetown, Cherrycoke appears as “the Rev’d” (35); and when they are all snowbound at an inn prior to surveying the line, Cherrycoke appears as “young Cherrycoke” and “the Rev’d” (384–85). Although this short sampling of slips into the third person could simply represent Cherrycoke narrating himself in the third person much like Henry Adams does in The Education of Henry Adams, they also suggest the at-least representational co-presence of Cherrycoke and Cherrycoke’s Cherrycoke, a coincidence that seems to occur only when Cherrycoke is physically present for the described events.

Finally, the mutual invagination of these narrative temporalities produces a similar effect for the texts that populate them. For instance, the Ghastly Fop, a work apparently published serially, appears throughout Cherrycoke’s narrative: St. Helena’s population, ax-men out on the line, Mason, and Mason’s son back in England all read the text. Even in the frame tale, Ethelmer and his younger cousin Tenebrae steal away from Cherrycoke’s story to read its saucier lesbian sections. As readers of Mason & Dixon, however, we discover that Ethelmer and Tenebrae are reading the Ghastly Fop only after we have read a significant portion of it seamlessly inserted into Cherrycoke’s story and the text of Mason & Dixon. Only after reading far into the story of Eliza, Zhang, and their Jesuit enemies does the narrative telescope out, forcing us to realize that what we have just been reading is only the Ghastly Fop text as it is being read by Ethelmer and Tenebrae in the frame tale. But later, when Zhang and Eliza run into Mason and Dixon’s surveying party, the two narratives converge, not only narratively, but also temporally: the action in the Ghastly Fop occurs in the same present time of the surveying party. Despite being a logical impossibility, when the Ghastly Fop’s characters and narrative action intersect with the time of the surveying, the time of Cherrycoke’s 1786 narration, and the time of our own reading, all three times are effectively rendered concurrent—the instant expands and all, readers included, move freely and meaningfully within it. This simultaneous looping and linearity of textuality has an effect similar to that experienced by the people chosen to populate the eleven days removed from the calendar: they inhabit a non-elapsing temporality, a kind of perpetually moving non-motion, or a simultaneity of instant and duration (555).

With its curious interweaving of textual and narrative temporalities along with its formal superimposition of circularity and linearity, bound-
edness and unboundedness, *Mason & Dixon* answers Deleuze’s call to represent the aleatory potential of the instant. The narrative’s complex historicity—the way multiple narrative temporalities interlock and converge in a singular moment of reading—animates the text’s historical content, creating the effect of temporal duration out of the recursive exchange structure that defines the act/event of reading. Instead of simply casting his textual content into time’s linear flow, the effect of temporal motion, of history’s historicity, comes as the multiple narrative times intersect with a singular moment of reading in which readers simultaneously access time and meaning, duration and instant, form and content, without conflating each into each other.

**The Form of Historicity**

A representational sensibility and a good book thus seem indispensable for treating temporality as an expanded and infinitely subdivisible instant. Cherrycoke literalizes this idea when, during a discussion of implements such as levers and pulleys that “multiply the apparent forces, often unto disproportionate results,” he cites “the printed Book,” with its “thin layers of pattern’d Ink, alternating with other thin layers of compress’d paper, stack’d often by the Hundreds,” as an example of one such synergistic implement (390). Cherrycoke here references the book’s singular multiplicity, the single surface formed from its multiple pages, as the property causing its inside to be disproportionately larger and more powerful than its outside. Similar fractalizations of space occur throughout *Mason & Dixon*: a 1756 uprising between local Indian leadership and the East India Company results in the Black Hole of Calcutta, a minuscule cell in which 146 Europeans were purportedly imprisoned (109); James’s Town, the city in St. Helena where Mason makes some observations, appears “small in secular Dimensions [. . . ] yet entering, ye discover its true Extent,—which proves Mazy as an European City . . . no end of corners yet to be turn’d. ’Tis Loaves and Fishes [. . . ] and Philosophy has no answer” (126); Cherrycoke tells of traveling in a coach, “a late invention of the Jesuits, being, to speak bluntly, a Conveyance, wherein the inside is quite noticeably larger than the outside, though the fact cannot be appreciated until one is inside” (354); and one night while lost in the woods, Mason and Dixon stumble across “a cabin, hardly more than a shed” that upon entering reveals “more room inside than could possibly be contained in the sorrowing ruin they believ’d they were entering” (412).

Another description of Cherrycoke’s magical carriage ride reveals how
these infinitely subdivided spaces relate to time. After describing its multiplicitous interior, Cherrycoke speculates about the carriage's relation to time and eternity:

“What machine is it,” young Cherrycoke later bade himself good-night, “that bears us along so relentlessly? We go rattling thro’ another Day,—another Year,—as thro’ an empty Town without a Name, in the Midnight [. . .]. Long before the Destination, moreover, shall this Machine come abruptly to a Stop . . . gather’d dense with Fear, shall we open the Door to confer with the Driver, to discover that there is no Driver, . . . no Horses, . . . only the machine, fading as we stand, and a Prairie of desperate Immensity. . . .” (361)

The carriage, with its supra-dimensionality, runs like Time itself, ostensibly measuring distance and duration while actually subsumed by the expansiveness of the pure form of infinitely subdivisible Time. The paragraph preceding this speculation further reinforces this reading. In explaining why boundaries and surveying so inflame people, one of the vehicle’s passenger’s reasons, “It goes back [. . .] to the second Day of Creation, when ‘G-d made the Firmament, and divided the Waters which were under the Firmament, from the Waters which were above the Firmament,’—thus the first Boundary Line. All else after that, in all History, is but Sub-Division” (360–61). Again we see subdivision responsible not just for delineating our spatial reality, but also for constituting our temporal experience of history and its passage.

It is this same sense of being in time that Mason & Dixon’s parallactic narrative form creates for its readers, providing us with both a representation of history and an experience of historicity. As multiple narrative times swirl through any given instant of reading, readers cannot help incorporating time into their understanding of the text. As I suggested earlier, such incorporation—modeled on the mutually invaginated relationship of instant and duration—responds to time’s accelerated drive to instantaneity and attempts to make time both meaningful and full. Most importantly for Qualified Hope’s larger theoretical concern, Pynchon’s techniques also resist treating time exclusively as object or as immanent motion. Instead, Pynchon suggests that we think of time as a complicated mode of being in the world, an idea that several fantastical landscapes throughout the novel aptly represent. Much like the all-absorbing experience of reading a good book, from the outside the inhabitants of these spaces seem trapped, but they experience life inside these bounded domains as infinitely expansive. The liminality of the Bermuda-Triangle-like Wedge (324), the subjunctive
status of those living on the inner surface of the Earth (740), the cyclical 
inhabitation of the eleven days that were removed from the calendar during 
the 1752 calendar reform (559), the five degrees that Zhang claims were 
removed from the measure of the circle (630), and any space larger inside 
than out, all provide their inhabitants this experience of time as a mode of 
being.

In what Cherrycoke describes as an alternative ending to his story, 
Mason and Dixon also inhabit their own alternative space of perpetual 
motion. They become Lethe’s ferrymen, a career choice adumbrated by a 
ferryman named Mr. Ice who appears earlier in the novel. While shuttling 
them across a river, “[e]xactly at the middle of the river, for a moment,” Mr. 
Ice tells the story of his massacred family. Because “[t]he Ferryman’s Grief 
is immune to Time,—as if in Exchange for a sacrifice of earthly Freedom, to 
the Flow of this particular Stream,” time stops while he speaks (659). How-
ever, only time as linear duration stops; the ferry rests not outside of time, 
but rather in an expanded instant at the very heart of pure time, figured 
as the Heraclitian river of time flowing all around them. The same could 
also be said for Cherrycoke and his own narration which, like Mr. Ice’s, 
also begins postmortem as he has come to town to attend Mason’s funeral. 
And in telling his own story, he, too, like both Mr. Ice and the watch of 
perpetual motion, borrows his power from repayment dates that can be 
indefinitely deferred. Specifically, his host permits him to stay as long as he 
can keep the children entertained, a credit-based exchange that transforms 
Cherrycoke into an engine of perpetual narrative motion working to fend 
off death’s finalizing survey. Indeed, despite Mason’s death, the coexistence 
of the narrative’s multiple temporalities permits Cherrycoke’s story to sub-
divide infinitely without ever becoming coextensive with the moment of its 
telling or with the moment of Mason’s funeral. Thus the novel’s alternative 
ending conspicuously ignores the fact of Mason’s death and instead follows 
Mason and Dixon to an island in the middle of the Atlantic where travelers 
between Europe and America can stop and rest. There, we learn, “They are 
content to reside like Ferrymen or Bridge-keepers, ever in a Ubiquity of 
Flow, before a ceaseless Spectacle of Transition” (713).

Which returns us to the idea that the world of Mason & Dixon’s eight-
teenth-century plot speaks directly to the world of its twentieth-century 
publication. As global trade accelerates time toward an ideal of instanta-
neity, Pynchon identifies a counterweight in the expanded instant through 
which all durations must pass, a condition of being in time that retains 
time’s motion while also renewing its meaningfulness. Time cannot be pre-
empted in such a scenario because both the future and the past are con-
tained in the present; and yet they maintain their meaning because they are
not reduced to the present. Like Mason and Dixon on their transatlantic island, Pynchon offers globalization a place to rest without compromising its perpetual “Spectacle of Transition.”

But why is the role of ferryman not a cop-out? Functioning like a shuttle in the middle of the river or ocean, does the ferryman really get the best of both worlds (old and new, meaning and motion)? But why should we not read their island as a purgatory of subjunctivity that violently cuts them off from the future? Because, in both the New World—where Manifest Destiny has already overdetermined the future, making violence and greed the order of the day—and in our contemporary world—where global technologies reduce the horizon of our future to pure instantaneity—the future no longer functions as a source of hope. The unrelenting forwardness of the Mason-Dixon Line, dividing the country and penetrating the wilderness, must be contained, and only the text’s many narrators, existing in their specific moments of time like so many ferrymen telling their stories in the midst of time’s river, can do so. Rather than reminding us of history, then, Pynchon’s unique temporal model reminds our constantly accelerating global economy that multiple durations course through every instantaneous currency exchange, day trade, and wire transfer. In the same way that Mason & Dixon accounts for the victims of calendar reform, boundary drawing, and the standardization of the longitude—that is, for those individuals forced, by this array of rationalistic, colonial technologies, to inhabit the eleven days removed from the calendar, a house built on top of the Mason-Dixon Line, or “the Wedge”—so too might the embedding of durations in instants remind us that global capital does not transcend the durées of malnourished Africa, indigenous South America, tribal Afghanistan, or any other region ostensibly removed from the fast-paced world of finance and industry. Instead, its instantaneity relies on and gains meaning from those excluded spaces in the same way that Pynchon’s narrators, in their uniquely parallactic style, tell stories, produce knowledge, and experience history’s becoming by grounding each of these narrative acts in that “moment” in the middle of the river where time stands still, but only because one rests at its very heart.
n his 1895 Project for a Scientific Psychology, Sigmund Freud introduces the concept Nachträglichkeit, perhaps best translated as “afterward-ness,” to describe the specifically temporal nature of trauma. Freud suggests that because consciousness cannot absorb the traumatic event in the moment of its occurrence, the time of the original event inflects all future times, thereby skewing temporal experience in general. Trauma is thus not of a moment, but instead spans an individual’s temporal continuum, constituting her past, present, and future. Commonly registering 9/11 as just such an affront to individual temporal experience, both Jonathan Safran Foer’s Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close and Art Spiegelman’s In the Shadow of No Towers chronicle different attempts to mend the relationship between temporal experience and consciousness. To prevent the skewed time of trauma from dominating their interactions with the world, each text’s protagonist must identify new temporal forms—new ways of incorporating time into his understanding of the world—that will move him beyond 9/11’s temporally traumatic effects.

A common image from the two texts—that of a man falling from one of the World Trade Center towers before its collapse—reveals the specific
version of temporal understanding each seeks. Oskar Schell, Foer’s nine-
year-old narrator whose father died in the attacks, keeps a collage-like
journal entitled Stuff That Happened to Me into which he has taped a series
of photographs of the man in various stages of descent. At the novel’s con-
clusion, Oskar removes the images from his book and re-inserts them in
reverse order, so that when the pages are flipped forward, the man defies
fate and flies safely into the building. Foer then includes these images as
the final fifteen pages of his own work, bringing their cinematic tempo-
rality to the reader’s own fingertips and making the novel performatively
coeextensive with Oskar’s journal. Spiegelman also enlists this provocative
image, depicting himself as the man jumping out of the tower. To capture
the temporal experience of falling, however, he superimposes five draw-
ings of himself, in various stages of descent, over an image of one tower.
Upon landing, the Spiegelman figure becomes Happy Hooligan, a histori-
cal cartoon character. As each human figure indexes a different moment
in time, Spiegelman here represents the event’s temporality rather than
performing it.

On one level the difference between these performative and repre-
sentational portrayals of falling’s temporal arc are a function of genre:
Spiegelman composed his ten-page series of comix in single-page install-
ments for the German newspaper Die Ziet, a format not conducive to a
flipbook’s mobile illusions. Nevertheless, these disparate treatments of the
falling-man image also point to the particular form of temporal experience
each believes will counter 9/11’s skewing of time. Because 9/11 reorients
his entire existence around the moment his father died, Oskar thinks he
will be healed if he can reverse time. While this reversal is clearly just
so much wishful thinking, its temporal form—the flipbook’s cinematic,
real-time performance of motion—proves crucial to Oskar’s healing pro-
cess. He must relegate the event to the past by embracing time’s forward
progress into the future, an argument his therapist implicitly makes when
he asks Oskar if he has noticed any hairs on his scrotum. If hormones, not
9/11, were causing Oskar’s emotional distress, then his life would in fact
be moving forward, not back. Sympathetic to Oskar’s sense that his “dad
died the most horrible death that anyone ever could invent,” Foer’s filmic
portrayal of the falling man thus allows Oskar the illusion of reversing
time while also insisting on a process-based, real-time solution to healing
(201).

“[R]eeling on that faultline where World History and Personal History
collide,” this same forward motion will not remedy Spiegelman’s temporal
problems, which instead require the realignment of public and personal
times (Introduction). While Spiegelman’s personal sense of time “stands
still at the moment of trauma” (2), the government responds rapidly and aggressively with wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, a disjunction nicely captured in his suspicion that the nation’s “leaders’ are reading the book of Revelations” while he reads “the paranoid science fiction of Philip K. Dick” (7). Given this discrepancy between an apocalyptically committed government and the individual paralyzed by paranoia, Spiegelman looks for a version of time that unites the personal and the public, kick-starting the personal with time’s forward motion while slowing down what he sees as public time’s death-driven acceleration. In his treatment of the falling-man image, therefore, he puts himself in the place of the anonymous figure, personalizing this globally disseminated photograph and superimposing the personal on the public. Furthermore, reproducing his image five times over brings a semblance of temporal motion to the timeless isolation of his personal experience of the attacks, while the public aspect of the event pauses a moment in the solitary form of the looming tower. At least representationally, then, the temporal discrepancy between the personal and the public are brought into a tentative alignment that the accompanying narrative reinforces. For instance, Spiegelman identifies a parallel between globally published accounts of people jumping from the towers and the underreported local story of New Yorkers who have more metaphorically “landed in the street” “in the economic dislocation that has followed since that day” (6). Here he analogizes the images that he witnessed personally with the widely disseminated public images that threaten to preempt his understanding of the event and its aftermath. Finally, Spiegelman uses history to achieve this temporal alignment, as the Happy Hooligan character simultaneously embodies the final stage of Spiegelman’s fall from the tower and a hobo sitting among garbage on the city street. This historical representation thus allows Spiegelman to experience stopped personal time and moving public time simultaneously and without conflict; history here represents the only “place” where he is safe from the time of 9/11’s trauma.

Achieving and inhabiting these healing forms of temporal experience entails mending the rift between time and consciousness by developing a better way to incorporate time into the process of knowing. As we have already seen in previous chapters, however, such temporized knowledge is hard to come by because it is a knowledge of time that must also be acquired in time. In an essay appearing just months after the attacks, Don DeLillo wrestles with this complicated relationship among time, trauma, and representation: after the first plane hit the building, it gradually “became possible for us to absorb this, barely. But when the towers fell. When the rolling smoke began moving downward, floor to floor. This was so vast and terrible that it was outside imagining even as it happened. We
could not catch up with it” (39). Even as time moved the violent events forward, the human experience of them lagged behind, as DeLillo’s incomplete sentences haltingly perform. DeLillo contends that months later, “We seem pressed for time, all of us. Time is scarcer now. There is a sense of compression, plans made hurriedly, time forced and distorted” (39). While suggesting that the aesthetic can play some role in “catching up” with this time lag, DeLillo also warns against certain representational modes: “The event itself has no purchase on the mercies of analogy or simile. We have to take the shock and horror as it is” (39). Here DeLillo calls for a form of representation that does not reduce the temporal experience of the event in the way that analogy or simile might, but exactly what that form might be remains elusive.3

Initially, using images to produce and elicit forms of temporal experience might seem counterintuitive.4 After all, images, particularly the still photographs included in Foer’s text, represent stable and self-contained slivers of time. Functioning by analogy and simile, they tend to reduce, hypostatize, and impose meaning on a constantly moving reality better captured through cinema’s diachronic form. My readings will nevertheless suggest that Foer’s novel and Spiegelman’s comix successfully overcome this reductive aspect of images, enlisting them to portray specifically temporal forms of knowing. Advocating a contingent and fully temporalized mode of knowing as the best antidote for Oskar’s trauma, Foer privileges process over content and uses images performatively. Seeking a realignment of his personal and public times that does not require Oskar’s turn to real-time experience, Spiegelman’s images can represent a healing version of temporal experience without having to perform it. Consequently, Spiegelman imports history into his present where its union of timelessness (history as something eternal and always with us) and timeliness (history as a domain where action occurs and events transpire) provides him the safe space required to negotiate the conflict he experiences between personal and private times.

The Time of Global Terror

This difference between performance and representation also defines the debate over the timing of U.S. intelligence both before and after the 9/11 attacks. Fueled by the logic of dot connecting, the recriminations concerning who knew what when about the events of September 11 lent credence to Condoleezza Rice’s warning, just a year later, that any delay in action against Iraq only increased the likelihood that “the smoking gun
would be a mushroom cloud" (CNN). Desperate to avoid another 9/11, Rice’s rhetoric represents the Bush Administration’s search for its own new form of temporal understanding. Rather than waiting for the dots to coalesce into an intelligible representation of an attack, she implied that the United States must act in real time, if not sooner, a belief that led the Administration to embrace the immanent temporality of performance and eschew the retroactive temporality of representation.

Such temporal imperatives not only dominate the discourse of intelligence gathering but also point more broadly to a general shift from spatial to temporal logics occurring on the level of U.S. foreign policy, as the Bush Administration struggles, just like Oskar and Spiegelman, to make sense of its place in a post-9/11 world. As George Bush highlighted in a speech at the National Cathedral just three days after the attacks, the terrorist violence established time as the requisite paradigm for understanding our new global reality: “This conflict was begun on the timing and terms of others; it will end in a way and at an hour of our choosing.” While the Cold War, dominated by spatial metaphors of dominoes, walls, and curtains, sought to control territory (e.g., Berlin, Korea, Cuba, Vietnam, Central America, and even outer space), the “War on Terror” fights to control time. And from the war against Iraq to curtailing civil liberties under the Patriot Act to detaining “enemy combatants” at Guantanamo Bay without due process, preemption has defined the Bush Administration’s primary relation to time. While preemption removes us from time’s gradual unfolding—from its “due process”—it does so not by stopping time but by forcing it ahead of itself to determine the future before it has a chance to occur. Meanwhile, the terrorists use the future’s infinite open-endedness to counter U.S. preemption: they wait-out preemption (hence the phrase “sleeper cells”), wielding the specter of the unknown next attack as their strongest weapon. For both camps, and for those of us living in the shadow of this “new kind of war,” the way time unfolds and the meaning given to that unfolding affect our political interactions with the world and with each other.  

As Richard Posner implies in his review of The 9/11 Commission Report, however, preemption may evade or trump the problem of gaining knowledge in real time, but it certainly does not solve it. He concludes instead that the main lesson we should take from 9/11 is the simple truth “that it is almost impossible to take effective action to prevent something that hasn’t occurred previously” (9). Indeed, as Donald Rumsfeld’s frustrated musings about “known knowns,” “known unknowns,” and “unknown unknowns” demonstrate, the timely thinking that this post-9/11 paradigm shift demands is more complex than U.S. preemption has allowed. Known knowns belong to the past, and known unknowns are easily and legally
preempted under the international legal doctrine of imminent threat. As Posner points out, however, the future is not populated with known unknowns; rather, it explodes with unknown unknowns, as the United States, which did not know that it did not know that Iraq did not have weapons of mass destruction, learned the hard way.

But as Foer’s novel suggests, it is not clear that there are any good options when it comes to unknown unknowns. Commonly trapped in the time-knowledge paradox, Oskar and the Bush Administration either can act in real-time with compromised knowledge, or they can stabilize their knowledge but risk acting too late. Instead of compromising, the government chose preemption, and Oskar chooses to obsess over the moment of his father’s death. Given this parallel between Oskar’s and the nation’s fear of an unknown and uncontrollable future, Foer’s novel proves particularly useful for examining the feasibility of any real-time pursuit of knowledge. Moreover, just as the performative logic of Foer’s novel reveals the challenges attending any attempt to gain knowledge in real time, Spiegelman’s representational embrace of history suggests that waiting for after-the-fact knowledge does not necessarily produce the kinds of mushroom-cloud disasters ominously foretold by Secretary Rice and might even mitigate performance’s inclination to leap before looking. While Foer’s text ultimately advocates a form of real-time acquisition of knowledge that would be too dangerous as foreign intelligence policy, I will argue that Spiegelman’s text does in fact respond productively to preemption, identifying historical time as an alternative to the Faustian choice of acting without knowing and knowing without acting that currently plagues U.S. foreign policy decisions. Taken together, these two texts allegorize the U.S. struggle to manage its own timely traumas since 9/11.

Foer’s Performative Present

Foer’s novel, crowded with images, reproduced handwriting, and shifting typographical layouts, proffers metafiction as an ideal narrative form for recapturing the forward flow of real-time temporal experience. To be sure, the idea that metafiction can access real-time temporal experience seems contrary to its typical treatment as a device that distances readers from texts, creating a space between the saying and the said that for Hutcheon functions as an ironic space of political possibility but for Jameson ensures metafiction’s political impotence. In fact, the idea that metafiction, so frequently conceived through spatial metaphors of distance, layers, and frames, has anything to do with time might at first seem counterintuitive.
After all, if metafiction calls our attention to the written-ness, and thus to the artificiality, of the book we hold in our hands, then it would seem to rupture readers from rather than enmesh them in time’s measured passage. Foer’s novel, however, smartly engages metafiction’s strong performative impulse: a desire for the book within the book to be the actual book that we hold in our hands. In these cases the goal is not a rupture from the text, but an isomorphism between a text’s internal and external worlds. Oskar’s scrapbook, *Stuff That Happened to Me*, provides an apt example. At one point, he narrates from his bed, “I pulled *Stuff That Happened to Me* from the space between the bed and the wall, and I flipped through it for a while, wishing that I would finally fall asleep.” The ensuing fifteen pages contain images from his book, after which he resumes his narrative: “I got out of bed and went to the closet where I kept the phone” (52–68). In this metafictional moment, the book in our hands becomes Oskar’s *Stuff That Happened to Me*. Moreover, given Oskar’s need to reacquaint himself with time’s forward passage, it is a moment in which the real-time temporalities inside and outside the text are coextensive. Our hands become Oskar’s hands and move together accordingly.

Of course, these coextensive pages are embedded in the narrative of another book, the novel named *Extremely Loud & Incredible Close*, but that does not necessarily mitigate the metafictional performance. Instead, because Oskar narrates *Extremely Loud & Incredible Close* in the first person, the entire novel reads like a book that he wrote himself. This sense is heightened by the presence of pictures and other reproduced texts, which he ostensibly includes as examples or proof of the events detailed in his first-person narration. For example, he tells of an encounter in an art supply store with a female employee by narrating, “She showed me a pad of paper that was next to the display,” and on the following pages we see the pieces of paper covered in different scripts written in different colors (44–49). Later, Oskar tells us about dropping his cat from the roof of the school “to show how cats reach terminal velocity by making themselves into little parachutes,” and on the following page we see the cat (190–91). Importantly, these pages are not from *Stuff That Happened to Me*. They are part of Oskar’s narration of *Extremely Loud & Incredible Close*, and they performatively transform the book we hold in our hands into the book that Oskar wrote. In addition to his own narrative, this book that he wrote includes three other texts: the first is *Stuff That Happened to Me*; the second includes pages from his grandfather’s journals, which appear in chapters titled “Why I’m Not Where You Are”; and the third includes letters from his grandmother, which appear in chapters titled “My Feelings.” Each text has
its own unique style and spacing, reproducing the format and layout of the “original” pages, a verisimilitude intended, once again, to metafictionally transform the book in our hands into the texts internal to the book. In effect, the novel functions on two metafictional levels. First, when we read from Stuff That Happened to Me, the grandpa’s journals, and the grandma’s letters, we seem to be reading from those actual texts. Second, the inclusion of those texts in Extremely Loud & Incredible Close also enhances the metafictional effect of Extremely Loud & Incredible Close itself, turning it into a book ostensibly authored by Oskar. In a sense, the novel has five authors. Jonathan Foer, the author of Extremely Loud & Incredible Close, wrote his book so that it appears to have been authored by Oskar Schell. In writing his book, also apparently titled Extremely Loud & Incredible Close, Oskar has included texts from other authors: first, Stuff That Happened to Me, also authored by Oskar Schell; second, “Why I’m Not Where You Are,” authored by Oskar’s grandfather; and third, “My Feelings,” authored by his grandmother. In all of these instances the isomorphism between the text in our hands and the text in the book brings a forward-moving, real-time temporality to the worlds outside and inside the novel, and this is precisely the version of temporal experience that Oskar requires if he is to overcome the trauma of his father’s death.

The plot of the novel, however, highlights Oskar’s obsession with a different version of time: the instant. Specifically, it chronicles Oskar’s need to know what was happening at the instant of his father’s death. Consequently, rather than recapturing his sense of time’s forward motion, Oskar searches for a secure and absolute knowledge of the past. The reason, perhaps, is that his trauma does not stem simply from his father’s death, but from the horror of not knowing that his father was about to die. Oskar recounts his experience of being sent home from school on the morning of 9/11: “I opened the apartment door, put down my bag, and took off my shoes, like everything was wonderful, because I didn’t know that in reality everything was actually horrible, because how could I?” (68). It is this radically unknown unknown that traumatizes Oskar and fuels his desire to fill the hole in his knowledge of the event. Tracing his attempt to gain symbolic understanding, the novel’s plot follows Oskar’s search for the lock that matches a key he finds in his father’s closet after 9/11. The key is in an envelope with the word “Black” written on it. Believing that “the lock was between [him] and [his] Dad,” Oskar methodically visits every “Black” listed in the phone book, interrogating each about the key (52).

A quaint story, but the novel also suggests that this symbolic reunion with his father is impossible. Using DeLillo’s language, we might say that the symbol is not strong enough to carry the weight of the event: symbolic
language cannot find an adequate substitute for the event that will make its meaning and significance clear, even if that symbol is a present absence like a lock. For the key to unlock the lock would be for Oskar to inhabit the moment of his father's death, to understand the logic of that traumatic instant. Although the traumas that require healing are “extremely loud,” he can only come “incredibly close” to the event, as he is when he visualizes himself in a building hit by a plane: “I imagined the last second, when I would see the pilot’s face, who would be a terrorist. I imagined us looking each other in the eyes when the nose of the plane was one millimeter from the building” (244). Indeed, when Oskar finally meets the man who owns the matching lock, Oskar declines to open it.

The key-lock plot clearly indicates the nature of Oskar’s response to 9/11 and its aftermath: the more he knows about the event, the more secure he will feel in his post-9/11 world. After calculating that he could visit each of the 216 Blacks listed in the phone book in three years, for example, Oskar reveals, “I couldn’t survive three years without knowing,” and he decides that canceling his weekend French lessons will allow him to “know everything” in just one and a half years (51). Related to this epistemophilia, Oskar invents fantastic devices—skyscrapers with movable parts, a portable pocket that holds people, a birdseed shirt that attracts birds to help people fly—intended to reduce all unknown contingencies to a known and manageable form. Like the symbolic search for the lock, these inventions preempt future death, but they also preclude him from living his life, as Oskar’s observation that he compulsively invents whenever he feels insecure indicates (234).

Finally, Oskar also stabilizes his relationship to his world with his photographs. Like his search for the lock and his obsessive inventing, however, the photographs can only symbolically return him to the moment of trauma, deploying a retroactive temporality at odds with the forward-moving temporality of metafictional performance. I describe the temporality of the symbol as retroactive because symbols always point back to whatever they symbolize; for a symbol to work, we have to already know and understand the thing preceding it, the thing being symbolized. To use Donald Rumsfeld’s language, symbols can illuminate known unknowns, but they tell us nothing about unknown unknowns because symbolic logic always requires some form of prior knowledge. Oskar thus finds symbols quite helpful because they point back to the moment he wants to understand, but they never point back far enough because the event he seeks to know is, in fact, an unknown unknown. The text thus evinces a tension between the forward-moving temporality of its performative mode and the backward-moving temporality of its symbolic mode. This tension is
most apparent in the photographs themselves. Although they do function performatively in the ways discussed above, all of the interpolated pictures also have a symbolic register that exceeds their ostensibly documentary function. This is why Oskar photographs the back of Abby Black’s head. If he were truly just accumulating “stuff that happened to him,” we would see her putting her hand in front of her face as she did when Oskar tried to take her picture. Instead, Oskar tells us, “I thought of a different picture I could take, which would be more truthful, anyway” (99).

Suffering the traumas of a different horror, Oskar’s grandfather stopped speaking shortly after living through the Dresden fire bombings, and he keeps a daybook in which he writes messages to people along with unsent letters to his son, Oskar’s father, explaining “Why I’m Not Where You Are.” Like Oskar, the grandfather also takes photos, but his are purely documentary. After the war he began to photograph everything he owned, right down to the doorknobs in his apartment, and these pictures are inserted into his journal. While Oskar’s pictures aim at a deeper truth, the grandfather’s pictures have no meaning beyond the objects they represent. They are, in effect, ontological substitutes—proof of existence for a hypothetical insurance adjuster of the future. Like Oskar’s photos, these also enhance the performativity of the grandfather’s chapters, which reproduce the visual appearance of the daybook’s pages so that some pages have only a few words on them while others have dense text flush to the margins.

Both of these photographic styles—Oskar’s, which aims at symbolic depth, and the grandfather’s, which aims at encyclopedic breadth—unsuccessfully attempt to heal their respective traumas. Just as Oskar’s symbolic search for the lock cannot replace his father’s violent absence, and just as his inventions come at the expense of his mental and emotional stability in the present, so too do these photographs run from rather embrace the contingencies of temporal experience that define the original trauma. The Dresden bombings and 9/11 were so sublimely horrific because they were unknown unknowns, and no amount of inventing, symbolizing, or accruing can possess that central emptiness. Indeed, the novel argues that these characters should be trying to live, not trying to know, which is why they exhibit true knowledge only when they are not thinking. For example, describing his first sexual encounter with his first love, Anna, Oskar’s grandfather relates, “[W]ithout any experience I knew what to do . . . as if the information had been coiled within me like a spring, everything that was happening had happened before and would happen again” (127). Similarly, the grandmother evinces needs that exceed her logical knowledge of them: “What does it mean to need a child? One morning I awoke and understood the hole in the middle of me. . . . I couldn’t explain it. The
need came before explanations” (177). Tellingly, Oskar experiences such knowledge just once during his search, while standing outside the door of the Black who owns the lock that matches his key: “I didn't believe in being able to know what's going to happen before it happens, but for some reason I knew I had to get inside her apartment” (91).

But if these images prevent Oskar and his grandfather from achieving the kind of intuitive knowledge just described, do they function similarly for the novel’s readers? Or, to ask the question that David Palumbo-Liu poses for all acts of imaginative creation post-9/11: do they reclaim the future and incorporate time in a way that addresses 9/11’s temporal traumas, or do they become “manic,” succumbing to the imagination’s “self-generating frenzy, unchecked by the otherness of the external world” (“Preemption” 158)? Almost unanimously, book reviewers have judged Foer’s inventiveness as pathological and compulsive as Oskar’s:

The avant-garde tool kit, developed way back when to disassemble established attitudes and cut through rusty sentiments, has now become the best means, it seems, for restoring them and propping them up. No traditional story could put forward the tritenesses that Foer reshuffles, folds, cuts into strips, seals in seven separate envelopes and then, astonishingly, makes whole, causing the audience to ooh and aah over notions that used to make it groan. (Kirn 2)

Perhaps. But if we give Foer the benefit of the doubt for just a moment, we might see that there is something productively odd about this slew of formal techniques: they all grasp after the performative without ever fully achieving it; they are quasi-performative. For example, when meeting with Abby, Oskar leaves his business card, which Foer reproduces in the text, performing the event for his readers. And yet the reproduced card is just a square with text in it; some words are italicized and some are capitalized, but the font on the card is identical to the novel’s and in no way looks like a business card. The same problem arises with the grandfather’s daybook which performatively recreates the spatial layout of each page but retains the novel’s font. This may seem like quibbling, but other pages in the novel do achieve a more consistent performativity: those containing different handwriting styles printed in various colors purport to be, as much as possible, the actual papers Oskar finds at the art supply store (47–49). In other words, these fully performative pages require that we ask why other such moments do not measure up or adhere to the same logic.

A clue might come when we notice that some of the pages in the grandfather’s daybook performatively deliver the precise message he wrote at
that moment, as when a question to a passerby, “Excuse me, do you know what time it is?” interrupts a letter to his son (111–13). At other times, however, the pages recording these single-line snippets of conversation are part of the letter to his son, included as representations of something that he had previously written in the daybook. For example, an early letter explains the daybook’s function: “I would take the book to bed with me and read through the pages of my life:” (18). The next nine pages after the colon then exemplify what he would read: “I want two rolls”; “Help”; or “Ha ha ha!” (19–27). After representing enough examples, the letter finally continues, only to be interrupted by a photo of a doorknob, a performative rather than an exemplary image. The grandfather’s daybook thus reveals that the text’s overall performativity breaks down because sometimes it claims actually to be the thing that we are reading about (e.g., the colored handwriting or Oskar’s Stuff That Happened to Me), while at other times it seems content merely to represent that thing (e.g., the cards, letters, and elements of the grandfather’s letters). This same equivocation between representing and being marks the difference between Oskar’s and his grandfather’s photographs. In Oskar’s symbolic aesthetic, the pictured object refers us to something “more truthful,” and yet these same photos, intended to be deeply symbolic and representational, are also performative when they appear in Stuff That Happened to Me. In the grandfather’s documentary aesthetic, the photos function as ontological substitutes for the pictured objects, and yet in a book about a boy searching for a lock, the photos of doorknobs and locks are deeply symbolic. Therefore, both in the novel’s photographs and in its overall performativity, there is an equivocation: sometimes a thing is what it is, and at other times it represents something other than itself. Lacking an internal and consistent logic, this undecidability has given reviewers good cause to chastise Foer. And yet I would like to entertain the possibility that such undecidability might just be the point.

After all, this is the very lesson that Oskar’s father impresses upon him when they play “Reconnaissance Expedition,” a game in which Oskar’s father gives him clues and instructions to decode and perform. During one game, Oskar gleans that Central Park holds the clue that will help him solve his mission, but after digging up various objects in the park, he struggles to determine which are clues (i.e., representations) and which are just things. Oskar then wonders if perhaps this undecidability is itself a clue, a notion that is reinforced when plotting the found objects on a map of Central Park leads him to realize that he “could connect the dots to make . . . almost anything [he] wanted” (10). Oskar complains to his father, “But if you don’t tell me anything, how can I ever be right?” “How could you ever be wrong?” his father replies (9).
Indeed, readers could make almost anything they wanted out of the “avant-garde toolkit” Foer empties into his novel. But what might first appear as crude and sloppy writing instead proves to be Foer’s finest performance of them all: the novel performs the irresolvable equivocation between performance and representation since that equivocation governs the entire process of reading the novel. In other words, the novel performs the inherent contradictions of performance; it is a metafictional account of the tensions implicit in metafiction. The quasi-performances internal to the text are always compromised in some way by the retroactive temporality of the symbolic mode. However, these compromises do not prevent Foer from insisting on the value of gaining knowledge in real time and charging head-first into those unknown unknowns, which is exactly the form of knowledge acquisition that the novel’s meta-performance—its performance of the equivocation between performance and representation—demands of its readers. If the static performativity of the grandfather’s photos, aiming merely to be the things they represent, produces known knowns, while the symbolic logic of Oskar’s photos, aiming at a truth beyond the things they represent, points backward to known unknowns, then the contingent logic required to apprehend the conflicted relationship between the two brings us fully into the temporal challenges of post-9/11 unknown unknowns. The meta-performance thus achieves the version of temporal experience—a forward-moving real time—that the novel’s internal quasi-performances do not. When we know either what we know or what we do not know, our knowledge is stable and removed from the flow of time. Because unknown unknowns are unknown precisely because of the future’s radical contingency, however, if we embrace the formal incoherence of Foer’s novel and allow that we do not know what we do not know about the aim and function of his “avant-garde toolkit,” then readerly knowledge becomes temporalized.

Of course, Oskar’s own journey also proves to be a contingent search for unknown unknowns, but he does not realize it, perhaps because realizing it would make it no longer so. Instead, Oskar characterizes his search as a quest for a known unknown, as he does when he complains, “I don’t know a single thing that I didn’t know six months ago. And actually I have negative knowledge because I skipped all of those French classes with Marcel” (255). Knowing what he does not know implies that he knows what will solve his problems but currently lacks that thing. But Oskar does not find the thing that he thinks he lost: his connection to his father. Instead, Oskar gains a different kind of knowledge, a different kind of connection—to New York City, to his mother, and to his grandparents—that he did not even know he was missing. At the novel’s conclusion we finally learn that
Oskar's father bought a vase from an estate sale and never even knew the key was hidden inside (unknown unknown #1); and the man who sold him the vase, Mr. Black, only learned after the fact that the vase held the key to his now-deceased father's safe-deposit box (unknown unknown #2). Although Oskar does not reconnect to his father, his search allows Mr. Black to connect to his, yet another unknown unknown articulated through Oskar's speculation that Mr. Black's posters searching for the man who bought the vase (i.e., Oskar's dad) may have hung next to the posters Oskar's mother hung searching for her husband after 9/11 (299).

Finally, in addition to the text's internally conflicted performativity, the reciprocal interaction among the novel's interlocking chapters also channels readers into their own contingent search for knowledge. Although Oskar's, the grandfather's, and the grandmother's chapters recount different events, one chapter's story frequently intersects with and appears in the other chapters, making the reading experience an analeptic and proleptic whirl. Early in Oskar's narrative, for example, he describes his grandmother writing a message to him on the window of her apartment across the street, but in one of the grandfather's chapters appearing much later in the novel, we learn that the message was actually for him, the grandfather. In effect, when we read Oskar's account of this scene, we do not know what we do not know, which is that the grandfather has just returned to town and is trying to move back into the apartment. Like two posters unwittingly searching for the same person, there are always relevant events transpiring concurrently to the events being narrated, but they remain unknown unknowns to readers until we go through the process of reading. (The same is again true of Oskar's own quest, as he does not learn until the novel's conclusion that his mother knew all about his escapades and even phoned ahead to the Blacks whom Oskar assumed he was visiting unannounced.) Readers are perpetually recontextualizing their knowledge of the text while the general unreliability of each of the three narrators ensures that they never land on a stable or true understanding of the narrated events. This in turn intimately links the reading experience to time's passing and ensures that our knowledge of the text is only ever associative and contingent, produced from the juxtaposition of the three chapter types which refuse to be reduced to a coherently unified story. Foer thus asks his readers to focus on processes of understanding rather than on the specifics of novelistic content. Of course, as Walter Kirn notes in his review, Oskar could have learned that “searching” is more valuable than “finding” if he had simply gone to the docks and talked to Jonathan Livingston Seagull. However, Kirn’s caustic criticism of Foer's maudlin message not only ignores its provocative formal enactment, but also fails to recognize how
deeply such apparently pithy problems have vexed our nation ever since 9/11 forced us to think in time.

**Spiegelman’s Represented History**

If Foer’s novel posits a performatively cinematic real time as the ideal temporal mode for knowing and healing 9/11’s timely traumas, it also reveals that adopting this mode comes with great risks: formal incoherence, an unknown and thus potentially dangerous future, and an equivocal relation to the world and its objects. These are precisely the risks that the Bush Administration has refused to take, choosing instead to manage risk with a policy of preemption that is coherent, known, and unequivocal. But does the relationship between time and knowledge offer only these two all-or-nothing options? Art Spiegelman’s *In the Shadow of No Towers* suggests not, and it does so by establishing a unique relationship to history that Spiegelman uses to withstand the government’s aggressively preemptive logic.

In some respects, Spiegelman’s temporal experience of the 9/11 attacks is remarkably similar to Oskar’s. Just as his father’s death prevents Oskar from moving on with his life, Spiegelman’s personal experience of time’s passage stopped on 9/11. And just as Oskar compulsively invents, Spiegelman, depicting himself with a bald eagle hanging around his neck, observes that more than five months after the attacks, he must “compulsively retell the calamities of September 11th to anyone who’ll still listen.” On the other hand, with some loving nudges from his mother and his therapist, Oskar remains free to reanimate his temporal experience at his own pace, while Spiegelman’s imbrication in the public sphere causes him to feel that the U.S. government is forcing time’s reanimation on him. Consequently, a public counter-discourse heckles his compulsive retelling: the bald eagle hanging around his neck represents not just the weight of the trauma grinding his personal sense of time to a halt, but also the government’s insistence that the nation move forward in time as it squawks, “Everything’s changed!” and “Go out and shop!” (2).

Spiegelman portrays his paralyzed experience of time as both an anxious waiting and an obsessive fixation on the events of 9/11. In a strip on the text’s first page, he depicts his sense of suspended time as a case of “waiting for the next shoe to drop.” In this sequence a man noisily takes off a shoe after a night of drinking. Alarmed at the calamity the first shoe causes, he silently places the second shoe on the floor and drifts off to sleep while his downstairs neighbors anxiously wait for the other shoe to drop.
Similarly representing his inability to think beyond the morning of the attacks, the next page reveals a “Missing” poster for Spiegelman’s brain, claiming that it was “last seen in Lower Manhattan, mid-September 2001.” Later in the text, his fixation on the moment of trauma turns into paranoia and a general obsession with the news. Noting that “he totally lost it way back then, after 9/11,” we see Spiegelman surfing the Internet until two in the morning, looking for information about the attacks, only to go to bed and watch CNN’s coverage of various 9/11 conspiracy theories.

Of course, the fact that Spiegelman’s sense of time effectively stopped on 9/11 does not mean that the world followed suit: “Amazing how time flies when it stands still,” he observes on a page marking the first anniversary of the attacks. Aggrieved by the violence that conspicuously marks the “flying time” of world events, however, Spiegelman refuses to fly along because he fears his government as much as he does the terrorists. For instance, the “other shoe” drops twice over, once as “Jihad brand footwear” falling from the sky onto the frightened masses below, and later as a rain of cowboy boots that coincides with the 2004 Republican presidential convention held in New York City. That the other shoe belongs to both the terrorists and the Republicans nicely captures Spiegelman’s sense that the Bush Administration hijacked the hijackings for its own purposes, leaving him “equally terrorized by Al-Qaeda and by his own government.” To convey this dual terror, Spiegelman draws himself sleeping at his drawing board while to his left a terrorist suspends a bloody knife above his neck, and to his right George W. Bush holds a gun to his head. While Spiegelman sleepily inhabits his frozen personal time, reliving “his ringside seat to that day’s disaster yet again,” his waking entrance into the public sphere will clearly be a violent one, as it was for a young woman he overheard at a Tribeca party. The woman was mugged the previous night while walking home, an event she sees as a positive development since it indicates that “things are finally getting back to normal.”

Shortly after the attacks, Spiegelman initially believed that reentering time’s forward flow would be peaceful rather than violent, that “Ground Zero” would become “Year Zero,” and that a “globe” rather than “provincial American flags” would “sprout out of the embers” of the destruction. But such hopes were dashed the moment the administration acted before it knew what it was doing, simultaneously preempting global goodwill and Spiegelman’s personal healing process. Before preemption, Spiegelman thought that his comix would entail “sorting through [his] grief and putting it into boxes,” and he intended to represent very personal aspects of 9/11 and its aftermath: seeing the tower before it fell, driving to retrieve his son from school, and forbidding his daughter
to wear red, white, and blue, as school officials requested days after the events of September 11. But as “the world hustled forward” and “the government began to . . . hurtle America into a colonialist adventure in Iraq,” he was confronted with “[n]ew traumas [that] began competing with still-fresh wounds and the nature of [his] project began to mutate” (Introduction). Consequently, in the fourth installment of the series, a sequence of snapshot-like frames neatly contain the personal story of retrieving his daughter from school after the attacks, but flying above and outside these boxes, George Bush and Dick Cheney straddle a large bald eagle as Bush yells, “Let’s roll!” and Cheney slices the eagle’s neck with a box cutter (4). Finally, preemption’s tendency to accelerate time—to precipitate an event sooner than it would otherwise occur—also threatens to make his comix obsolete before they are even published. Noting the labor-intensive process of creating comix, he quips that “one has to assume that one will live forever to make them” (Introduction). Convinced that he might not live to see next week, however, “forever” is precisely the kind of time that he does not have. Hence, the representational burden of Spiegelman’s text: how can he slow down his experience of public time and reanimate his personal time when those two times are so mutually antagonistic?

The text’s final pages do indicate that he achieves a semblance of reconciliation between these competing temporalities. On a page dated more than one and a half years after the attacks, Spiegelman writes, “Time passes. He can think about himself in the first person again, but deep inside the towers still burn” (8). Also, on the text’s final page, Spiegelman notes that “even anxious New Yorkers eventually run out of adrenaline and—. . . you go back to thinking that you might live forever after all” (10). Finally, in the last frames of the book, a glowing image of the towers that serves as the “pivotal image” of Spiegelman’s personal 9/11 experience and appears on every page, fades nearly to black beneath the claim that the towers “seem to get smaller every day . . . ” (10). Of course, these successes are highly qualified: he uses the third person to assert his ability to think about himself in the first person; the towers still burn inside; he only “might” live forever; and the glowing tower fades nearly to black, but not all the way.

So how has Spiegelman achieved these qualified successes in the midst of an onslaught of public and political events that threaten permanently to preempt his personal experience of time, leaving it stagnant and frozen at the “moment of trauma”? In her insightful reading of Maus, Erin McGlothlin argues that its meta-artistic moments—when Spiegelman draws himself struggling to draw Maus—represent a temporal domain where he retreats to work out the vexed relation between his present and his father’s past. McGlothlin identifies three interlocking stories in Maus,
each with its own temporality: the past Holocaust; the present father-son relationship; and the meta-artistic story about *Maus*’s production, occurring in what McGlothlin via Spiegelman dubs the “super-present.” This “super-present” allows Spiegelman to “reflect on his project” from a safe “narrative time in which nothing exactly happens, but in which the complexities and contradictions that relate to the other narrative levels are exposed” (186).

*In the Shadow*, which also recounts a family trauma and tells three stories (Spiegelman’s personal 9/11 experience, the global politics surrounding the event and its aftermath, and the production of the text itself), also cultivates a safe temporal space from which Spiegelman can reconcile the conflict between personal and public time. However, unlike in *Maus* where each story has its own place in time, here all three stories occur simultaneously in the present. In *Maus II*, Spiegelman famously draws himself at his drawing board surrounded by a pile of dead bodies that are clearly intended to represent Holocaust victims (41). While gruesome and haunting, the past from which these bodies come does not immediately threaten Spiegelman in the superpresent. When he appears at his drawing board in his 9/11 text, however, the terrorist’s sword and Bush’s handgun reveal that the meta-artistic level is no longer safe. In *Maus*, where his father “bleeds history,” the trauma lies in the past, and he representationally escapes into the superpresent; in his 9/11 work, where the traumatic event is unavoidably present, history becomes a time to escape to, rather than a trauma to run from.

Because Spiegelman does not need the coextensive relationship between time and knowledge that Oskar requires, his text never aims to *perform* its temporality as Foer’s does. Instead Spiegelman incorporates historical cartoon characters into his own work to represent a safe temporality in which personal and public times are reconciled. Importing the past into the present to draw the present as history, he historicizes the present. Crucial to the success of his project, however, such historicization does not figure the present as the past of a future yet to come; instead, the historical cartoon characters make the present past before the future ever has a chance to make it so, a necessary strategy given that the future has been tainted by government preemption. In a brief introduction to the cartoons included in the appendix, Spiegelman explains why he turned to old cartoon characters to render his present as past:

> The only cultural artifacts that could get past my defenses to flood my eyes and brain with something other than images of burning towers were old comic strips; vital, unpretentious ephemera from the optimistic dawn of...
the 20th century. That they were made with so much skill and verve but never intended to last past the day they appeared in the newspaper gave them poignancy; they were just right for an end-of-the-world moment.

To the extent that they belong to their day of publication which is also the day of their extinction, these cartoons are timely and mortal, but to the extent that they are “ghosts” that continue to “haunt” Spiegelman, they are timeless and eternal (8). In effect, they offer a temporality in which the timely and the timeless are not at odds with each other; their poignancy derives from their unstable ephemerality, not from any attempt to impose meaning by simile or analogy, as a photographic image might. As history, they are alive and animated but also immune to the anxious fear of the next shoe’s dropping.

Literally encasing the temporal traumas of Spiegelman’s present, the text’s title page and the appendix also present historical materials that point to history’s eternal timelessness. The title page reproduces a newspaper from September 11, 1901, five days after President McKinley was shot and three days before he died, with headlines attesting to history’s eternal return: “President’s Wound Reopened” and “Emma Goldman in Jail Charged with Conspiracy.” The historical repetitions are clear: the wounding of the president and 9/11’s wounding of the nation; using the shooting to imprison anarchists indiscriminately and using 9/11 to curtail civil liberties. The comics in the appendix reveal similar parallels: “The War Scare in Hogan’s Alley” depicts a group of rag-tag children recruited to fight England; a comic from 1902 portrays two German children, Hans and Fritz, the Katzenjammer Kids, who trick two innocent American boys into planting a bomb under their grandpa while he recites the Declaration of Independence; a “Little Nemo in Slumberland” cartoon shows giant children strolling around Lower Manhattan, knocking over buildings roughly where the World Trade Center would later stand; and a “Bringing Up Father” strip from 1921 shows “father” traveling in Pisa where he interferes with Italy’s infrastructure by propping up the Leaning Tower with some wooden scaffolding.

Accompanying the eternal timelessness born of history’s self-repetitions, Spiegelman accesses history’s timeliness when he replaces the characters in his story (usually himself) with characters from old comics. Occurring most frequently in scenes of intense emotional distress, he asks them to live through events in his life that he, stuck and fixated on the moment of trauma, does not have the time to experience. For example, before Spiegelman and his wife see the tower, they appear as ordinary Manhattanites, but in the next frame, after seeing the tower burning, they
are transformed into the Katzenjammer Kids, renamed the “Tower Twins” (2). After retrieving their daughter, they reappear human, but in depicting the feeling that the Iraq invasion made their lives more dangerous, Spiegelman again draws himself and his wife as the twins. In addition, when representing the emotional tension that 9/11 brought to their marriage, Spiegelman portrays his wife and himself as characters from “Bringing Up Father” (8), and he appears as Happy Hooligan after his fall from the tower (6) and while participating in a sham interview for Tom Brokaw’s tribute to 9/11 (10). While Spiegelman’s mind remains lost in the suspended timelessness of his post-9/11 world, these historical cartoon characters intervene to embody and animate his experiences. Paradoxically, if he drew himself living through these events, he could not draw the events, because the individual living through the events is entirely unmoored from the very temporality required to represent the sequence of events in the first place. Coming out of the past, the historical characters provide the experiential temporality required to get through the event sequences. When combined with the timelessness of history’s repetitions, these historical comics offer Spiegelman a safe temporality from which to approach the timely trauma of his immediate present.

Finally, we can see this union of the timeless and the temporal in Spiegelman’s manipulation of the flexible format of his single-page comix. On each of the ten pages, multiframed strip sequences recounting diachronic events overlie single-frame drawings that depict different timeless states of being. For example, a drawing of several people with their heads in the sand, an advertisement for the “Ostrich Party,” depicts the general condition of political consciousness in the United States (5); a single-frame, fire-and-brimstone image depicts the “inner demons” roiling a homeless woman (6); a drawing of interlocking red hawks and blue doves, flanked by a skeleton and the grim reaper, represents a potentially violent divide in the U.S. electorate (7); and a disturbing portrayal of Spiegelman jack-hammering into his own skull intrudes into a boxed strip sequence in which he diagnoses his own paranoia and neurotic depression (8). Each of these single-frame representations establishes the general underlying condition of the more fully temporalized events transpiring in the surrounding strip sequences. A few pages take this union of the timeless and the temporal a step further, presenting a full-page background image—the long shadow of the Twin Towers (2), an enlarged image of the Tower Twins (4), and fire engulfing the towers (10)—that subtends the animated events represented on each page. Representing the qualified healing captured in Spiegelman’s observation that “most New Yorkers seem to have picked up the rhythms of daily life . . . but right under the surface, we’re all still just a bunch of
stunned pigeons,” Spiegelman’s use of historical cartoons, along with his formal layering of different temporalities, effectively unite the timeless and the temporal in a historical vision that facilitates his realignment of personal and public times. (8).

Having completed the final installment of In the Shadow, Spiegelman observes in the Introduction that ideas once deemed too extreme to print in mainstream media outlets—such as the notion that George Bush has hurt the United States more than the terrorists have—began gaining more popular currency. Once the world comes around to his point of view, Spiegelman realizes that he was ahead of his time rather than behind it, and his sense of disconnection and alienation begins to fade. Although his tone suggests a certain amount of personal satisfaction about this turn of events, he also strikes a facetious note, suggesting that such anticipatory modes of knowledge, regardless of who deploys them, are not wholly desirable. After all, Spiegelman would have presumably been happier if his apocalyptic vision of the Bush Administration were incorrect. Better instead to avoid preemption’s hurtling temporality by turning to history, a turn that politicians and the public at large made in 2006 when the debate surrounding the war in Iraq became historicized: thinking about Iraq in the context of Vietnam helped clarify arguments about an exit strategy, and the partitioning of Yugoslavia informed discussions about pursuing a similar course in Iraq, productively illuminating potential problems—such as the differences among the ethnic, religious, and political differences dividing Iraq—that were never considered in the original plans for Iraq’s invasion and reconstruction. Like Spiegelman’s text, these discussions deploy history to mitigate the forward march of what many fear is a war without end. But Spiegelman’s work also reveals that we need not wait for preemption before countering it with historical time. Not only can the past disarm preemption, but it also offers its own solution to the time-knowledge paradox, as it suggests that we need not immediately succumb to the lose-lose choice between acting without knowing and knowing without acting. Instead, like Spiegelman in his moment of trauma, we can look to the past for the histories that best personify us—moving forward by moving back—and make our present both more alive and less out of control than it would otherwise be.

Reading this conclusion back onto Foer’s novel, I would suggest that the two texts might not pursue such disparate temporal modes after all. In the nascent relationship that he forges with his grandfather, Oskar recognizes a form of historical repetition—in his case, between Dresden and 9/11—that echoes Spiegelman’s own recourse to history. In the absence of his father, Oskar’s grandfather becomes, quite literally, the past that provides the his-
tory best able to reanimate him in the present, a past that certainly makes Oskar’s present both more alive and less out of control than it would otherwise be. Rather than contending that the quasi-performances internal to Foer’s novel compromise real-time temporal experience while only the meta-performance external to the novel uncompromisingly achieves it, the temporal logic of Spiegelman’s work demonstrates that allowing a little retroactive temporality to compromise real-time performativity should not be viewed as a failure, or even as a compromise. Instead, it appears symptomatic of a world in which leaving oneself open to a radically contingent future could lead to certain death. Forced to live with precisely this fear, Oskar and his grandfather, much like Spiegelman, will always compromise their performances for knowledge; they will always hedge their bets to protect themselves from the threat of unknown unknowns.

And to the extent that Foer’s real-time model—clearly more in line with Morson’s thoughts on reading than with Attridge’s—is not conducive to rereading, the same lesson applies to performative metafiction itself. As I am proving by writing this sentence, interpretation, knowledge, and representation’s symbolic mode always intrude on the radically aleatory contingencies of performance. To reiterate one of Qualified Hope’s main arguments, it is too easy to see compromised performances as failures and uncompromised ones as successes. Instead, if we admit that there are no uncompromised performances, that the lure of real time is just a pipe dream that distracts us from identifying more complicated temporal (and literary) forms that might productively avoid the time-knowledge paradox, then we are free to make somewhat more interesting arguments. For example, the lessons of Spiegelman’s work suggest that the apparent contradiction between performance and representation that Foer’s novel reveals at the heart of metafiction need not be contradictory at all. Instead, if we conceive the performative and representational modes simultaneously, then Foer’s novel reveals not the conflicted limits of metafiction, but rather its potential, and these apparent contradictions instead provide forms of temporal experience that assuage rather than exacerbate trauma. In demonstrating that metafiction is always simultaneously performative and representational, always a performance and a representation of that performance, Foer’s novel produces an aesthetic doubleness that creates a temporal experience that moves simultaneously forward like a performance and backward like a symbolic representation referring to something prior. Best of all, at least for the temporal traumas described in Foer’s novel, this doubleness amounts to a formal enactment of Oskar’s own complicated impulse to both return and never return to the moment of trauma. Metafiction provides an aesthetic form and thus a temporal experience
that nonparadoxically accommodates his simultaneous desire to remember (through the symbolic) and forget (through the performative). Finally, this simultaneity offers a new way to read the novel's concluding image in which quickly flipping the final fifteen pages forward cinematically returns the falling man safely to the building from which he jumped. Frequently read as a juvenile stunt symptomatic of Foer's (and Oskar's) naive wish to turn back time, we should instead see it as a perfect example of how the simultaneity of performance and representation yields a temporal model that moves forward by moving back in a noncontradictory way.
PART II

THE POLITICS OF CULTURE
RACE

NATHANIEL MACKEY’S FROM A BROKEN BOTTLE TRACES OF PERFUME STILL EMANATE

_Invisibility, let me explain, gives one a slightly different sense of time, you’re never quite on the beat. Sometimes you’re ahead and sometimes behind. Instead of the swift and imperceptible flowing of time, you are aware of its nodes, those points where time stands still or from which it leaps ahead. And you slip into the breaks and look around._

—Ralph Ellison, _Invisible Man_

On April 16, 2006, Jamal Woolard, a little-known rapper from Brooklyn, New York, who records under the name “Gravy,” was shot in his left buttock outside a Manhattan radio station. Although the police found eleven shell casings and many bystanders were present, Gravy was the only individual hit by a bullet, an incredible stroke of luck which immediately led commentators to speculate that the entire event was staged to raise Gravy’s street cred, not to mention his record sales. Such rumors were only fueled by the fact that an episode of the _Sopranos_ had aired just weeks earlier in which a rising rap star pays one of Tony Soprano’s men to shoot him in the backside for precisely these reasons.¹ Whether real or fictional, the idea that anyone might countenance such self-inflicted pain points to a disturbing relationship between violence and black authenticity, a relation in which victimization functions as the necessary ground for asserting one’s own power and fearsomeness. Of course, from slave songs born of the degradations of field work to rap songs born of police brutality and economic inequality, black music has a long tradition of forging art out of pain, an argument that Simple, the protagonist from Langston Hughes’s “Simple Stories,” makes when discussing the source of Be-Bop: “Every time a cop hits a Negro with his billy club, that old club say, ‘BOP! BOP! . . . BE-

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BOP! . . . MOP! . . . BOP!' . . . That's where Be-Bop came from, beaten right out of some Negro's head into them horns and saxophones and piano keys that plays it” (104).

Of course, such music does much more than commemorate violence and bemoan victimization. Instead, from a slave song like “Wade in the Water” to Gravy's own “FBI Warning,” these creations provide instructions for both resisting and escaping violence while also envisioning better futures. Consequently, in describing black music as an oblique politics designed to point the direction forward, toward what he calls the “postmodern yet-to-come,” Paul Gilroy contends, “In the simplest possible terms, by posing the world as it is against the world as the racially subordinated would like it to be, this musical culture supplies a great deal of the courage required to go on living in the present” (36). As Gilroy’s focus on the relationship between present and future here implies, the politics of artistic production are intimately connected to temporal experience, particularly the experience of violence and pain. Gilroy, in fact, makes an explicit connection between “being in pain” and a “personalized enregistration of time,” (203) prompting his own work to investigate “the diaspora temporality and historicity, memory and narrativity that are the articulating principles of the black political countercultures” (191). Accordingly, because of violence and trauma, the domain of black politics has historically been and will continue to be marked by its relation to time. From Booker T. Washington's gradualism to W. E. B. Du Bois's demand for immediate equality, and from Martin Luther King’s projective dream to Huey Newton’s black nationalist call to bear arms against the Oakland police, the temporal horizon of political change has consistently defined the nature of the articulated politics, and vice versa. Writing to and about a postcolonial black diaspora that has retreated into isolated pockets of cultural nationalism at the end of the twentieth century, Gilroy’s work articulates a new political vision by “bring[ing] a new historicity into black political culture” (190).

Why exactly might “black political culture” require a “new historicity”? Because, as Gravy’s possibly self-inflicted wounds symbolize, black artistic production and its consistently future-oriented politics have collapsed in on themselves, miring the contemporary black subject in a temporal paradox that has both artistic and political implications: what is the best way in the post–civil rights era to negotiate between honoring the past's unjust traumas while envisioning a more just future? Should the past’s violence ground future artistic production, and if not, then how can art produce a utopian future unmoored from past experience? Such are the conundrums facing the members of an experimental jazz band in Nathaniel Mackey's
From a Broken Bottle Traces of Perfume Still Emanate—a series of epistolary novels entitled Bedouin Hornbook (1986), Djbot Baghostus’s Run (1993), and Atet A.D. (2001)—in which Mackey suggests that the dialectic between historical suffering and artistic creation is particularly seductive, and suffocating, to African-American artists. These texts are composed of letters that N., the narrator, writes to a mysterious interlocutor named “Angel of Dust” between June 1978 and September 1982, and the letters roughly chronicle the band’s practices and performances, along with its search for a drummer.²

Nearly every musical performance described in the three texts evinces this double pull into the past and the future, offering various conclusions about the degree to which each should inform the other. Too much remembering and too much dreaming are equally shortsighted, and predating a vision of the future on the pains of the past both instrumentalizes historical experience and articulates the future in terms of inevitable disappointment. N. discusses this conflict in a letter that describes the band’s nervousness about an upcoming gig in New York City, their East Coast debut. N. explains that the band members are experiencing “[a] thick itch along the floor of the stomach [that] spreads a sense of expectancy, an issueless urgency with nowhere to turn but on itself, an otherwise blank apprehension. It’s an itch which twitters between two like-sounding limits: futurity at the upper end, futility at the other” (Djbot Baghostus’s Run 75).³

Describing the effect this has on their embouchures, he depicts “[a] mix of qualms and hunger. . . . It’s as if, that is, the mouth were hooked in a dithyrambic embrace, one’s embouchure caught by contested claims of a spastic past and a rhythmic future, alternate claims of a spastic future and a rhythmic past. Shakiness reigns” (76). In the previous letter N. interprets this tension as a space where “revelation and recuperation lock horns” (71); and in a letter dated ten months earlier, he describes the beginning of one of his own solos as a “paradoxical plea . . . lecturing all who’d listen on the hopelessness of hope while at the same time indicting the presumptuousness of despair” (BH 121). Such paradoxical and apparently mutually exclusive choices inflect the present with a “hard-knocks epistemology”—a condition Lambert describes as “the Afro-anticipatory taste of disappointment, Afro-inevitable slap upside the head”—and strongly indicate the need for Gilroy’s “new historicity” (DBR 77 and 30).

On an almost daily basis, then, N. and his fellow band members struggle to produce music that forges an emancipatory relation to the future, but they are also careful not to become too liberated from the past. Just as various cultures of politics—the media, globalization, and 9/11—seek a relationship between time and knowledge that accounts for and makes sense
of the unique truths of temporal experience, so too must those invested in
the politics of culture work to incorporate time into their understanding of
the world. In Mackey’s texts, this task is particularly complicated because
the form of time in which his characters are immersed stretches simulta-
neously in opposite directions. Mackey’s texts and my chapter thus ask
two complementary questions: what unique difficulties accrue to the black
diaspora’s attempt to situate itself meaningfully in time, and what unique
experiences and resources can the black diaspora use to gain a more timely
knowledge of its past, present, and future? I ultimately argue that Mackey
does achieve an innovative formal solution to the temporal dilemmas
facing post–civil rights era blacks: his texts both describe and produce a
rhythmic temporality that negotiates the double pull of past and future on
the black subject. More specifically, these three epistolary novels articu-
late the historical traumas of the Middle Passage and slavery; they explain
that these sublime traumas vex the black subject’s relation to both past
and future; they contend that this double motion into the past and future
empties out the black subject’s sense of the present; and they fill in that
missing presentness with a rhythmic version of time. Most of all, the highly
equivocating syntax and self-contradicting puns proliferating throughout
the letters incite a quivering reading experience in which this rhythmic
temporality produces our own timely knowledge of the texts.

Keeping Time

If there is a single plot extending over all three texts, it concerns the band’s
quest for its own rhythmic temporality, a quest most forcefully symbol-
ized in their search for a drummer—someone who can, quite literally, keep
time. Early in Djibot Baghostus’s Run, the three male band members have
an identical prophetic dream that leaves each believing that their future
drummer will be named “Djeannine.” Penguin, who evinces the most
acute attachment to this prophecy, at one point breaks down in uncon-
trollable crying and explains, “It’s odd to miss someone you’ve never met,
but I do. I miss her” (79). This idea of missing someone you’ve never met
marks the band’s original decision to search for a drummer, a decision
that stems from an argument between Lambert and Aunt Nancy over the
role of drums in the band. In a solo performance for the rest of the group,
Lambert lays out his case in favor of adding a drummer. To do so, his
playing retells the Prometheus story, ultimately associating the fire stolen
from the Greeks with the drums that were outlawed and stolen from slaves.
In a reversal of the master-slave dynamic, Lambert claims that Zeus actu-
ally stole fire from Prometheus just as white culture stole black music and
then, over the course of the twentieth century, proceeded to appropriate
it as its own. In the middle of the piece, as he switches from saxophone
to harmonica, he states to the group, “To articulate the past historically . . . means to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of
danger. This danger affects both the content of a tradition and its receivers:
that of becoming a tool of the ruling classes.” N. notes, “It sounded like a
quote, but he neglected to name its author” (146).
Knowing this is a quote but not knowing that it comes from Walter
Benjamin’s *Theses on the Philosophy of History* mimics Penguin’s sense
of missing someone he has never met. Moreover, the statement itself
describes a condition in which history deeply affects the present despite
the present’s apparent disconnection from that history; the structure
defines an unavoidably present absence, just like the absence of drums in
their band. Suggesting an ineluctable connection between drumming and
the African diaspora, N. thinks that Lambert’s song advocates “a rhythmic
umbilicality . . . an implied polity of a mystic-accidental assembly dealing
in alchemized, neo-Africanized ‘weight’ (i.e., duration and pulse).” N. con-
cludes, “The conspicuously absent drums . . . had a way of making their
‘presence’ felt” (148–49). While Lambert argues that drums would provide
a much-needed return to African roots, Aunt Nancy, believing that the
drum has become overdetermined in black music, claims that “the absence
and/or presence of the drum could never be taken literally, that either was
also the other as a genetically dislocated aspect of itself.” This is why she
prefers the band’s “come-as-you-are” approach to percussion (153). Lam-
bert, however, is “fed up with scrounging around for roots,” charging that
Aunt Nancy’s counterargument “revel[s] in deprivation” (154). Lambert
and Aunt Nancy thus represent two strains of contemporary thought about
the politics of black culture and its relationship to time: Lambert’s tradi-
tionalist approach elides the violent removal of drums from African and
African-American culture and uses the drum to connect with a pretrau-
matic and prediasporic past. For Aunt Nancy, the violence of the Middle
Passage and slavery necessarily entails that nothing will ever be the same
again. Her “come-as-you-are” approach implies the futility of returning
to the past—whether to the moment of trauma or to a pretrauma tempo-
rality.
According to Aunt Nancy’s logic, ontological and epistemological con-
tinuity between the pre- and posttraumatic subject remains impossible.
Instead, the experience of slavery irrevocably changes the black diaspora,
adding something to their experience that makes them nonequivalent
to the black population living either before or during slavery. Similarly,
Gilroy’s discussion of the “slave sublime” focuses on this formal element that is superadded during a sublime experience. In examining the black subject’s relationship to modernity, Gilroy identifies the sublimity of slavery as an integral and inescapable event that ruptures the continuity of black subjectivity. Afrocentric reclamation projects like Lambert’s, however, attempt to elide this “temporal and ontological rupture.” Relying on traditional models of temporal continuity, Afrocentrism denies historical traumas, miring the black subject in bad faith. For Gilroy, all recourse to “tradition” functions as a repressive, compensatory mask that “provides a temporary home in which shelter and consolation from the vicious forces that threaten the racial community (imagined or otherwise) can be found” (189–90). Instead of the illusory African home from which the black subject is irreparably ruptured, Gilroy examines the unhomely home of the black diaspora, a home predicated on uprootedness, hemorrhage, and trauma—in short, an uncanny home. Most importantly, much of Gilroy’s indictment of the Afrocentric movement takes aim at its reliance “upon a linear idea of time that is enclosed at each end by the grand narrative of African advancement” (190). Instead, Gilroy insists that a constitutive temporal uprootedness accompanies the geographical and spatial change that occurs in black subjects from Africa to Reconstruction, from one side of the slave sublime to the other.

But why refer to the traumas of the Middle Passage and slavery as sublime? Surely, aestheticizing trauma mitigates any effort to mend the pains of bondage and runs the risk of treating real-world experiences as abstract phenomena. And this danger would seem to run particularly high with the sublime, which is marked by a radical negativity that both entices and subsumes, offering the masochistic pleasure of surrendering our cognitive capabilities as its intensely present absence sets us epistemologically adrift. And yet, over the past several decades, scholars have been engaging the sublime as a productive interpretive scaffolding precisely because of its insistent negativity. Charles Altieri has argued, for example, that texts highlighting sublimity’s traumatic incommensurability can “play significant corrective and projective social roles, even though (or precisely because) they are the kinds of texts now regularly treated as lacking social involvement” (117). Altieri’s formulation reminds us that the true stakes of the sublime experience belong to the future, which is why, despite disagreeing about whether slavery can or cannot be ignored, the debate between Lambert and Aunt Nancy reveals their common desire to adopt whatever stance toward time will prove most politically productive in the present and on into the future. In describing sublimity’s projective potential, therefore, Altieri does not imagine a content-based projection of a better world but
instead highlights the unique formal properties that characterize the process of change such trauma induces. Accordingly, sublimity and its formal negativity frame any consideration of the present’s relationship to the past and, in turn, its relationship to the future.

Thinking about the temporality of sublime violence marks an important turn away from a long history of essentializing claims that anthropology, through its intimate connection with colonialism, has made about the relationship between race and time. Indeed, the racist assumptions inherent in many of anthropology’s conclusions about its subjects—what V. Y. Mudimbe calls “epistemological ethnocentrism”—have been as difficult to outrun as colonialism itself. Lucien Lévy-Bruhl, an early-twentieth-century anthropologist claimed, for example:

Primitives do not see, extending indefinitely in imagination, something like a straight line, always homogenous by nature, upon which events fall into position, a line on which foresight can arrange them in a unilinear and irreversible series, and on which they must of necessity occur one after the other. To the primitive time is not, as it is to us, a kind of intellectualized intuition, an “order of succession.” (3, quoted in Adjaye)

Although the biological determinism of this position gradually gave way to a more culturally informed approach, the assertion of a foundational difference between African and Western concepts of temporality remained intact. For the cultural relativist, Africans had the capacity to think of time as Westerners did, but other factors such as religion, agriculture, economics, and origin myths led them to conceptualize time cyclically.

This basic distinction between Western, linear time and African, cyclical time has utterly dominated any work on the relation between temporality and race. James Snead, for instance, extends the line-circle distinction to claim that the shape of Western time and history is just as cyclical and repetitive as that of black culture, but Western culture represses this fact. Snead simply reverses the privileged status that the West has historically given to linearity and progress, instituting a classification system of cultural forms predicated on the degree to which cultures “tend to admit or cover up” the repetition that lies at their core (146). Instead of flipping the dichotomy, Bonnie Barthold concludes that blacks are both severed from a point in their past when they had access to cyclical time and precluded from gaining access to the linear time of Western culture. Contemporary black subjects, she suggests, are trapped in an in-between time best characterized by “flux” and chaos (8). And Shelia McKoy agrees with Barthold’s structural description of the relation between cyclical and linear time, but
she decides to make the condition of flux and chaos a bit more empowering. Naming it “limbo time,” she argues that its presence across an array of diasporic cultures makes it a powerful tool: “Ultimately, the validity of recognizing a concept such as limbo time enables Diaspora peoples to connect to a past that does not depend upon the Western notion of succession” (220). Each of these arguments, presumably progressive at the time, uses an identical assumption about the difference between African and Western temporal experience to reinforce the author’s political assumptions. Moreover, all of these models ignore the sublimity of slavery, wanting either to return to traditional cycles embedded in a pre–Middle Passage culture or to ignore the rupture of the Middle Passage in favor of progressing into the future.

The temporality of the slave sublime, however, forces us to consider temporal experience as something other than cyclical or linear—specifically, as an irreducible break or rupture. Moreover, the political imperatives of diasporic experience—the constant need to improve conditions on the ground—demand that we see this cut not as an irruption from time but as a unique form of temporality all its own. Unsurprisingly, this is how music in general and jazz in particular treats its own internal ruptures and breaks, or what musicians more commonly refer to as “cuts.” When it comes to actual jazz performance, the cut takes several different forms. Sometimes, a cut will be a cut back to an original melody line or to some other passage already performed; in these cases, the cut obviously has an element of cyclical repetition to it. In more freely improvisational performances, however, the cut also designates a departure from the original melody or time signature, a flight toward something previously unconsidered. In other words, much like the uncanny, the cut can be its own opposite to the extent that it designates both a return to and a departure from a given musical line. Either way, as James Snead has argued, the break always enhances the rhythm and never debilitates it (151). Pursuing a more Freudian angle, Fred Moten highlights the duplicity of the cut, associating the cut of castration with the cut of jazz to make a claim similar to Snead’s. Moten describes “a cut or break that is easily reconfigured as an augmentation—something brought to the language one enters, by way of the language one has lost—that bears the lineaments not only of the most abhorrent and horrific deprivations and violations but also of the most glorious modes of freedom and justice” (178). In much the same way, the temporal rupture that constitutes Gilroy’s notion of the slave sublime cuts both ways: it does not dissolve temporality but instead accentuates and augments it, ultimately serving a projective rather than an ascetic function.
In sum, I am telling a story in which sublime trauma produces a supplement in the black subject, a supplement best figured as a “cut” in time that both pulls the black subject back to the past and propels her forward into the future. This double pull creates a vacuum where the present should be. Consequently, the present must be temporalized so that the paradoxically double move into past and future does not end in paralysis. And this is why the band needs a drummer who does not just keep time, but keeps a particular kind of time—a time that rejects and moves beyond the linear-cyclical duality. All of which suggests that the debate between Lambert and Aunt Nancy is not about content—about the presence or absence of drums in the band—but about identifying a temporality, a specifically rhythmic form, through which such content-based debates can be negotiated and decided. N.’s description of an audition by a drummer named Sunstick—whom N. likes because of his ability “to rescind the punctuality of time, exacting a feeling for the tenuous, uninsured continuum the so-called beat thereby allows or is made to admit itself to be”—reveals just such an awareness of this distinction between the content and form of the drum (DBR 8). That is, the band actively avoids “traditionalist” drummers who might ignore the slave sublime and pursue the illusion of temporal continuity. Instead, they want a drummer whose time is always provisional—who acknowledges that time is exclusively linear or exclusively cyclical only under duress—because if time can still be rhythmic without having to be subjected to linearity or cyclicity, then it is free to delve into the temporal cuts resulting from the past’s sublime traumas without getting stuck there.

**Sublimity’s Supplement**

In Mackey’s trilogy the sublime moment of trauma (the broken bottle from which “traces of perfume still emanate”) produces a supplement that serves two functions: first, the supplement always threatens the black subject with an uncanny return to the past moment of trauma; second, the supplement works as a compensatory object of desire (e.g., the search for a drummer) that propels the band and the plot forward into the future. The supplement thus functions like a toggle switch, moving the diasporic subject either forward or back. Both motions, however, are always asymptotic because the supplement can never be erased; neither repeating the past nor projecting the future fully absorbs the “temporal and ontological rupture” of the traumatic cut.
In general, Mackey’s texts portray the supplement as a hauntingly present absence. For example, N. cites Victor Zuckerkandl’s *Sound and Symbol*—an essay that Mackey also discusses in *Discrepant Engagement*—which asserts that “the dynamic quality of a tone is a statement of its incompleteness, its will to completion” (*BH* 21–22). This relation between notes parallels the relation between music and its listeners, which N. earlier describes as being haunted by a “phantom limb” (*BH* 7). In an interview with Peter O’Leary, Mackey describes this haunting as a process of “finding out what you have but don’t have. You have it in the form of a disposition but that disposition is not the same as the possession of it. So you have it as a reaching-toward-something.” As both an internalized disposition and an externalized phantom, Mackey articulates this pervasive sense of loss as “a spiritual supplement to the world that both invests it with a certain urgency and divests it of any ultimacy” (38). Accordingly, the supplement’s haunting presence both propels and stymies the black diasporic subject.

Throughout the three texts this “spiritual supplement” frequently adopts a material form. For instance, cowrie shells, implanted in N.’s forehead during a particularly powerful musical performance in *Bedouin Hornbook*, buzz and rattle whenever N. treads too close to music or emotion that sublimely defies comprehension. Always susceptible to reactivation, when he advances too far, the shells cause him to pass out and lose his short-term memory. N. describes the attacks “as an inverse gravity in which I’m cut loose from every anchoring assumption, a giddy index if not an indictment of a tipsy world. I feel it as a weightlessness, a radical, uprooting vertigo, a rash, evaporative aspect of myself” (*BH* 125). Explicitly linking the supplement’s temporality to music, N. also associates his dizziness with the spinning albums he listened to as a child. The records leave records (i.e., marks and traces) on the young N., instituting a “repository of imprints which long ago went to work on me, set up shop (tenuous hope, tenuous heaven) in my perhaps too-impressionable heart (foolish heart).” Finally, N. identifies a broader socio-political genealogy to his musical dizziness when he suggests that this tension between hope and foolishness, which he diagnoses as a sense of “possibility parented by prohibition,” is an “old dialectical story” (*DBR* 19).

While discussing the fact that Sufis revere palm trees because they believe they were made from the surplus clay that God originally used to make Adam, Penguin reveals the urgency with which he and the other band members want to transcend this “old dialectical story.” Penguin sees the supplemental clay as evidence for an “aliquant” incongruity between the clay and Adam, an excess that serves as a “[r]emainder and thus reminder of what’s left over, what’s left out,” thereby “bl[o]w[ing] the lid off totalizing
Such “lid blowing” might effectively resist an essentialist attitude toward race, but Mackey’s own comments suggest a more vexed relationship to the dicey work of balancing the supplement’s double move into the past and the future. In a 1992 interview, for instance, he resists any overinvestment in history, be it individual or collective: “You don’t want to see your wounds as the sole source of your identity” (60–61). Elsewhere, however, Mackey errs toward predicing advancement on trauma, parenting possibility with prohibition, when he claims that the “phantom limb” of music serves two important functions: it provides “a felt advance beyond severance and limitation that contends with and questions conventional reality” (DE 235), and it serves “to concentrate a memory of injustice and traumatic survival, a remembered wound resorted to as a weapon of self-defense” (DE 246).

These complexities also appear in the fiction, as the band members rarely agree on the supplement’s proper function. During one performance, for example, N.’s playing tells of “canefields burning, sudden rousings out of bed, late night harvest, all-night labor. A reminder of past oppression if not a foretaste of burnings to come” (DBR 130). Within the performance, N.’s allusion to the historical slave sublime functions as a counterpoint to Djamilaa’s voice which “rode the wind of its ‘new day’ annunciation, annulling the asthmatic equation on which Udrite aesthetics had up to then been based” (DBR 129). As N. explains, the performance is marked by a “contiguous incongruity between X-ray accessibility and semantic x-factor.” Assuming a transparent and easy progress that elides supplemental remainders, Djamilaa’s “new day’ annunciation” moves in the direction of “X-ray accessibility” while N. asserts the material remainder of past trauma as an irreducible “x-factor.” Djamilaa’s path wins out among the band members, but so much accessibility causes N. to pass out onstage in the middle of the performance, leaving him unable to remember anything about the show. He quite literally loses all reminders and remainders. The performance thus suggests that any meaningful (i.e., rememberable) motion beyond blockage requires the remainder or the x-factor; the song demonstrates the necessary interdependence of progress and regress.

After reaching an impasse in a libretto he is writing about the power of aliquant remainders, N. hallucinates an “automatic sax” that delivers the same message. Much as Penguin naively sees the supplement blowing the lid off “totalizing assumptions,” N.’s libretto engages aliquant excess as a one-way ticket to forwardness, claiming that “gap, that incongruity, obeyed a principle of non-equivalence, an upfront absence of adequation” (DBR 49). N.’s “principle of non-equivalence” seems better thought out than
Djamilaa’s “X-ray accessibility,” but here N. also looks for an “upfront,” fast-track solution, just like Djamilaa. The alto in the hallucination cautions him, implying that what he posits as the upfront aptitude of non-equivalence actually reinscribes a new equivalency between incongruity and progress. Instead, the alto tells him that “aliquant excess provided not a see-thru advance but a before-the-fact Atlantean collapse” (DBR 53). That is, whatever advance the aliquant remainder achieves simply reiterates the same “old dialectical story” of presence and absence, identity and difference. We might even say that N. is forgetting Mackey’s observation about the nature of the supplement—that it is a “disposition” that “is not the same as possession.” In each of the above examples the characters treat the supplement as a thing, as an object that is either present (e.g., Penguin’s “ali-quant incongruity” and N.’s “semantic x-factor”) or absent (e.g., Djamilaa’s “X-ray accessibility”). If the supplement is actually a disposition and not a thing one can possess, however, then it becomes a matter of form rather than content. This is why none of the approaches described thus far, all of which treat the supplement as content, successfully resolves the double pull that sublimity’s supplement initiates. Treating the supplement as a disposition, however, allows Mackey to think more complicatedly about its temporal form, which is what I investigate in the next two sections of this chapter, first in terms of the uncanny and then in terms of desire. Ultimately, I hope to show that Mackey, rather than seeing the supplement’s double pull as mutually exclusive temporal motions, superimposes them, creating a version of time always collapsing in on itself. Like the musical cut, however, this collapse does not excise temporality; rather, it constitutes a new, augmented version of temporality, a temporality that Mackey’s texts portray as rhythm.

Uncanny Returns

An early practice session with Drennette, the drummer they find during their trip to New York City, reveals the vital connection between rhythm and the past. Each time the band plays one of N.’s new compositions, “Tosaut L’Ouverture,” Drennette drags the tempo until she stops playing, “saying that something about the piece deeply disabled her, that she couldn’t say exactly what it was but that her legs and arms had begun to knot up, her body to ache under what felt like added weight” (AD 39). A little detective work reveals that Drennette’s incapacitation is a response to the composition’s allusion to “Cyclic Episode,” a song from Sam River’s’s Fuchsia Swing
Song. Apparently, Drennette has recently suffered her own “cyclic episode” while bicycling with her ex-boyfriend, Rick. After falling off her bike, she woke from a concussion with Rick cradling her head in his hands. Unaware of what had happened or where she was, Drennette hallucinated that they were lovers in bed and that the drops of blood trickling down her face were his kisses. This hallucination awakens her to the hope that their relationship can be rekindled, but it also forces her to admit that Rick does not share her desire to recuperate their past (DBR 147–48). In practice, then, Drennette’s “percussive spirit,” her ability to produce and keep the band’s time, is compromised by her “traumatic spill,” a trauma that N. describes as a “phantom cramp” evocative of the knotted limbs of slaves in a slave ship (AD 40–41). In the very first letter of Bedouin Hornbook, N. indicates that he sees nothing aesthetically or politically productive about such compromising traumas. Having previously pursued a return to the painful past intentionally, N. here forswears the “ontology of loss” and decides to stop working so hard just to “give birth to a lack [he] no longer ‘need[s]’” (9 and 8). Emphasizing his efforts to stop dwelling on the pain of history, N. tells his correspondent not to “expect anything more in the way of words,” no more letters, only taped recordings of the band’s performances. What follows, however, are more than three years’ worth of words, suggesting that one cannot maintain a consciously decisive relation to loss. Just four letters later, for instance, N. recounts a dream in which tears flood from his eyes because his brother Richard has returned from spending twelve years overseas. N. notes, however, that he has these dreams even though in reality his brother returned over a year ago, a paradox that suggests to him “a sorrow free of all cause, a sorrow previous to situation”; ultimately concluding that the “ontology of loss” is not so easily renounced, he admits that he cries for the more abstract and collective notion of “lost kin” (BH 21).

In instances such as these, history flares up, unbidden, dragging the subjects back into the past against their will. Knowing that the past has this uncontrollable tendency, one might be tempted to think that a conscious and intentional return to past pain could preempt any unwelcome returns in the future. All too often, however, even a chosen return to past pain—much like Gravy’s apparent self-wounding—only highlights the fact that one can never truly return home; instead, the return must always be asymptotic, approaching but never touching that original event that produced the haunting remainder. Paradoxically, then, choosing to return to the past effectively ensures that the past will continue to return of its own accord. Saidiya Hartman’s return to the West African slave ports taught her this very lesson:
One has come too late to recuperate an authentic identity or to establish one's kinship with a place or people. Ultimately these encounters or journeys occur too late, far too long after the event, to be considered a return. In short, returning home is not possible. Nor is this an encounter with Africa in its contemporaneity, the present is eclipsed by an earlier moment—the event of captivity and the experience of enslavement in the Americas. (762–63)

This state of permanent orphaning in which “the homeland is that which is always already lost” forces Hartman to ask, “[T]o what end is the ghost of slavery conjured up?” (763).

Taken together, Mackey’s characters offer conflicting views on just how actively the contemporary black subject should participate in conjuring up that ghost. When they do intentionally seek such a return, they do so by staging uncanny repetitions and doubles. In an early performance, for instance, Djamila and Aunt Nancy double themselves visually (they dress identically) and aurally (Djamila plays doubly negating instruments, the Kashmiri “not” and the Iranian “nay” to transform herself into “Ain’t Nancy,” Aunt Nancy’s negated double). N. comments that these doublings, like uncanny puns that reveal what was there all along, make the men do double takes, rub their eyes, and realize that “quandaries [they] only now began to see had always been there” (DBR 11). Pursuing a similarly punning revelation of what was there all along, Penguin highlights his always-already fractured subjectivity by playing a recording by the Penguins, a vocal quartet, on his answering machine (DBR 153). Finally, Djamila demonstrates her own constitutive fracturing during a performance that she gives wearing shoes bolted into a concrete block. This visual pun connects the amputation of being “implanted” in a concrete block with the mental, emotional, and physical amputations suffered during slavery, a time when blacks were literally “im-plantated” (DBR 143). In each of these cases the pun’s double signification allows the characters to intentionally conjure up the ghosts of the past while keeping one foot firmly planted in the present.

The difficulty involved in negotiating one’s present relation to a traumatic past comes to the fore one evening when Penguin invites the band to his house for dinner. While chopping onions for the meal, a “Knife Ex Machina” grips Penguin with a “shamanic seizure” that compels him to chop and cry ceaselessly. This physical repetition turns into oral “repetitions and permutations of certain syllables, words and phrases” until he becomes stuck in a rut, a needle stuck in its groove (DBR 89–90). Here the compulsion to repeat the past takes control of Penguin in the same
way that the “automatic alto” that N. hallucinates in an earlier scene comes to life to set him straight about “aliquant incongruity” and “remaindered excess.” In that scene N. air-plays the saxophone, thinking that he controls its message as he attempts to correct the intentional mistakes of the alto’s performance. This backfires, however, and “[i]t was as though automatic alto were playing [him], as if [he] were its axe, its instrument” (DBR 53). By refusing to let N. correct its intentional mistakes, the alto “critique[s] its own effortlessness,” contending that its seamless skills have not erased or ignored the historical trauma on which those skills were built. At the end of the performance, however, the alto admits that its self-critique “had simply replaced what it took to be artificial wholeness, artificial health, with artificial breakage, artificial debris” (54). The saxophone ultimately concludes, therefore, that it is just as hard to be genuinely broken as it is to be genuinely whole, a paradox that suggests that there might simply be no good way to deal with history.

In these two scenes of possession and repetition, Mackey argues that treating history as one’s axe—instrumentalizing it or using it to ground any progress in the present—will inevitably backfire, and history will return even stronger, transforming the subject into the axe of history. This occurs whether the past is being pursued or ignored—whether one chooses to be broken or whole—because both approaches imagine history as a radically detemporalized object or space. Indeed, as the characters in these scenes either possess or are possessed by history, they ignore Mackey’s distinction between a “disposition toward” and the “possession of” loss. N. shows an awareness of this difference between hypostatized and temporalized stances toward the past when he speaks of the need to “personify loss,” “to personify but not identify the resident hollow one’s apparent solidity concealed” (BH 195). To “identify” is to hypostatize, but to “personify” is to temporalize. Personifying loss makes it a dynamic force, not a thing to return to and recuperate, but a process intimately tied to the vicissitudes of time. Conversely, whenever the characters possess or are possessed by history, their movement through time becomes fixed and repetitive; they are instrumentalized automatons, removed from time and thus not fully human.

N. further highlights the temporal stakes of this problem when he interprets Penguin’s “shamanic seizure” as an “oblique discourse on rhythm,” an indictment of the group’s collective failure to “keep loss alive.” N. concludes that their inability to personify loss has prevented them from accessing what he describes as “rhythmic displacement,” an “echo of deferred fulfillment” that might allow them to “haunt and inhabit time” (DBR 93). “Rhythmic displacement” and “deferred fulfillment” speak to a quivering, rhythmic temporality distinct from the linear forward-
ness of Djamilla’s “x-ray accessibility” and from the cyclical return of N.’s “semantic x-factor.” Absent this more nuanced approach to time, the past seizes the characters in manic repetitions that ultimately detemporalize lived experience. But once they begin to personify rather than merely identify past loss, time begins to move in fits and starts. During a performance of “China,” for instance, Djamilaa and Aunt Nancy literally personify loss by dressing the part, and their personification directly affects the band members’ temporal experience. They arrive at Penguin’s house “dressed identically, each of them wearing sandals, a white cotton skirt, a white cotton blouse and a white cotton headrag.” Just seconds after their entrance, however, N. and the other men look up and see them dressed in a “black hat, black shirt, black pants, black boots, an empty black holster hanging below the right hip”; but after rubbing their eyes, they see them “dressed, as before, in white cotton.” (DBR 9–10). N. describes the experience temporally: “What one saw took one back a moment in time.” In this case they are able to “inhabit time,” to be taken back in it, because the women, monochromatically costumed and playing an Iranian drum called a “not,” have personified loss in both their dress and their drumming, which N. describes as an “insistent rush of binary negation” (10). The same temporal cut is activated during Penguin’s “shamanic seizure,” which “keeps loss alive” rather than treating it as a historical object. Just before Djamilaa calls him “Penny,” N. tells us that “Penguin reached into his right pants pocket for his handkerchief and, pulling out the handkerchief, caused a penny to fall from his pocket to the floor.” Again, the other observers see the same thing, although they also see the event transpire the other way, without the penny falling out of Penguin’s pocket. N.’s interpretation of the event echoes his ideas about “rhythmic displacement”: “Time, it seemed, had fallen behind by trying to get ahead of itself and now sought to correct or catch up with itself by including what in its haste it’d left out before” (DBR 96). In these slips or cuts in time the cyclical repetition of Penguin’s “shamanic seizure” is transformed into a more temporalized version of history—an uncanny temporality, predicated on the cut, which constitutes one half of an overall rhythmic temporality that augments and strengthens one’s ability to be in time.

**Desirable Futures**

The other half of that rhythmic temporality emerges from the relationship between the present and the future. In an interview with Paul Naylor, Mackey characterizes the past as an insufficient grounding for an aesthetic
project and suggests that the future must also play a crucial role. When asked about the seriality of both his novels and poetry, Mackey states:

As for theorizing serial form, lately I’ve been more attentive to a dark accent or inflection running through its recourse to repetition, the sense of limits one again and again bumps up against, limits one would get beyond if one could. This qualifies if not brings to a crisis the form’s promise of openness, possibility, advance. The form lends itself to a feeling for search but to one of insufficiency as well, to prospects of advance as well as to the not always happy fact of déjà vu. (653)

In addition to reiterating the idea that history must be personified rather than merely repeated (because such repetitions lead to “the not always happy fact of déjà vu”), here Mackey implies that the desire for advancement is just as important as responding to the call of the past. And as Djamilaa’s drive toward “x-ray accessibility” has already demonstrated, the characters in *From a Broken Bottle* just as frequently pursue the future without paying any heed to the past’s repetitive haunting. N. names the future toward which music’s desire strains “heaven,” and as a qualification of Djamilaa’s x-ray vision, he associates this desire with the conditional “would.” Not only does “would-be” proliferate as an adjective throughout the texts (as in “would-be heaven,” “would-be hub,” and “would-be high”), but N. also treats the word itself as a state or condition (“wouldness”) at which desire generally aims. During their performance in New York, for instance, Penguin’s playing on the oboe, a high woodwind instrument, suggests a “wishful insistence” that N. describes as a “high would” (*DBR* 24). The pun becomes portable when, in *Atet A.D.*, Penguin describes his prolonged absence from the band as a retreat into his “wouldshed.” The private space where musicians have historically retreated to hone their skills here becomes the location for conceiving a more collective vision of future advance (6).

In general, however, and as the tentative provisionality of “would” suggests, this straightforward desire for possibility is too good (and too easy) to be true. During a presentation at a symposium on “Locus and Locomotivity in Postcontemporary Music,” for instance, N. interprets a song as a “‘marriage made in heaven’ between aim and object,” but the audience arraigns his interpretation for being “opiate” and “opportunistic.” Similarly, while Penguin’s meditations on “high would” offer hope and possibility, the band also realizes that “would” “cuts both ways,” its hope and desire quickly bottoming out into a complaisant “would it were so” (*DBR* 124 and *AD* 25–26). In short, hope and desire advance only so far, as they too run...
up against an asymptotic limit similar to the one that prevents the characters from seamlessly returning to the past. If, when one thinks about the past, the asymptotic limit is a function of the failure of return, here it is caused by the absence of a stable object of desire to direct any movement into the future.

In *Djbot Baghostus’s Run*, N., Lambert, and Penguin’s common dream about a sublimely beautiful woman named Djeannine illustrates desire’s asymptotic nature. All three use exactly the same words to articulate their dream: “Beneath her white cotton dress she wore nothing. No slip, no bra, no panties. The sun’s light, having stripped her of the dress, was a further nothing, so unseizably there as to make sight a fleet, far-reaching rendezvous. . . . I lay possessed and penetrated by shadows, drunk with a glimpse of silhouetted legs and the X-ray wafting of an imaginary musk” (*DBR* 20). The dream concludes with a kiss in which Djeannine fills each mouth with a “mint-flavored liquid” that quickly devolves into “nothing more than X-ray spit, spit-flavored spit,” making each nauseated until “[m]y stomach began to convulse[,] . . . [a] gush of emptiness and air spewed out of my mouth and bent me over. I looked at my legs and saw through the flesh to the bones underneath” (*DBR* 23). Although the peppermint spit sabotages the romantic encounter with Djeannine, the three men become obsessed with this dream, and “Djeannine” in all her emptiness and absence stands in for desire in general throughout *Djbot*.

As Freud, Lacan, and Žižek have all explained, dreams do not fulfill desire but create it; the dream is where desire receives its object. In this case Djeannine and her “contraband heaven” clearly stand in for the men’s object of desire, but to the extent that she merely reveals emptiness, absence, and nothingness, she does not give desire its object but instead exposes desire’s object to be desire itself. Lambert’s interpretation of the dream further emphasizes this conundrum. Maintaining that this dream only lays the foundation for the “Afro-inevitable slap upside the head,” he sees Djeannine as “a set-up, the dream we tie to the sky, the match made in heaven” (*DBR* 30). In his critical work Mackey names this desire of desire *duende*: “Duende often has to do with a kind of longing that has no remedy, not simply loss, unrequited and so forth, but what [Federico García] Lorca calls ‘a longing without object’” (“Cante Moro” 75). Periodically, the characters do reconcile themselves to the fact that their desire will never find its object. For example, Penguin wonders of Djeannine, “Who’d be foolish enough to think we could ever capture that walk of hers . . . the subtle, suggestive sway of her hips, a certain pelvic savvy? The pelvic perfume, the erotic musk it seems to toss into the air, is accessible, everyone knows, if it can be said to be so at all, only to thought” (*DBR* 89). Because never
truly accessible, this iterative rope of desire, this fantasy which “is basically a scenario filling out the empty space of a fundamental impossibility, a screen masking a void,” is structured asymptotically (Žižek, *Sublime* 126).

Nevertheless, when not functioning as a “slap upside the head,” the asymptotic gap of desire also provides a second layer of temporalized “rhythmic displacement,” this time moving forward into the future. After all, even though N. passes out, the band’s collective pursuit of Djamilla’s “X-ray accessibility” proves to be one of the most successful performances included in the text, and during another particularly “moving” performance, the temporal displacement actually effects material change in the world as the band realizes after leaving the club that the entire building has been displaced an entire city block during the show. In her analysis of this transformative power of asymptotic desire, Adalaide Morris captures the specifically temporal form of Mackey’s engagement with incommensurability by referring to a line from Gertrude Stein’s *Tender Buttons*. Morris writes that Mackey’s “lack of adequation is not a failure but a release: a ‘difference [that] is spreading,’ the generative ongoingness and dispersal of punctual thinking” (757). Although Morris’s description of the emancipatory potential of asymptotic form does not tell the entire story—we should not forget about N.’s hospitalization—it does provide the other half of the equation for Mackey’s rhythmic temporality. Crucially, when combined with the displacement of uncanny time, the resulting rhythmic time is effectively defended against the pitfalls about which “automatic alto” warned N.: the danger of reinscribing breakage and difference as a new form of identity. If Mackey only offered a “difference that is spreading,” then he would not be heeding the saxophone’s cautionary tune. But Mackey never allows difference-based identity to establish itself because the retrograde temporality of the uncanny is always present as well. Mackey knows that difference, like Penguin’s “would,” always cuts both ways.

Armed with this complicated understanding of the relationship between identity and difference, Mackey presents a doubly asymptotic motion that propels the diasporic subject forward into the future and pulls her backward into the past, as illustrated in figure 1. The point where the two asymptotes intersect—the temporal cut—is a present emptied of all meaningful temporality. But as we will see in the next section, this is also the time in which Mackey produces rhythm’s quivering temporality, effectively transforming the cut into its own version of temporality. In fact, we can see the beginnings of this transformation here, as the graph demonstrates that each asymptotic motion is actually predicated on the other because the same supplement, created through the slave sublime, fuels them both. In other words, past losses create the desire for a better future, and the drive
to recuperate the past stems from the future’s contingent uncertainty. If the horizontal line represents a time continuum, then the fact that the desire asymptote originates in the past while the uncanny asymptote originates in the future represents this mutual predication. In effect, the desire for a better future is never so strong as when one is confronted with the asymptotic gap of return, and the drive to recuperate the past is never so strong as when the asymptotic gap of advancement makes the desired progress impossible.

**Filling in the Cuts**

Figure 1 represents the complicated situation confronting Mackey’s attempt to retemporalize black subjectivity, to augment the temporal cut with a temporality all its own. His task is made even harder by the specific historical conjuncture in which he intervenes: a moment when the goals of the civil rights era collide with postmodernism’s changing notions of representation, power, and truth. Madhu Dubey’s groundbreaking work illuminates this collision, arguing that “problems of racial representation are taking exacerbated forms in the postmodern era” because developments such as “the end of legal segregation, expansion of the black middle class, and ascension of black elites to administrative and political power . . . have strained the idea of a cohesive and singular black community” (5). For Dubey, the civil rights era both solidified the need for and undermined
CHAPTER 4: RACE

the possibility of a “cohesive community of racial interests” (30). Mackey makes a similar insight in “Destination Out,” where he describes a version of black aesthetics which, “[i]n the face of a widespread fetishization of collectivity,” “dislocates collectivity, flies from collectivity, wants to make flight a condition of collectivity. It says that ‘we’ was never a swifter fiction. . . . It says that only such admitted fugitivity stands a ghost of a chance of apportioning prodigal truth” (814). This impasse between identity politics and postmodernism even vexes the automatic alto when it asks, “[I]n a period haunted by (hemmed in by) artifice . . . [is] there no way to be genuinely broken?” (DBR 54).

The short answer is no. As long as the break opened up at the intersection of desire and the uncanny remains detemporalized, the characters only spin their wheels in N.’s “old dialectical story.” For instance, whenever they find “every attempt to make a virtue of sorrow” arraigned and every utopic future “absconded with by this or that preemptive intervention” (BH 117 and 200), they unconsciously tend to enter into what N. describes as a “self-sentencing conviction and self-commuting sentence [that are] symbiotic halves of a self-cycling ordeal” (DBR 18). In short, the band frequently knocks itself down only to be picked back up, repeating the traumas of the past without moving beyond them and ensuring that there is, in fact, no way to be “genuinely broken,” much less “genuinely whole.” Despite their gnawing desire to “awaken or unlock the roar so apparently sedated by a shepherded ennui,” to “harvest (i.e., mobilize) the lion,” this “self-cycling ordeal” prevents the characters from filling in the temporal cut of their present and traps them in a stagnant, circular discourse of dialectical opposition (BH 133 and 80). Having learned the poststructural lesson that “inversion finds itself invested in the very assumptions it sets out to subvert,” N. insistently wants to avoid any “romance of resistance”: “I find myself . . . increasingly unable (albeit not totally unable) to invest in notions of dialectical inevitability, to read the absence of what’s manifestly not there as the sign of its eventual presence” (BH 28 and AD 120). Because such tactics of inversion ossify their terms of engagement, Mackey’s texts explicitly caution us against predicating any form of political advancement of them.14

Instead, Mackey contends that finding a unique temporality to fill in the aporetic present might be the only way to move past the wheel-spinning politics of dialectical opposition. He moves in this direction when, rather than seeing the double pull of past and future as a permanent state of self-contradiction, he associates it with a mobile logic of qualification. Whereas contradiction empties the present, qualification gives it temporal contours; qualifying instead of contradicting allows the temporal cut to
mend through breaking. Moreover, qualification provides a unique model of temporality that is neither cyclical nor linear. Rather than instituting an Edelman-like “self-cycling ordeal” or stretching forward into infinite Groszian possibility, qualification lends rhythm to being. Mackey makes this point politically relevant when he claims, “Our interest in cultural diversity . . . should lead us to be wary of hypostasis, the risk we take with nouns, a dead end that will impede changes unless ‘other,’ ‘self,’ and such are given the possibility of ‘infinite qualification’” (DE 276). Here, by describing qualification as an antidote to the hypostasis of nouns, Mackey grants it the temporality that inheres in verbs. In these newly temporal terms, the cut ceases to function as a mere mark of difference and instead becomes an opportunity for a highly qualified transcendence.15

For Mackey, the dominant culture’s appropriation of black music best represents the widespread absence of temporality in the articulation of black culture. Riffing on Amiri Baraka’s claim that white culture turned “swing” from a verb (something one does) to a noun (something one listens to), Mackey argues that black artistic culture should be moving in the other direction, from noun to verb, for explicitly political reasons.16 He contends, for example, that the shift from noun to verb “linguistically accentuates action among a people whose ability to act is curtailed by racist constraints” (DE 268). This can occur because highlighting the verbal quality of living does not simply oppose spatialized demarcations of power but actually shifts the mode of political discourse altogether. This artistic “verbing”—in effect, a retemporalization of lived experience—suggests that overcoming oppression entails more than identifying a position of articulation. Instead, it requires adopting an active mode of being in the world. Music, particularly the Mystic Horn Society’s improvisational free jazz, would thus seem to be the logical place to turn for just such a fully temporalized form of black cultural politics.

But having no formal musical training, Mackey’s literary forms of expression cannot directly tap into the rhythmic dynamics of musical performance. As a writer, the need to personify rather than identify presents him with different constraints from those of a jazz band; after all, he cannot write only in verbs. Nevertheless, Mackey makes the most of his tools, using syntactical qualification to produce vibrations and rhythm in his writing which effectively temporalize his articulation of black culture. Experientially and thematically, this quivering derives from the traumatic rupture whose supplement simultaneously incites an internal tendency toward action and lingers as an incessantly haunting event, thereby producing a temporal model that is adamantly non-aleatory. Instead, much as I described reading in chapter 2, such rhythmic time manages to be simul-
taneously bounded and unbounded: rhythm obeys a forward-moving substrate of successive beats, but it also marks out time's internal relation to itself, the cadence or mode derived from the nature of the space between the beats of that persistent succession. As such, rhythm is both an unbounded forwarding and a bounded grouping of different tones of varying length—it "moves" precisely because of its constant quivering, forward and back, between its unbounded and bounded form—a feature N. describes as the simultaneity of "straightahead lope" and "fugitive tread" (AD 95). In effect, when transformed into rhythm, the doubly asymptotic pull into the past and the future that previously evacuated the present of any productive temporality comes to look more like a series of simultaneously forward-moving and recursively spiraling loops.

Although the texts' characters tend to get caught up in various forward and backward movements that are rarely synthesized into a productively rhythmic temporality, many of the descriptions of drumming throughout the novels do convey this rhythmic time. First, nearly every description of drumming in From a Broken Bottle is marked by rhythmic qualification. For example, Penguin shares a recording with the band in which the drums have "a way of stalking rather than stating the beat," a style that yields a "rich polypercussive carpet into which collapse and eleventh-hour rescue were woven, stubbornly rolled into one" (DBR 87). Here the mutually antagonistic temporalities of uncanniness and desire that so plague the band are rhythmically synthesized ("woven") through the temporality of drumming. Just as the band was taken with Sunstick's ability to "rescind the punctuality of time," Drennette wins the band over with skills that elicit yet another weaving metaphor from N.: "Punch and propulsion complicated by slippage—well placed hints of erosive wear, erosive retreat—were the dominant threads in the rhythmelodic carpet she wove and rode, the pushy-supportive rug which, even as she threatened to pull it out from under us, carried us along" (DBR 133). Again, rhythmic time simultaneously advances on the current of successive beats and accrues through slippages and erosions that highlight the constitutive role of the space between those beats. The advance provides the "pushy," the accrual provides the "supportive," and they combine to make music and its meaning "vibrational rather than corpuscular" (DE 20). Finally, N. describes bossa nova rhythms in which "longing, heavily tinged with regret, became complicit with a no-regret furtherance of itself or beyond itself, a self-possessed rhythmic advance which, when it was on, ran the line between 'of' and 'beyond'" (AD 4). Here the rhythmic line between "of" and "beyond" represents rhythm's capacity to simultaneously signify forwardness and grouping, propulsion and erosion, push and support.
Not only does Mackey’s work describe this rhythmic temporality, but its unique formal innovations also transcribe rhythm’s simultaneously bounded and unbounded temporality onto that of the reading experience itself. In fact, in “Palimpsestic Stagger,” Mackey describes a similarly temporalized dynamic in his own writing. Referencing Kamau Brathwaite’s description of a “coastal poetics” that gives poems a sense of “to-and-fro,” Mackey characterizes his writing style as a “conflation of coastal sand with desert sand, undulatory premises with ambulatory premises” (228–30). While the tide undulates, the Bedouin, wandering in the desert, ambulates. Significantly, undulation and ambulation are not precisely equivalent to circularity and linearity: the coast always changes, and the Bedouin has no fixed direction. Only a rhythmic version of time in which erosion qualifies forward progress aptly captures the combination of these two temporal motions.

While I hesitate to claim that Mackey writes jazz, he does go far beyond simply writing about jazz. Take, for instance, the sentence describing Drennette’s drumming: “Punch and propulsion complicated by slippage—well placed hints of erosive wear, erosive retreat—were the dominant threads in the rhythmmelodic carpet she wove and rode, the pushy-supportive rug which, even as she threatened to pull it out from under us, carried us along.” As an example of the rhythmic qualification inherent in Mackey’s syntax, this sentence is particularly exemplary because its own form mirrors the percussive mode it describes. The two qualifying clauses—“well placed hints of erosive wear, erosive retreat” and “even as she threatened to pull it out from under us”—not only describe the qualifications in Drennette’s playing, taking a step or two back from its propulsive forwardness, but also manifest the same temporal experience for readers, acting as bounding qualifications to the unbounded advance that the sentence would otherwise achieve.

Something even more complex happens in a description of a performance by one of his favorite bands, the Boneyard Brass Octet. N. tells the Angel of Dust that the band manages to find its “voice in the most out-of-the-way places”: “Their approach seems to be one of confronting themselves with an array of constraints which, by way of a finicky, almost fanatical syntax, they retroactively convert to the ‘higher ground’ of an at once belated but anticipatory access to the most radical imaginable future. Always on the verge of disintegration, each ‘advance’ turns out to have gone according to plan” (BH 98). In these two sentences Mackey performs the same tricks with his prose. The constraints he faces are representational—how can he adequately portray music and its different elements in words? Given these constraints, Mackey’s prose perpetually hedges its
bets while nevertheless moving forward to make its point. In their continual qualification and syntactic detour (“appears to be,” “an array of,” “by way of,” “almost,” “at once . . . but,” and “the most”), the sentences are truly “finicky” and “belated”—one wonders if there will be a point and, if so, when it might arrive. At the same time, however, they move forward to the fanatical: even the list of qualifiers becomes increasingly assertive and stable until he can describe the imaginable future as “the most radical.”

In his interpretation of Wilson Harris’s *Palace of the Peacock*, Mackey notes that the crisis of representation—whether it be manifest as music’s attempt to represent heaven or prose’s attempt to represent music—requires that all assertion immediately qualify itself: “This is the ongoingness of an attempt that fails but is repeatedly undertaken to insist that what it fails to capture nonetheless exists” (*DE* 255). Here, the “ongoingness of the attempt” distinguishes this process from the asymptotically limited trajectories of uncanny return and future-directed desire. Whereas asymptotes emerge whenever time is treated as an object or space that cannot be reached, these “repeated undertakings” suggest a temporalized process that successfully personifies its goals. In his letters N. frequently describes such ongoing attempts to achieve wholeness and completion as “curves of articulation” (*BH* 30). As I have already discussed, the curve manages to move forward precisely to the extent that the cut makes wholeness unachievable and produces a temporalized qualification that resists the logic of contradiction, opposition, or negation. Mackey achieves the same effect in his prose, as the necessarily syntagmatic trajectory of each sentence ensures that no amount of qualification will keep the sentences from reaching their goal, while the qualifications ensure that the arrow never reaches its target perfectly intact. Instead, Mackey’s sentences curve, loop, and swerve into the meaning they convey.

We see an example of this in N.’s description of Djamila’s singing:

Djamila’s voice “took on a quality of naïve but omniscient, blocked but open access to truth. . . . The cramped insistence of a nasality which bordered on regret slowly elicited a sort of rain—a rain, however, which was more like a desiccated spray or a suspended rush of infinitesimal powder” (*BH* 59). In the first half of this passage, instead of signaling a reversal or negation, “but” means something more like “also.” Djamila is no less omniscient or open for being naïve and blocked; what she “fails to capture nonetheless exists.” Similarly, one senses that the rain is no less wet for being desiccated, no less dynamic for being suspended. A cut or break intrudes as N. stretches to articulate voice and rain, but the qualifications that fill in the vacancy of that cut give it an additive rather than a negative quality.
While this accretive qualification rhythmically vibrates Mackey’s prose on the level of syntax, he also pursues a similar vibration of the signifier through punning. The process by which one comes to understand a pun’s meaning, much like the proliferation of syntactical qualification discussed above, requires a rhythmic temporality in which meaning grows out of a vacillation between two different yet related concepts. In an interview with Charles Rowell, Mackey views this as another way that language functions like music:

This engagement with music has partly to do with trying to free the sense of what language does and what writing does by invoking the example of music, where, especially in instrumental music, what we’re listening to are by no means denotative sounds yet we have the sense that something very meaningful is being conveyed nonetheless. That fact serves as a provocation for language uses that cultivate apprehensions of meaning which are not carried at the denotative level, uses of language which get into areas of resonance and gesture that can be as meaningful and as expressive as the denotative functions of language. We hear a word and it denotes something, but in addition to that there are communicative and expressive properties that have to do with the tone of voice with which the word is uttered, the connection of that word to other words, rhythmically, phonologically and syntactically, and so forth. (714)

Drennette’s aforementioned “cyclic episode” is just one example of such non-denotative associations that do not obey any consistent logic. Believing that “the roots of coincidence” lie in “etymology,” the aural vibration between two words provides N. with more than enough grounding to build a meaningful argument about the connection between the music’s allusion to Sam Rivers’s “Cyclic Episode” and Drennette’s bike accident (BH 89). Most mysteriously, the actual words required for the punning connection to make sense—the phrase “cyclic episode”—do not appear in either N.’s musical composition or in Drennette’s lived experience. Although N.’s interpretation makes the pun clear to his readers, the effects of the resonance are achieved without the pun even being present; the rhythmic vibration is there prior to any attempt to stabilize its meaning by attaching two different meanings to the single phrase “cyclic episode.” Like a phantom limb, therefore, the non-denotative resonance links music and experience without language mediating or pointing out the connection. A second manifestation of this vibrational logic occurs through what we might think of as a reversed pun; rather than bifurcating the meaning of a word or phrase, N. frequently takes multiple words and conflates
their meaning into a single logic. For example, the fact that “impairment,” “empowerment,” and “impediment” all sound the same leads him to argue that all acts of crippling also contain an element of support (DBR 42). A third punning logic can be seen in one of N.’s interpretations of Lambert’s playing during a show. He hears Lambert posing the following choices: “Eventual or eventful? Basis or bias? Composite or compost? Concept or conceit?” Instead of the connotative pun of “cyclic episode” and the aural pun of “impairment,” “empowerment,” and “impediment,” here the objects of choice obtain their logic from the simple fact that the words look alike, from metathesis (BH 48).

Much like the Boneyard Brass Octet’s performances, Mackey’s puns, deployed with the qualified hope that some tenuous yet meaningful connection will be made, tend to go according to plan. Moreover, they usually advance a political argument on which the band then elaborates. For example, one of Lambert’s performances uses a pun to argue that a hierarchically “tiered” society inevitably produces a “teared” and sorrowful one as well (BH 45); N.’s notion of both political and spiritual “ascent” contains an essential element of “assent,” which he later associates with funk and its music born of a certain “scent” (BH 66); “Fort Knocks” allows N. to make a claim about the inextricability of economics, the military, and racism (DBR 31); N. considers the etymology of “to sing,” “cant,” to argue for a connection between music and debility (“can’t”) (DBR 145); the band puns on “Nazi” (“not see”) to indict the blindness of tyranny (DBR 173); and Lambert likes to think of himself as a “lamb,” but he also wants us to hear an aspect of fugitivity, of being “on the lam,” in his nickname (AD 95).

Because Mackey assumes the inescapability of the slave sublime, his literary performance of temporality satisfies itself with such highly qualified, rhythmic quiverings operating on the level of both syntax and the signifier. He does not seek to know time in the same way as Ada’s Van, because he already knows that a certain gap or break inheres in any attempt to gain knowledge, be it temporal or otherwise. At the same time, however, Mackey’s texts make the critical claim that this gap, created by the double pull of history and the future, must not remain empty and detemporalized. For Mackey, although we cannot know the true nature of time’s aporia, we need not deny temporality altogether. Rather than knowing time, his texts perform the process of temporally knowing, a process that ebbs, flows, and wanders about, creating epistemological challenges but not representational impossibilities.

In terms of a more concrete political agenda, adopting Mackey’s qualified rhythmic temporality injects a new argumentative logic into some stale political debates. For example, we might use it to reconceive repara-
tion payments as an acknowledgment of the asymptotic distance between the present and the past rather than as an attempt to compensate for past wrongs. As such, reparation would not be an act of equalization—a recalibrating of the scales—but would instead function as a springboard for future change because those past traumas would no longer function as the historical limit that marks one end of the present’s rhythmic quivering. Similarly, rhythmic time would force the affirmative action debate out of the rigid divide between those who categorically support it and those who categorically object to it. Currently, those who support it refuse to acknowledge that it might someday be unnecessary for fear that it will be immediately ended, and those who object to it refuse to admit that racial inequality remains a problem for fear that affirmative action will never end. A logic of infinite qualification, however, allows us to imagine a model of affirmative action that could stop, but then start again if necessary, after which point it might once again be stopped, and so on. Crucially, such a scenario would not be just another “cyclic episode” or an “old dialectical story” because changing facts on the ground—that is, the fact of time’s passing—would both qualify and propel each decision to either start or stop the program. In general, therefore, this “new historicity” that Mackey’s qualified rhythmic temporality brings to black political culture challenges the black diaspora to animate rather than relive the past, to personify rather than identify its political positions in the present, and to reconceive the oppositional logic of “but” as a simultaneous logic of “also.” Only then, Mackey suggests, will its movement into the future be meaningful and productive.

By the conclusion of *Atet A.D.* (“A.D.” stands for “adaptive dance”), the band members have fully embraced this temporal mode, translating the rhythm of their music to the rhythm of their lives. Refusing to be paralyzed by contradictory options of “selling out” and “keeping it real,” the band makes the qualified decision to record and release an album, confident that their choice personifies the difference between the extremes rather than identifying rigidly with one side or the other. While N’s great trepidation about the record release constantly qualifies the decision they have reached, the fact that they do ultimately produce an album represents their own “rhythmic advance,” their own “adaptive dance” in which temporality itself constitutes the meaning of their message.
Elizabeth Grosz’s voluminous work on time and feminist politics does not offer up your run-of-the-mill, everyday feminism concerned with issues of choice, sexuality, financial equity, or women’s access to positions of power and prestige. This is because she rejects a content-based, utopian approach to the future in favor of a radically unknown and even unimaginable future. Basing her futurism on Deleuze’s virtual ontology, Grosz reasons that imagining the way we would like things to be hypostasizes politics, rigidly linking political decisions in the present to one’s hypothetical vision of the future. By characterizing the future as a radical emptiness rather than as the location of possibility, Grosz avoids such stagnation and postulates a dynamic ontology “rooted in becoming rather than being.” If “the possible” names that which has already been thought, then Grosz conceives the future as “the new” or, as the subtitle to one of her essays puts it, the “yet unthought.” Fully cognizant of the challenges involved in thinking something yet unthought, Grosz admits that the burden of her work requires her to “think of direction or trajectory without being able to anticipate a destination” (Becomings 19). This requirement becomes even more challenging when applied to the domain of politics, but Grosz does so anyway. Feminists, she maintains, should not be “forced, through a lack of viable alternatives, to accept a more pragmatic, expedient and internal relation to the structures of global patriarchy, corporate capitalism, inter-
national racism or local government regulation, working within them and accepting their conditions as [they] struggle against them” (“Deleuze's Bergson” 215). Representing what Grosz sees as a conservative politics of compromise and negotiation, such complicit political models do nothing but “anticipate a destination.” They accept the terms of the debate—the limits of the possible—as “global patriarchy” structures them, thereby ensuring that their politics will never exceed the confines of that predetermined framework.

Take, for example, the “mommy wars” that continue to be fought between “stay-at-home” and “back-to-work” mothers. As second-wave feminists challenged women's confinement to the domestic sphere and made guilt-free work outside the home a reality for millions of women, the poststructurally inclined third-wave feminists argued that women should also be able to stay at home with their children without feeling as if they were betraying the feminist cause. The third wave's antiessentialism, which sought to retain feminism's political potency while grounding its politics in the historical, cultural, and performative construction of gender, allowed women to be “feminist” regardless of their postpartum childcare decision, the very decision that second-wavers found much less negotiable and, in turn, much more riddled with guilt.\(^2\) Curiously, however, the third wave's expanded thinking about “the mommy track” has not solved the problem. At least a full decade after the shift from second- to third-wave feminism, for instance, Lisa Belkin argues in a 2003 article from *The New York Times Magazine* that an evolving definition of success and fulfillment—one not so overtly linked to power, wealth, and prestige—has led more and more women to stay at home with their children. While not exactly biological essentialism, Belkin consistently implies that differences between men and women are natural rather than constructed. Wondering why women do not run the world, for example, she concludes, “Maybe it’s because they don’t want to” (45). Countering Belkin's reporting, Linda Hirshman, a retired philosophy professor, published *Get to Work*, a Betty Friedan-esque manifesto which categorically claims that “childcare and housekeeping . . . are not occupations likely to produce a flourishing life” (2).\(^3\)

Why does this problem continue to vex women and their families a full twenty years after the third wave ostensibly decoupled it from feminist politics? Grosz would probably contend that the problem will never be solved because the terms of the debate are overdetermined: it is a false dilemma that accepts and thus perpetuates a rigid either-or logic that has been fixed not just by generations of past feminists, but also by a “global patriarchy” that benefits from our inability to have any truly new ideas about the issue. The fact that we are still talking about the same problem in
the same language suggests that this politics is all “destination” and absolutely no “direction or trajectory.” In effect, any such approach to feminist politics simply substitutes its own rigid designators for the core signifiers that belong to the phallogocentric heterosexism it seeks to subvert. For Grosz, however, feminism is not a matter of making the proper political decision—reaching the correct destination—when confronted with a given feminist issue; instead, feminist politics entails living and thinking in a way that will move beyond issues altogether because only there, in a radically empty future that accommodates the truly new, will politically significant change occur.

Regardless of “wave,” Grosz clearly asks a lot of anyone invested in feminist politics. And as Grosz is a theoretician, not only is her work short on practicable examples, but it also describes the challenge of “thinking trajectory without anticipating destination” more than it actually does it—which is certainly no slight to Grosz. After all, if her own theoretical work resisted all destinations, then she would never be able to tell us that we should also do the same. This simply means that some other discourse besides the theoretical will offer a clearer picture of a feminist politics intimately linked to time’s immanent flow; and this picture is precisely what Leslie Scalapino’s experimental poetry, composed over the past three decades, gives us. A short piece in The Public World/Syntactically Impermanence, a collection of poetry and prose published in 1999, reveals the depth of Scalapino’s commitment to writing without a “destination.” In this passage Scalapino chastises Lyn Hejinian for pandering to an academic audience that presumably wants to leave Hejinian’s presentation with a better sense of what her poetry is about—that is, what “issues” it addresses. Scalapino writes:

I thought recently you described (at the university) your writing in terms of ideas—that it is “comparing cultures”—which will be accepted as description of the writing (its importance) but which are not the gesture that occurs as the writing (the mind coming up with whatever it is at that moment only). (Acknowledgement that it is perspective only.) Because you know the professors will tend not to like the ‘idea’ of the mind and only its action at a moment, because they don’t trust that. It isn’t “any thing.” (42)

Poetry’s “ideas” and Scalapino’s rejection of them in favor of “the gesture that occurs as the writing” is equivalent to feminism’s issues, goals, or destinations and Grosz’s rejection of them in favor of a politics of the radically new. Both try to achieve something that “isn’t ‘any thing’” while expecting that “thing” to do significant work.
Scalapino’s concerns do not stop at the aesthetic, however, as she also shares Grosz’s expansive understanding of feminist politics. For example, she writes in *The Tango*:

is subjunctive—the man starving dying lying in garbage?—there not being black dawn—?
no. not anyway—that is, anywhere.—or:
subjunctive is only ‘social.’ both. (19)

We can see in just this short passage that Scalapino’s interest in the relationship among ideas, poetry, and the temporality of writing comes with weighty political implications. Specifically, Scalapino’s work rides on a foundational homology between the overdetermined logic of feminist politics and the overdetermined value of poetic language. Underdetermining the idea-based meaning of her poetry thus finds its political analog in a version of feminism unmoored from predetermined terms and choices. Scalapino’s work, in fact, makes a wonderful counterpoint to Don DeLillo’s *White Noise* in which media technologies force the text’s characters, narrator, author, and reader to succumb to a frightening overdetermination of meaning in both the present and the future. Scalapino’s poetry delivers the opposite experience, as the only meaning to be found rests in the immediate present of its apprehension. Indeed, if DeLillo’s layers of knowing narrative preempt textual meaning and future knowledge, then Scalapino’s non-narrative, nonsyntactic, and agrammatical poetry, with its absence of character, plot, and point of view, harmoniously unites time and knowledge without asking time to run ahead of itself. Not beholden to “meaning” in the same way that theoretical and narrative texts are, poetry has the option of signifying nothing but pure trajectory absent all destination. And yet, taken as an actualization of Grosz’s ideal version of feminist politics, the radical underdetermination of meaning we find in Scalapino’s poetry—its reduction to the present moment of apprehension—feels problematically distant from politics in general and feminism in particular, a tension that will constitute the primary focus of this chapter.

Scalapino’s work offers a particularly rich exemplification of “trajectory feminism” because she does not simplistically argue for language’s transparency and immediacy as we might imagine any such real-time production of knowledge would be tempted to do. Rather than merely reducing language to its signifying core, Scalapino acknowledges that there is no purely innocent or formless language use, and she instead develops and deploys extremely complex formal techniques that resist political and linguistic
overdetermination. Despite its frequent opacity, therefore, her writing is wholly literary; it is highly stylized, theorized, and mediated. In resisting a naively transparent approach to language, Scalapino effectively stakes out a position beyond the problem of linguistic mediation and immediacy. She does not fret about whether or not language’s inevitable mediation of experience irretrievably blocks us from temporalized knowledge, nor is she searching for ways to deploy language for immediate effect. Instead, she so radically rejects reference, representation, and interpretation that the question of linguistic mediation no longer applies. Contending that the conceptual distinction between interior and exterior—based in the patriarchal epistemologies of Enlightenment thought—causes the problem of mediated knowledge in the first place, Scalapino’s writing utterly dissolves this distinction. Creating works that have neither inside nor outside in turn allows her to assert that a text, its writing, and its reading are all coextensive with and determined solely by the temporal form of a reader’s apprehension. For Scalapino, then, eliding the distinction between interior and exterior erases the problem of mediation; any charge of a naive drive to immediacy becomes a moot point. In a sense, and to make a bad pun, we might say that Scalapino is Grosz-er than Grosz since she would view Grosz’s notion of temporal immanence as the residue of an internal-external logic that Scalapino rejects out of hand. Instead, she pursues an immanence beyond immanence, a poetics in which there is simply nothing more than what there is. Only when freed of the prescriptive norms of reference and representation—that is, of destination—will both reading and politics gain access to the truly new.

My primary aim in this chapter is to show exactly how Scalapino’s writing does the things that she claims of it; secondarily, I will examine both the philosophical and political implications of those literary techniques. When considered as an intervention in the philosophical paradox of time and knowledge, Scalapino’s work fails to make much headway. In claiming that inside and outside, identity and difference, are pseudo-distinctions that should be treated as unified phenomena, Scalapino dissolves but does not resolve the relationship between time and knowledge. Regardless, the fact that her literary language does successfully dissolve such distinctions suggests two related conclusions: literary form’s flexibility continues to recommend it as a productive way to incorporate time into our understanding of and interaction with the world around us, and by extension, literary form’s philosophical limits do not preclude it from delivering politically potent arguments, as I will ultimately suggest Scalapino’s work does.
In her attempt to manifest a radically underdetermined feminist politics, Scalapino strongly opposes recognition in all possible forms. After all, if her poetry contained ideas or objects that readers could recognize, then the interpretive die would be cast and readers would be well on their way to a specific destination. According to Scalapino, recognition implies a prescriptive politics of “ought” which presupposes the political ends against which any particular political decision or act of recognition must be measured. The prescriptive logic of “ought” relies on two processes that overdetermine politics. First, it requires women to connect the specific particularities of their individual political decisions to the general political ideals of a broader collective; second, if the move from particular to general is to be successful, then women must also momentarily stand outside the space and time of that particular political decision to ensure that it is properly generalized. In the politics of maternal childcare, for example, a woman who experiences her decision to return to work as a political choice must first presuppose a feminist politics in which work in the public sphere enhances the position of women in society at large. Second, this presupposition also requires her to temporarily inhabit a projected point in the future from which her generalization can be justified, effectively removing her from the present circumstances of her decision. Two different motions thus displace our hypothetical mother from the site of politics—the first moves from a particular experience to a general ideal, and the second moves spatially and temporally from the inside to the outside of an event. Taken together, these displacements instantly overdetermine the meaning and significance of political experience in the present.

Counter to such overdeterminations—by the general, the external, and the future—Scalapino wants to reclaim the radically underdetermined experience of the present for feminist politics. To do so, she attacks these two foundational displacements, describing the first move from particular to general as the movement of interpretation, and the second move from an event’s inside to its outside as a fracturing of space and time. For example, when we interpret a book, we take the particular words we read on the page and generalize them into broader ideas, concepts, and concerns; and when we adopt a perspective external to an event, space and time must be multiplied and fragmentated so that we can move from “here” and “now” to “there” and “then.” Identifying these displacements as the two primary causes of political overdetermination, Scalapino thus writes poetry that both resists interpretation and unifies space and time into the present moment of reading. This section of the chapter examines her resis-
tance to interpretation, and after considering the political potential of such opaque and uninterpretable poetry, the chapter’s third section considers the unique theory of simultaneity that she uses to dissolve the distinction between interior and exterior. Finally, I conclude with an explication of the broader political vision her writing entails.

Scalapino dismantles the particular-general relation that any act of interpretation requires by purging her poetry of relationality, causality, reference, and representation. The problem of relationality is most thoroughly addressed in her earlier texts which ask how things and events relate to other things and events, and what, if anything, those relations mean. In the “Bum Series” of way, for instance, various people and objects are written into relation with each other, and the poem implies a certain desire to have the constellation of people and objects mean something significant. Some of the people and objects are: “the men / on the street who’d / died—in the weather—who’re bums” (51); “cranes” which lift “containers to or from / the freighters—as the new / wave attire of the man” who appears with baggy pants and dyed blonde hair (52); and “our present / president—who doesn’t / know of the foreign / environs” (58). For ten pages Scalapino, whose “I” should also be included in this odd cast, arranges these people and objects in different relations to each other as if she were constructing a diorama. For example:

the man in the new
wave attire—as the relation
of him
being another person—as
the freighter and
his and its relation

the inverse
relation to the freighter
only occurring when that
person is living

the man—who’s
accustomed to
working in the garage—
as having
that relation to
their whole setting (57)

Prepositions, scattered throughout the “Bum Series,” forge the relations, but not in any coherent or intelligible pattern. Confronted with a tangled
network of asserted yet chaotic relations among a disparate collection of things, the reader desirous of meaning will be dissatisfied. For Scalapino the simple placement of the people and objects in the places that they are (various forms of “to be” dominate the series) suffices, and by the end of the series the people and objects remain as paratactically isolated as they were at its beginning.

Scalapino does allow that relationality per se might be unavoidable. Because she desires a writing that is purely its own phenomena, for instance, she still admits the facticity of structure into her poems. For example, she writes in *Objects in the Terrifying Tense*, “The relations between things, the structure, is the belief that there can be any ‘relation’ of it” (3). To prevent a reader from insinuating any exterior meaning or knowledge into a given relation, however, Scalapino uses ambiguous punctuation and slippery subordinating conjunctions to maintain the openness of her writing’s relational structures—an openness Barrett Watten describes as a “disciplined avoidance of totality [that] traces a network of contingent relations in which subject and object have no fixed positions” (51). For example, dashes proliferate in Scalapino’s poetry, standing in for conjunctions, conjunctive adverbs, prepositions, or any other kind of transitional part of speech which, if present, might better define the relations among the words. The relations among people in “walking by,” the first section of *way*, demonstrate this drawing into relation that is also no relation at all:

```
made—to
be con-
vention in
the present
—their—my
by
myself

...


to make
—as
in—their
—it
with—
a person—in
a time (11)
```
Significantly, “my” and “their” are the two most commonly dash-connected words throughout the section, thus highlighting the difficulty in moving from particular to general, individual to collective, the crucial move of any act of political recognition.

The ambiguous relationality of “walking by” culminates with the temptations of causality in the poem’s final section, entitled “END PART.” This section investigates our propensity for finding causal connections between objects or events that might not necessarily be related in any meaningful way:

```
a man in
a city—when
I’d been
feeling intense anger
—kicking
me in a crowd

a bird
lit on
my head
when
I was walking
and was
having the same
thought (33)
```

How can she not think that the world is out to get her, that her anger somehow led the man to kick her, creating an aura of negativity which caused the bird to exacerbate the situation by landing on her head? Indeed, she describes the bird as “seeming / to have picked up / on [her] anger” (34). Confronted with causality’s seductive lure, “END PART” forgoes the first section’s gauzy relations and instead adamantly negates all possible relations among the events: the bird is “not necessarily” hostile to her, the occurrence is “not related” to her thought, the city is lovely “regardless of” her attitudes, and her anger has “nothing to do with” itself (35–38). The negative assertions continue throughout the section, resisting any desire to identify causal relations, an identification that would import presupposed ideas and explanations into what Scalapino insists must remain a radically underdetermined experience. Refusing to justify the move from the particularity of her experience to the generality of its meaning, Scalapino maintains that things just are; her experience of them just is.
Because any assertion of causality is also an act of reference, Scalapino treats language phenomenally rather than referentially. For Scalapino the fact that things are always moving through time entails that relations among objects or people exist only to the degree that those relations constantly change. Any depiction of relation or causality does violence to this fact, rigidly attaching a signifier to its signified meaning. Thus the only determinative relation in the poetry discussed above derives from the temporal pace and motion of her apprehension of the objects and events about which she writes (hence the name of the first section, “walking by”). Again, this does not indict the existence of the things that she walks by, but it does preclude her from identifying any relationality besides the Stein-like parataxis of “and”—“this and this and this and this and this”—in which the “and” signifies nothing more than time’s passage.

Avoiding the referential value of language in turn undermines what way names “the representational situation” (129). Representation implies referential structures of reflection, and reflection suggests a withdrawal from the motion of life. Scalapino makes this point in multiple genres: in poetry in *New Time*, “(singular events have no reflection) / concentration has made them reflections of each other, but as vis- / ible?” (64); in prose in *Objects*, “When [the text] is subject to only its movement, it has no other reflection” (78); and in an interview with Elisabeth Frost, “A space of the text has a reflection that’s only its own movement and not what is called a social perception. It’s as if the perception were solely that—social” (4). The seamless coextension between an event and its representation thus constitutes Scalapino’s view of reality. She does not, like a poststructuralist, claim that all reality is mediated by representation; rather, she demonstrates that all representation, regardless of mediation, is really just that much more phenomenal reality. The writing itself is history, the present, and motion.

Taken together, these various ideas about relation, cause, reference, and representation stymie the move from particular to general, thereby challenging the possibility of interpretation, an act that she views as a violent and oppressive relationship to the experience of reading. More than any other work, *New Time* is particularly interested in the tyranny of interpretation. Concerned about the temptation of retroactive interpretation that attends serial writing (i.e., the desire to synthesize what one has already read before moving on to accumulate more items in the series), Scalapino here argues that interpretation’s retroactive reordering of a text destroys reading’s spontaneous eventfulness. She writes, for instance, “interpretative—blue destroying—itself—their—structure in / being after only” (2); and more explicitly, almost doing the interpreting for us:
interpretative is the ‘fixing,’ and as such distortion of phenomenal activity (*per se*, not simply fixing the view of actions)

an ‘outside’ outwardly-articulating ‘social’ interpretation which qualitatively changes the object of its consideration—as does the inner ‘warp,’ which warps in order to see its own reverberation—is there (8)

The dangers of interpretation, then, are internal as well as external: interior interpretation is “warped” by self-reflection, and exterior interpretation succumbs to the desire to generalize from a particular occurrence. Moreover, these warpings represent more than just mild shifts in perspective (“the view of actions”); she suggests instead that they utterly undermine the core of experience (“phenomenal activity *per se*”). Just like any politics that requires one to recognize the “meaning” of a political decision before making it, interpretation also locks us into an idea before we fully experience the interpreted event. In fact, interpretation ensures that the event will never be fully experienced. In both instances, political and interpretive, the move from recognizing a particularity to making generalized claims about it can be justified only through presupposition. Scalapino forthrightly names this kind of interpretation, which preempts a subject’s access to real time and lived experience, interpretation “from the point of view of what one should think.” “It seems puritanical,” she writes (R-hu 62).

**Private or Political Language?**

Before moving on to Scalapino’s attack on the second displacement of recognition-based politics—the distinction between interior and exterior—I will look briefly at the more overt claims she makes for the political value of her poetry. How exactly does dismantling the epistemological structures that facilitate the interpretive move from particular to general enhance rather than undermine politics? At first glance it makes more sense to assume the opposite—that foreclosing the foundations of interpretation is tantamount to a rejection of the political. Nevertheless, Scalapino is very clear that her dismantling of this interpretive space is by design; she wants something more immediate, although again, this would be an immediacy beyond the problem of mediation and immediacy: “*One as the outsider sees oneself as observing actively and at the same time being inactive in the past event and the insider as active yet unobservant there. The event itself occurs*
'between' these. (My) intention—in poetry—is to get complete observing at the same instant [space] as it being the action” (“The Cannon” 9; Scalapino’s italics, parentheses, and brackets). Contending that a particularized, internal perspective permits experience without critical distance while a generalized, external perspective permits critical distance but no experience, Scalapino here asserts that her poetry will do both, but only because it erases these perspectival differences (or what in a previous example she described as “warpings”) and occupies external and internal, observant and active, positions all at once. Even if we allow that she does accomplish this aim, we must still ask whether the result offers us anything more than an opaque system of private language. Why should we care about her “complete observing at the same instant [space] as it being the action” if, by definition, no one else can experience the same event? How can her poetry mean anything to anyone other than her? Scalapino’s primary rebuff to such questions appears in a later version of “The Cannon” that appears in Public World: A characteristic of conservative thought is iteration of tradition for its own sake, valuable in that it is that. Social conditioning is transcended—there is no “other”—rather than perspective itself being seen being created. Without the conception of the social as phenomenological, actions that are rebellious in response to whatever conditions, are seen as ‘personal’ merely. Articulating outside’s warp imitated as being one—is interpreted as one’s being unable to comprehend, couldn’t put things together. A syntax that is this dismemberment will be incomprehensible in the framework of conservative thought (one characteristic of which: conception of the past as entity to be preserved as being in the present). In terms of a conservative framework, ‘dis-location’ is seen as merely personal aberration or failure to comprehend the whole, rather than strategic and phenomenological. (20) In effect, Scalapino tells us that any confusion over the ostensibly private language of her poetry is symptomatic of a failure of imagination—a failure to experience writing solely as the event of its own occurrence. Writing, for Scalapino, neither describes phenomena nor is equivalent to the phenomena it names; rather, writing constitutes its own phenomena. The private language argument, in other words, remains trapped in a representational paradigm. Because the thrust of its interrogation comes from its demand for meaning, when Scalapino fails to provide any, it contends that her writing is “merely personal aberration.” Juxtaposed to this representational paradigm, Scalapino asserts her phenomenological ideas about language. If words are representations, then they either succeed or
fail at transferring meaning and understanding between the particular and the general; but if words are phenomenological, then they are not even concerned with the question of meaning. The “conservative thought” that demands representational meaning will be “unable to comprehend,” but comprehension is not an issue for Scalapino. Consequently, she can write a “syntax that is this dismemberment” and feel well defended against the charge of private language. If we cannot understand this, we are relying too heavily on a conventional (and conservative) understanding of the relationship between author and reader. Scalapino’s author has nothing to say, no meaning to transport; instead, her author writes as a way to experience occurrence and to incite others to do the same.

More specific to my concerns here, in defending against the charges of personalism and privacy, this passage also shows Scalapino making political claims that point to an externality beyond the phenomenological occurrence of her poetry. Concepts such as “conservative thought,” “social conditioning,” and the “other” bring a conspicuously political valence to her core distinction between a representational and a phenomenological approach to language. In the very next paragraph we read, for instance, “Phenomenological ‘dis-location’ in writing is strategic and specific, detail arising from or noting social conditions or background; which conservative ideology regards as without transcendence, transient. Yet such transience is change as writing’s subject (in avant garde or radical practices).” Here even more externalities would appear to distance us from the phenomenological eventfulness of her poetry, as “strategy,” “social conditions,” and “background” all imply a process much more reflective and mediated than “complete observing at the same instant [space] as it being the action.” Nevertheless, in interview after interview, Scalapino asserts that despite writing very few poems that could be said to be “about” feminism, she is a feminist writer whose poetry speaks directly to social injustices both local and global. In R-hu, for example, Scalapino expresses outrage at an argument Robert Storr makes during a 1998 lecture on theory-based art. Storr claims, “There are no issues in art. There are issues in private life and issues in social life, but there are no issues in art. We are living in a neutral time.” Scalapino shares her response: “And there is no neutral time. Now with sixty or seventy (?) million people to die of AIDS, two million dying of starvation in Korea, girls sold into brothels, the homeless pan-handling everywhere—there being no ‘issues’ is a variation on a seamless reality. And one can’t be in that” (95–96). Similar socio-political content frequently appears in her poetry: bums freezing in the cold, oil rigs, social struggle, and Ronald Reagan form some of the primary content in “Bum Series” (51–61); the “social unit” plays a contrapuntal role to the mind
throughout *New Time*; and a starving, homeless man figures prominently in *The Tango*. Indeed, these political themes, combined with *R-hu*’s laundry list of social ills, suggest a polemic directed against an out-of-touch intellectualism: now, in a world with all of these problems, is not the time to be theorizing about the value of the aesthetic. And yet, this proliferation of “issues” appears to fly in the face of the intense presentism of her phenomenological approach to language; the politics and her insistence on issues would seem to be all destination and no trajectory, suggesting the kind of propagandistic poetry we might read in old copies of *The New Masses*. But this is not the kind of poetry that Scalapino writes: after all, lines such as “is subjunctive—the man starving dying lying in / garbage?—there not being black dawn—?” are certainly much more concerned with trajectory than with destination. So how can she rescind the differential gap between particular and general but also reject “seamless reality”? Isn’t the phenomenological unity of her poetry “seamless reality” *par excellence*? How can her poetry be only what it is but, in being so, also be political?

Borrowing heavily from the Marxist impulse behind Russian Formalism’s notion of defamiliarization, Language poets and their promoters developed the standard answer to these questions in the early 1970s. Basically, the opacity and unintelligibility of such literature foregrounds the materiality of language, prompting readers to reflect on the arbitrary and thus possibly manipulative relationship between the signifier and the signified. The alienating effect supposedly strips away one’s illusions about the transparency of language and the world. Although she is often interpreted according to this Language poetry platform, Scalapino actually makes the opposite argument and devotes much of her critical work to getting out from under the yoke of Language writing’s “radical artifice.” According to Scalapino, it is not the fetishization of transparently signified meaning that is a problem, but a more pervasive inability to think beyond the transparency-mediation duality in the first place. Postmodernism’s critique of authenticity, which, in the poetry world, Scalapino appropriately associates most closely with Marjorie Perloff’s critical work, wants to expose the constitutive differences lurking behind our everyday interface with the world, such as those between reality and illusion or the signifier and the signified. But the same presuppositional logic that we have seen Scalapino resist in both political and literary realms also lies at the heart of this critique of transparency: telling someone that the world is not how they think it is presupposes that it actually is the way you think it is. Sickened by such prescriptive demands, Scalapino cannot abide the implications of Perloff’s argument in *Radical Artifice* that authenticity does not exist and is only a “constructed domain of truth.” (Even more maddening to Scalapino, Perloff...
actually enlists Scalapino’s poetry as supporting evidence for her claims.) Complaining of Perloff’s logic, Scalapino states, “She’s not allowing anything independent existence” (R-hu 100). Instead, Scalapino argues for a “radical transparency” in which critique and opposition are produced out of actual occurrence. For example, when describing her erotic trilogy, The Return of Painting, The Pearl, and Orion, Scalapino claims that her text simply “is: exactly that is ‘social commentary on it’ as only exactly the thing without separation” (107).

In short, Scalapino’s writing is opaque, defamiliarizing, and often unintelligible, but she also claims that it is phenomenologically authentic and immediate, a tension that we can see in her simultaneous rejection of Storr’s “seamless reality” and her assertion that there is no “separation” in her trilogy. The key to determining exactly how her poetry resolves these apparent contradictions, between the personal and the political, the opaque and the immediate, lies in discerning exactly what “radical transparency” looks like and how it functions. This is how she describes it:

> A syntactical rendering of such ‘radical transparency’ might be akin to imagining negative space as only a positive surface: e.g. subverting it from an ‘inside’ where there is not its ‘language-shape’ existing:
>
> as if genre (such as erotica), ‘only’ as language-shape, were a reflection of social convention (that language-shape). [It] isn’t (a reflection)—in that it is to be exactly that thing. (107, Scalapino’s brackets, parentheses and italics)

Having rejected Language poetry’s argument for the political value of “radical artifice,” “radical transparency” represents Scalapino’s answer to my previous question: how can her poetry be only what it is but, in being so, also be political? As the next section will detail, these contradictions can be resolved only through a unique rethinking of time as pure simultaneity. In effect, Scalapino ultimately dissolves this tension between the phenomenological immediacy of her writing and the political externalities to which it speaks within the pure flow of time.

**A New Simultaneity**

Such dissolution erases all distinction between inside and outside, allowing Scalapino to decouple politics and recognition while asserting the political value of a real-time presentness. Of course, time’s pure flow does not in and of itself erase the distinction between inside and outside since any conven-
national understanding of the relation among past, present, and future treats the past and the future as temporally “external” to the present. To ensure that time’s flow has no externality, therefore, Scalapino develops a complex notion of temporal simultaneity. If a conventional notion of simultaneity—two events occurring at once—stagnates time, reducing it to the instantaneous snapshot of a vertical cross section of time, then simultaneity for Scalapino entails the simultaneity of time itself: past, present, and future occurring all at once. This horizontal simultaneity constituted by time itself prevents the stagnation of a vertical simultaneity constituted only by detemporalized content. Thus, she explains in her essay on H.D., “In my writing I’ve worked on occurrence of simultaneous times in relation to the writing’s structure, how time and events unfold or appear simultaneously as if existing vertically/ horizontally in a ‘visual’ field.” Logic tells us that vertical and horizontal, simultaneity and duration, are mutually exclusive, but Scalapino’s writing aims to prove otherwise: “In language horizontal and vertical time can occur at the same moment” (*The Public World* 3). She continues, claiming that “the future being in the past and present, these times separate and going on simultaneously, equally active . . . suggest a non-hierarchical structure in which all times exist at once” (3). She elaborates on these thoughts through a reading of Philip Whalen’s *Scenes of Life at the Capital*: “Past, present, and future occurring at the same time (wreck one’s mind) are the disjunction in which one cannot be in any instant” (7). “‘[T]hen’ is ‘now,’ the present is ‘now,’ and the future is the same ‘now’ (they occur at once, but not hindering each other, being entirely those times, separate from each other—in a ‘present’ as being disjunct)” (9).

Despite its philosophical implausibility, Scalapino’s complicated syntax successfully produces the simultaneity of time that she postulates, and the first quoted description of Whalen’s poetry—“Past, present, and future occurring at the same time (wreck one’s mind) are the disjunction in which one cannot be in any instant”—aptly exemplifies how she does it. The disagreement in number between the singular subject (“Past, present, and future occurring at the same time”) and the plural predicate (“are the disjunction”) syntactically allows many different times to occur in one instant. Of course, the disjunction runs even deeper in that both the subject and the predicate contain both singularity and plurality: the subject is singular only because of the gerund “occurring” which reins the temporal plurality of “past, present, and future” into one gerund-nominalized instant of happening while also maintaining a sense of the permanent motion of all of three times. In the predicate the verb is plural, as if it really wants “Past, present, and future” to be its subjects, but the
predicate noun “disjunction” is singular. So the plurality of “Past, present, and future” agrees with that of “are,” and the singularity of “occurring” agrees with that of “disjunction”; but when all of the syntactical pieces are combined into one sentence, the mind becomes rather “wrecked” trying to make sense of what does or does not agree with what. The temporal effect, which is quite similar to the one Pynchon achieves through narrative form, prevents readers from occupying “any instant” which would slice a vertical cross section from time’s constant motion.

This highly temporalized version of simultaneity also conflates the many processes that occur “within” it. Specifically, the processes of seeing, thinking, writing, and reading all swirl together in Scalapino’s essays and poetry so that each becomes identical to the others. Speaking of Whalen’s use of non sequitur as an organizing and compositional principle in his poetry, for example, Scalapino explains, “It’s only the way the mind works making fast disjunctions and connections; it is phenomena as being one’s mind. ‘Seeing’ is not separate from action and these are only the process of the text/one’s mind phenomena. Writing is therefore an experiment of reality” (8). Here, “it” refers to both Whalen’s compositional process and the process of reading it, which, as the equivalence that she draws between “process of the text” and “one’s mind phenomena” suggests, amount to the same thing. Logically, the writing and reading of a text cannot be identical unless past, present, and future occur simultaneously. There are plenty of ways in which writing and reading are similar, but Scalapino pushes the equivalency even further: “writing is the mind’s operations per se”; the written poetry is nothing other than “a demonstration of one’s mind doing this.” The same equivalency also pertains to the reader’s mind because the poetry’s “syntax and structure duplicate the process that is the reader’s own mind-phenomena” (4). Because of Scalapino’s innovative notion of simultaneity in which all times occur at once, she can assert an equivalency among the writer’s mind, poetic form, and the reader’s mind. In the same way, Scalapino sees no contradiction between her claim that there is no “seamless reality” and that there is no “separation” in her writing. If all times occur at once, then the multiplicity of past, present, and future accounts for the “seams,” while the simultaneous occurrence of past, present, and future accounts for the complete absence of “separation.” In other words, the political can reside within the phenomenological without undermining the unified nature of one’s experience of it.

But how does this happen in the poetry? To take just the tiniest sliver of an example from New Time, a 94-page serial poem in which anywhere from one to three stanzas appear on a page, we read:
the day—only—no
—night (which is delicate)
is

According to Scalapino’s notion of simultaneity, the pace and process of reading these words on the page should map onto the process of writing them on the page and onto the words themselves as they exist there in that sequence. If Scalapino wants to create a temporal reading effect comparable to thought, her writing points out that we do not think in sentences or even in clauses. Her poetry rejects the grammar, syntax, and punctuation that make thought meaningful through subordination and coordination. In the above stanza “the day” simply appears on the page only to be interrupted by a dash, an interruption that isolates the day into the stated condition of “only”-ness. “[O]nly” not only renames “the day” but also refers to itself as it exists in its own isolated state, stranded between the two dashes—which then, following the second dash, suddenly seems wrong: “no.” Following the mind’s path, night appears, and then perhaps enough has accrued for a thought larger than a word—“(which is delicate).” In these halting lines, however, the words do not represent or reflect anything beyond the simple fact of their being, an “is”-ness that is itself complicated when a singularity of being (delicate-ness) is predicated of a plural subject (day and night). The short stanza never identifies relation or causality; we are given no “also,” “in addition to,” “on the other hand,” or “instead.” The stanza is as much a list of the things that jumped into Scalapino’s mind as it is a meaningful statement about the day, or the night.

Instead of common attributes or properties, Scalapino hopes that a common temporal motion produces the cohesive force of the poetry along with the equivalency among the writer’s mind, the text, and the reader’s mind. In her essay on H.D., for example, Scalapino discusses the important role that time’s motion plays in her serial writing:

My sense of sequential or extended writing is that the present is in continual movement. It is not that the writing is fragmented; rather, events are “seen” again—first, before they occur.

For me, reading is “seeing” texts as if one sees on the surface of one’s retina, where the action of reading is out ahead of one—is actions outside. Actions or events are “read,” and . . . this action of reading is itself the present-time.

This sense of “reading” is interior scrutiny, which is at once observation of the outside. (205)
This unity of multiplicity appears whenever and wherever the grammatical logic of Scalapino’s writing breaks down: how can an event be seen “again,” “first,” and “before”? To be seen again implies the past; to be seen first implies the real-time newness of the present; and to be seen before implies the future; but the sentence also implies (grammatically, at least) only one moment of seeing. Moreover, this horizontal simultaneity appears alongside another dissolution of the inside-outside distinction. Just when she seems to suggest that there is an outside to reading (“the action of reading is out ahead of one—Is actions outside”), she negates that externality by naming such reading “interior scrutiny” and conflating it with “observation of the outside.” Scalapino thus asserts that the writing is not “fragmented,” despite the complex whirl of ostensibly internal and external actions that she highlights in her description of the reading process.

In practice, then, Scalapino’s texts offer no exterior scaffolding with which a reader might produce knowledge of the poetry. When Elisabeth Frost leadingly asks Scalapino in a 1996 interview if “the inside/outside dichotomy that dominates most Western thinking . . . is . . . basically a false distinction,” Scalapino responds, “Yes. I think that it has to do with the fascination of seeing that your mind and an action really are the same thing. Even though someone else doesn’t perceive you, they perceive their mind doing an action. It’s like trying to get into the time you’re in, as Stein was saying” (10). In other words, the act of perception supposedly distinguishes us from others and plunges us into the ethical problem that is other people. Because time constitutes the form of any such interaction, however, the inside and outside of an occurrence are always the same thing, united in a temporal experience of presentness that dissolves the problematics of the ethical encounter between self and other. Time ensures that people, their minds, and their acts of perception are not separate from occurrence; they are occurrence. Scalapino’s most poetic performance of this idea comes in *The Tango*:

the flesh is not asleep while one’s sleeping, at *any* time?—no difference between ‘apprehension’—
   it’s the *same* in one?
   —blossoming trees—outside—or ‘there not being memory at all’ if the flesh is no asleep ever
   
or that’s rest as *not* sleeping
the relation between ‘no memory occurring’ ever
(only constructing—thought as motion—in anyone—)
and the flesh not asleep ever (even while one's sleeping)—is blossoming trees 'outside,' that is also (13)

If the flesh here functions as a rim between internal and external, its ability to stay awake during sleep suggests the mutual imbrication of inside and outside. She makes the argument even firmer when she uses "is" to equate externally blossoming trees with "the relation between 'no memory occurring' ever / . . . / and the flesh not asleep ever." This equation, facilitated by the permanent motion of presentness, implies that inside, outside, and the rim between them are all one and the same. They are so much the same, in fact, that the first "between" in "no difference between 'apprehension'—" lacks a second term; without difference, there are not even two things that can create a relation of between-ness. Instead, all is only apprehension.

In place of distinction and difference, then, Scalapino offers a process of permanent motion that unites interior and exterior in time's passing. For example, Scalapino notes that in her preferred form of poetry "specific locations which are entirely inside appear to give rise to the outside." But, "This process is later seen to be the same as the outside" (Phenomena 106). Thus, "The speaker, the person writing the poem appears to be duplicating things, but these things are actually inside him" (109). She describes this process differently in The Front Matter: "I'm taking the outer culture to be the inner self drawing it in as one's core or manifestation—which it isn't. Then, it is externalized as oneself and is projected outward again as one's sense of real. That actually is one's inner self by acting upon its projection" (5). This process of projecting an internalized exterior as one's inner self, which, this passage suggests, it both is and is not, accurately describes what she refers to elsewhere as "reproduction at origin." What reads like a sequential process (i.e., reproduction) never escapes the permanent presentness of being (i.e., origin).

Scalapino names the outcome of this convolution "radical transparency." If transparency implies a representational situation in which inside and outside seamlessly align, then Scalapino pushes transparency further, claiming that inside and outside are so aligned that "transparent" becomes a senseless description—"being" would be more accurate. Curiously, however, such intense transparency does not translate into clarity; we must still contend with reality in all of its complications. Saying that inside and outside are the same is different from saying that the inside (i.e., mind, language, perception, emotion) is all there is. They are one and the same not because they are identical but because they are their simultaneous occurrence in and over time. Reading any of Scalapino's work firmly drives this point home: the words, the reading of the words, and the writing of the
words are coextensive and equal in their phenomenality, but that does not necessarily mean that we know or understand them; they are always, quite resolutely, external to us as readers.

**A Politics of Impermanence**

In many ways Scalapino’s intensely presentist understanding of the reading experience strongly echoes Gary Saul Morson’s ideas that I addressed in the Introduction. Both argue that literature provides a reading experience coextensive to the time of living, but they part company when it comes to the role that knowledge plays in the reading process. Morson needs a text that keeps the reader always in the present moment of acquiring knowledge about the work being read, and any past or future elements that slip into that present (such as reading the last page of the book first) ruin the entire effect. Scalapino desires that same sense of presentness, but she does not resist the intrusion of the past and future into the present. In fact, treating all times as simultaneous, she demands it, effectively making her version of presentness fully temporal. Despite their common advocacy of a model of reading that resists recognition and knowledge, then, Morson’s version can happen only once per text, while Scalapino’s occurs no matter how many times one reads her poetry. Even in its initial reading, therefore, Scalapino’s poetry can only ever be reread, which is just another way of saying that each present moment of interaction with the text simultaneously contains its past and future.

In turn, this mode of readerly apprehension only ever grounds and justifies itself. In several different works Scalapino describes this as a condition in which reading and the meaning it produces is “not being sustained by anything.” In *Objects* she even makes an explicit connection between this ungroundedness and the possibility of politics: “relations between people are not sustained by anything. . . . Writing is not being sustained also. The writing has to have nothing sustaining it. To find that place is duration. That is current time. We aren’t sustained and fulfill community. For no reason.” And a few paragraphs later she writes of the space created by duration “in which all actions are responsive to each other” (76–77). As a description of the “fulfillment of community,” Scalapino here argues that the move from particular to general, which I previously characterized as one of two displacements that necessarily overdetermine political action in the present, can, in fact, produce a successful politics as long as it is sustained and justified by nothing more than temporal duration. Moreover, if we pursue Scalapino’s parallel between the lack of sustenance between
people and the lack of sustenance in writing, we can conclude, rather paradoxically, that the political potential of literature depends on its complete unsustainability.

To be unsustained, writing must clearly resist the very epistemological scaffolding so conspicuously absent from Scalapino’s poetry: causality, representation, reference, reflection, and interpretation. But the absence of these things is not tantamount to the presence of duration—the one “thing” that Scalapino contends actually does sustain both politics and writing. To achieve such sustenance by duration, therefore, Scalapino not only rejects language’s referential function but also adopts a model of apprehension wholly determined by its temporal form: “the form of my present and past writing is ‘the mind as literally action of events’” (Hinton Interview 58). And she favors other authors who similarly “stat[e] their own structures as their forms which is per se scrutiny of the present” (Objects 1). (Notice here that she speaks of scrutinizing the present, not of scrutinizing an object that the present contains.) Because time functions as the unifying feature of phenomenological experience, her writing always looks to temporal form as its one and only mode of producing meaning. She expresses this idea throughout her essays and critical writings: “Form is instructions for, knowledge of the way of seeing, yet it is of a particular circumstance, location: what it sees is it. No rules or social caste determine seeing if it’s occurring” (Objects 10); “The form is the occurrence” (75); and “the ‘theme’ of the poems is its form” (Public 44). Scalapino thus indiscriminately makes form the exclusive mode of apprehending her poetry and, by extension, the world. Form is what teaches us how to see, what we see, what occurs out there in the world, the very words that one writes, and the thematic content of those words. Common to this array of definitions is the fact that form is always of the current time, implying that writing and reading reveal nothing beyond their own temporal phenomenality in the present moment.

Of course, actualizing this in poetry is challenging; one’s mind as form must stand in for and be consubstantial with all occurrence. If a thought is only occurrence, and vice versa (“the mind literally as action of events”), then what does one write? Scalapino’s The Tango goes some distance toward answering this question, offering us the metaphor of the dance as one way to think about how form may provide a work its sole referential value. Scalapino leads us toward these ideas in the only syntactically clear part of the poem, its beginning:

(Astor Piazzola’s tangos: the tango is relentless. The embrace
—a couple?—entwining goes and goes. It skips, jumps
ahead of a horizon—itself—resuming. The tango is a hopscotch 'head' of them, a couple, it's for convenience of maneuver, it's for intense love.) (15)

Here the tango seems to be a device that facilitates the exhausting task of making one's mind and its action tantamount to the form of occurrence, something it achieves by simultaneously constituting the couple's formal embrace while also jumping ahead of them, providing the formal duration that sustains the dance itself. Of course, knowing what we know of Scalapino's ideas about temporal simultaneity, we should also read what appears to be a temporality fragmented into past, present, and future (i.e., the tango can "skip" and "jump ahead of a horizon") as actually occurring all at once.

If this short passage offers a vague theorization of the referential capacity of form—specifically, the form of the dance—sustained solely by duration, then the remainder of the poem demonstrates what writing that is only its own unsustained form might look like:

separation the that's, outside as same the interior only
(separation) that's—. separation a to illumines

‘live why?’—one some on dependent—illumines—no place
~
and then—if there were that—there’s ‘no night’ either
~
as if from 'their' conception / view there were only 'that' 'one'—and only 'that' 'one' and only 'that' 'one'—an interior—and 'that' 'one' in it

except no interior in 'their' view (as 'that' 'one' and 'that' 'one' only structure)

Scalapino wants to make sure that every time we read “separation the that's, outside as same the interior only / (separation) that's—. separation a to illumines,” we “understand” it, but only while in the act of reading it. After the fact, we are perplexed, but because there is no difference between the formal phenomenality of the words that we read and the phenomenality of our minds apprehending and knowing them, reading and apprehending these words in real-time is like dancing a tango. In the same way, this passage presents both the interior perspective of the dancers ("as if from 'their'

conception / view there were only ‘that’ / ‘one’—and only ‘that’ ‘one’ and only ‘that’ ‘one’—an / interior—and ‘that’ ‘one’ in it”) and the fact that their interior perspective of “that” and “one” is actually just the phenomenal form of the dance itself (“except no interior in ‘their’ view (as ‘that’ ‘one’ and ‘that’ / ‘one’ only structure)”).

Admittedly, many will not find this to be a particularly rewarding or pleasurable reading experience, requiring, as it does, that readers accept a phenomenal realm of experience in which the only determinant content is a given mode, state, or condition of being—a kind of quasi-meditative space somewhere between being and doing where modality reigns. In Phe-
omena, for instance, Scalapino speaks of writing as “simply a mode of seeing what comes up in a time period” (114), a point she explains at greater length in her interview with Edward Foster: “I am trying to use the writing to be an examination of the mind in the process of whatever it’s creating; and to have there be a distinction, or there not be any distinction, between that and actually being in the present time: to have the writing be that” (32).

If writing is only a mode of being in and over a given period of real time—a text without context—then the reading of such writing will presumably have the same effect. Indeed, in the Foster interview Scalapino speaks similarly of reading, stating that she writes so that “you” (readers) are “always trying to be in present time; so that you’d be only concentrating in the place where you are”; “you’re creating [the textual content] by reading it” (33 and 32).

For Scalapino, then, anything more than being in the present time treads into the unjustifiable realm of “should” and “ought”; implicitly, political claims must always be made under the influence of the present time and its form because anything else results in a presumptive, overdetermined, and thus exploitative political mode.

In place of the overdetermined politics of “should,” Scalapino offers a politics of impermanence, a model of political action and choice that remains coextensive with time’s form in the present. But if time’s form is all time occurring at once, then traditional syntax—that feature of language that makes reading feel like a diachronic event in which past, present, and future are kept nicely separated—will not suffice. Scalapino thus argues that “syntax or language-shape” must find new ways, independent of any presupposed categories of time’s passage, to embody temporal simultaneity. During a discussion of her book-length poem New Time, Scalapino describes exactly how her syntax does this:

The text is phrases separated by dashes which simultaneously relate and dis-connect (also, the phrases are simultaneously unrelated). The phrases are ‘as’ (the motion of?—by being separated, ‘other than’) ‘being in the place
of’—freezing-red-sky-dusk-that-is-dawn. There is no relation ‘outside.’ At all.

Dawn is at the same time as dusk ‘as’ present time. Syntax ‘there’ (of the text) is relational as if a ‘time’ of (because ‘other than’—as it does not reflect) (is occurrence of) muscular physical motion. . . . It is a ‘time’ not as speech or sound per se—but as the reader’s experience of simultaneous relating and dis-connection only. There is ‘to be’ no basis. (Public World 35–36)

The simultaneity of relation and disconnection that she mentions at the beginning and end of this passage aptly characterizes the syntactical mechanism that Scalapino uses to create a reading experience in which all time is one. Any work written according to such a model demands a reader who is comfortable with constant impermanence and disconnection, a condition that the passage itself performs when “simultaneously relate and disconnect” is itself “disconnected” with the parenthetical assertion that “the phrases are simultaneously unrelated.” The proliferation of quotation marks in this and other similar passages works to achieve the same effect, as they highlight the simultaneous presence and absence of concepts like “as,” “outside,” and “being.”

The first pages of The Tango provide a more poetic example of how Scalapino’s syntax elicits an experience of simultaneous relation and disconnection to produce a reader’s experience of “present time per se.” If these opening pages can be said to be “about” anything, they broadly describe a shift from thinking linearly about the observed chronology of a given event to thinking about it simultaneously. For example, wondering if an observation in “present-time” actually occurs after a “real-time event (past),” Scalapino queries, “[F]irst seeing the ship or seeing the man dying?” (1). On the following page, chronological questions give way to simultaneity: “in order”—in spring, later—both. / as it not being first, occurrence at all, but at the same / time.” As we might expect, however, The Tango is not only about this move from a linear to a simultaneous sense of time; it also enacts this shift for its readers, making the reading experience both impermanent and always present. For example, the poem’s first and second pages are not identical, but enough of the same words and phrases appear on both pages that one is forced, upon reading the second page, to go back and determine if they are actually the same, at which point the reader starts to notice small variations. We read on the first page, for instance:

pink roses—are‘nt the pink sun rising—are ‘social’ only? both
“night” on famine—as one—real-time
(walking in garbage it wasn’t night)—not in time
either
‘night’ ‘night’ ‘won’t ever dis-place it’—it can dis-
place it—where it occurs

And on the facing page we read, with an italicized “only” and different line-spacing:

pink roses—aren’t the pink sun rising—are ‘social’
only? both

“night” on famine—as one—real-time
(walking in garbage it wasn’t night)—not in time
either
‘night’ ‘night’ ‘won’t ever dis-place it’—it can dis-
place it—where it occurs

This reading experience performs what the second stanza of the poem describes as “... observation / (‘so’ present-time) of a real-time event (past)—to make / these be the same ‘in order’ to dis-place ‘them’ and one” (1). The first version does not really occur first in our reading experience; it only occurs now. Reading the second page is “observation / (‘so’ present-time) of a real-time event (past),” which was the reading of the first page. The pages are virtually “the same” but also different and “in order”; they are simultaneously disconnected and related.

Of course, there are many ways in which one might dismiss Scalapino’s ideas about time and her literary deployment of those ideas. For one, science would not just refute Scalapino’s characterization of temporal experience, but would in fact challenge any phenomenological project—like my own—that views temporal experience as a relevant component of knowledge. Also, as I suggested earlier in this chapter, phenomenology itself would condemn Scalapino’s project for simply dissolving the problematic relationship between time and knowledge without actually solving it. Finally, anyone with a little common sense might simply point out that past, present, and future cannot occur simultaneously by definition, and regardless of what science has to say, we live our lives as if the past, present, and future were separate panels of our existence. But that is exactly Scalapino’s point: a life lived as if it has a connection to the past and a destination in the future is an overdetermined life precluded from adopting a mean-
ingful political posture. In other words, even if science, philosophy, and common sense all tell us that Scalapino’s treatment of time runs counter to everything that we know and experience, perhaps that is exactly why it still has some value for the world of politics. Specifically, it establishes a model of political decision making in which the past and the future are irrelevant because they are only ever concurrent with the present moment of choice. In effect, Scalapino actually gives the past and future less determinate control over the present by bringing them into the present itself. This is a bit counterintuitive, as we might assume that the present would become increasingly underdetermined the less connected it is to the past and the future. Scalapino would argue, however, that regardless of how distant they are, as long as past and future are treated as hypostatized times separate from the present, they will always overdetermine the present moment of political decision.

To return to the postpartum mother wrestling with the idea of returning to work, Scalapino’s notion of temporal simultaneity frees her from having to make the choice altogether. Rather than overdetermining her present choice by linking her present to the past (What would Betty Freidan say?) or to the future (What kind of world will my decision create for my daughter?), the woman can and should merely keep on living. Crucially, this is not the same as being paralyzed with inaction in the present. In fact, that is precisely why Scalapino includes the past and future in the present: if there were only present, if it were fully detached from past and future, then our hypothetical mother would be paralyzed. Scalapino instead offers a life free from the tyranny of having to choose at all—a life that continues to be meaningful and fulfilling despite having not chosen. Accordingly, this approach allows us to see that the truly oppressive aspect of global patriarchy does not involve confining women to the domestic sphere; nor does it involve bringing women into the public sphere and making them complicit with the imperialistic expansion of global capital. Instead, global patriarchy’s actual power comes from forcing women to choose one way or the other, from the logic of choice that feminism has adopted for its very own. Of course, our postpartum mother will stay at home, or go to work, or do some combination of the two, but she can do these things without choosing to do them—without accepting the overdetermined meaning of the choice. We might call this feminism’s fourth wave, a new stage that advocates life as it is lived in place of the third wave’s obsession with difference and the choices it permits—choices that were supposed to liberate women from the second wave’s dogmatism but actually just reinscribed difference as the “essential” component of identity. Moreover, if Scalapino has taught us anything, “life as it is lived” does not describe some naively
transparent existence beyond feminist politics; rather, it defines a position more feminist than feminism itself because it identifies all prior feminisms, with their focus on issues and choices, as just another tool of global patriarchy. Rejecting any attempt to stand outside or in opposition to masculinist hegemony as both second- and third-wave feminisms do, Scala-pino simply collapses the inside-outside distinction altogether, making it impossible to overdetermine the political meaning and value of life as it is lived in the present.
On December 4, 2006, the U.S. Supreme Court heard oral arguments in two different cases—Meredith v. Jefferson County Board of Education and Parents Involved in Community Schools v. Seattle School District—that questioned a school board’s right to consider race when assigning students to schools. While these cases challenged the conclusions reached in many landmark decisions, including the student busing sanctioned in Swann v. Charlotte-Mecklenburg Board of Education (1971), the definition of “diversity” articulated in Regents of the University of California v. Bakke (1978), and the limited version of affirmative action permitted in Grutter v. Bollinger (2003), they most directly confronted the Court’s ruling in Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka (1954). By requiring the end of de jure segregation in the public schools, Brown implicitly endorsed the use of race-conscious means to achieve race-neutral ends, effectively carving out an exemption to the “equal protection” clause of the 14th Amendment: “No State shall . . . deny to any person within its jurisdiction the equal protection of the laws.”1 That exemption allowed the state to treat people of different races differently as long as its actions were working to end de jure segregation. Once a school district achieved integration—a condition known as “unitary status”—the exemption would be rescinded and everyone would be treated equally regardless of race. The 2006 cases directly asked whether or not these goals are even possible.
In 1975 a district court mandated the integration of Jefferson County (Louisville, Kentucky) schools, and in 2000 the school district was granted unitary status after a court found that it had successfully overcome its segregationist history. Lacking Louisville’s history of de jure segregation, the Seattle schools were, in effect, always-already unitary, at least from the court’s perspective. Theoretically, then, neither school was exempt from the “equal protection” clause, and the universal and race-neutral category “student” should have already supplanted any racially particularized categories such as “black student” and “white student.” In practice, however, this was not the case, as both school districts argued that only race-conscious policies designed to prevent future de facto segregation would allow them to remain “unitary.” Paradoxically enough, according to their logic, the exemption to the 14th Amendment’s “equal protection” clause must remain open indefinitely to guarantee the very equality it promises. Supporting the plaintiffs in both cases, the U.S. government and its Solicitor General argued the opposite: the exemption must apply only to de jure segregation, and in all other cases school districts must forgo race-conscious behavior, even when confronted with overwhelming de facto segregation. If the exemption temporarily particularizes the citizenry to achieve universality, then the logic behind rescinding the exemption assumes that all universals, once achieved, remain universal. Even if the schools resegregated themselves, as the school districts argued would inevitably happen, this segregation would be different from the pre-Brown “separate but equal” segregation. As a benign reflection of the facts on the ground, it would necessarily be color blind, a result of what Justice Thomas’s majority-concurring opinion describes as “any number of innocent private decisions.”

Despite such antithetical positions, everyone involved in these cases—the litigants, the justices, and the federal government—appears to share the universal dream of race neutrality, but they disagree over whether paying attention to race or ignoring it will best achieve that aim. This is because they have diametrically opposed ideas about difference in its most abstract form. Those who want to pay attention to race must see difference as at least benign and at most wonderful for its own sake. This position belongs to those champions of diversity who smooth out difference’s rough and unequal edges, rejoicing in its presence while rendering it utterly insignificant. On the other hand, those who want to ignore race view all difference as malignant, retranslating “discrimination” as “differentiation” and suggesting that discrimination “between” is tantamount to discrimination “against.” Exhibiting just such an understanding of “discrimination,” Chief Justice Roberts writes for the majority, “Simply because the school dis-
tricts may seek a worthy goal does not mean they are free to discriminate on the basis of race to achieve it, or that their racial classifications should be subject to less exacting scrutiny” (36). Echoing this position, Justice Thomas cites the opinion he wrote in *Adarand*: “As far as the Constitution is concerned, it is irrelevant whether a government’s racial classifications are drawn by those who wish to oppress a race or by those who have a sincere desire to help those thought to be disadvantaged” (12).

While these arguments against difference identify a universally formal truth that exists independent of socio-historical content and context, those in favor of difference always link it to and insist on the value of a particular socio-historical content and context. In other words, these competing ideas about race entail a specific relation not only to particulars and universals, but also to history itself. When Chief Justice Roberts and Justice Thomas assert that the history of segregation ends the moment a school achieves unitary status, they sever all relations with the past. History and its content—what Justice Thomas calls a “discrete injury”—can be healed, and once healed, they are no longer relevant to our present. Conversely, when the school districts insist that they must continue to take race into account despite their unitary status, they base their claims on history’s continued presence, or on what Justice Breyer’s dissent calls the “stubborn facts of history” that “linger and persist” (44). By this account, race must always matter; if racial difference in the present is determined by the fact of racial difference in the past, then there will only ever be racial difference because the past itself cannot be changed. For Justice Thomas, however, anything so “limitless in scope and ‘timeless in [its] ability to affect the future,’ . . . cannot justify government race-based decisionmaking [sic]” (22).

However, even for those like Chief Justice Roberts and Justice Thomas who confidently declare its irrelevance in the face of a school’s unitary status, history proves conspicuously inescapable. This becomes most apparent in each author’s reliance on the historical impact of the *Brown* decision. As one would expect, Justice Breyer, writing in favor of the race-conscious programs in Louisville and Seattle, invokes *Brown* and its integrationist vision to support his contention that the ruling against the school districts ignores history and threatens to reverse the improvements *Brown* made possible. Paradoxically, however, Roberts and Thomas also invoke *Brown*, deploying its historical legacy and significance to justify their universalizing opinions and to stake out a position diametrically opposed to Breyer’s. Contending that “the position of the plaintiffs in *Brown* . . . could not have been clearer: ‘[T]he Fourteenth Amendment prevents states from according differential treatment to American children on the basis
of their color or race,” Roberts dramatically writes that “when it comes to using race to assign children to schools, history will be heard” (39–40). Justice Thomas is even more aggressive, developing an elaborate, historically grounded argument that invokes *Plessy v. Ferguson*, the 1896 case that sanctioned segregation, and situating his argument on the side of universal right while equating Justice Breyer’s ideas with the segregationists who ultimately won the case. Thomas reasons that just as the segregationists in *Plessy* asked the Court to heed “the established usages, customs and traditions of the people . . . with a view to the promotion of their comfort, and the preservation of the public peace and good order” (27–28), so too does Breyer “pin [his] interpretation of the Equal Protection Clause to current societal practice and expectations, deference to local officials, likely practical consequences, and reliance on previous statements from this and other courts” (27). Thomas then extends this analysis to *Brown*. After noting that the segregationists in *Brown* used the *Plessy* decision to justify their claims, Thomas concludes, “Though *Brown* decisively rejected those arguments, today’s dissent replicates them to a distressing extent” (28). Even when not discussing *Brown*, the conservative rejection of the past relies heavily on history to support its position. In denigrating what he sees as the dissent’s tendency to treat the beliefs of the current time (e.g., diversity and race-conscious decision making) as the beliefs that best suit all times, Roberts quotes Justice O’Connor’s claim from a 1990 dissent: “history should teach greater humility” (42). Despite his refusal to acknowledge its continued effect on the present, Justice Thomas indicates that he too has learned important historical lessons: “[i]ndeed, if our history has taught us anything, it has taught us to beware of elites bearing racial theories” (35).

We are thus left with a curious paradox. Roberts and Thomas argue that a universal principle such as color-blindness and not a historical particularity such as slavery should ground our treatment of race in the present day. And yet, in making this argument, both make recourse to historical particularities; they use history to contend that history should not matter. Granted, according to their “strict constructionist” approach to constitutional interpretation, both Roberts and Thomas believe that they are universalizing history: it was as wrong to “discriminate” racially in 1896 and 1954 as it is today. The paradox appears, however, when we remember that both Roberts and Thomas caution us against assuming that what we think is true today will be true for all time. They thus simultaneously assert the “eternal truth” of color blindness and the unavoidable fact that our ideas and beliefs are always specific to our present time; consequently, they can support their universal ideal only with historically particularized evidence.
such as the *Plessy* and *Brown* decisions. Their inability to suppress historical content from their universalism implies just how unpalatable a life lived according to their vision—a life purged of history—would be. But the dissent’s position is equally paradoxical and unpalatable. Grounding his decision in the persistence of history’s inequalities, Breyer sets up a relationship between past and present in which history’s particularities will never be universalized away because it will always be true that they occurred. If history justifies race-conscious behavior in the present, it also ensures race-conscious behavior in perpetuity because the “facts of history” will always be the “facts of history.” For the conservative justices, who believe that *Brown* teaches us that skin color should never matter, history teaches us history’s irrelevance. And for the more liberal justices, who believe that *Brown* teaches us that the violence of slavery and segregation will never be fully healed, history teaches us history’s permanently binding relevance.

Taken together, these competing interpretations manifest two different relationships that a nation can adopt toward its history, each of which entails a unique formulation of the particular-universal relation. Moreover, the divergent treatments of that relation underpin quite disparate legal arguments. The notion that history can be overcome suggests the universal’s easy subsumption of the particular and leads to legal decisions that refuse to consider the socio-historical context in which the law is being judged. Conversely, the notion that history affects the present suggests the particular’s core irreducibility and leads to legal decisions that insist on the relevance of socio-historical context. The former approach erases facts, and the latter approach fails to achieve enduring legal principles. In both instances historical content gets in the way. For Roberts and Thomas, whose “strict constructionism” envisions a timeless universal, a continuous and unchanging line that stretches from the original intent of the equal protection clause to the present, any and all historical content threatens to undermine their universalism with the myriad ways in which one moment in time is different from another. For Breyer, whose support of race-conscious decision making depends precisely on this difference—on the fact that people used to be enslaved, segregated, and brutalized—the eternal presence of this historical content ensures the constant deferral of his universal dream of making “a land of three hundred million people one Nation” (40).

If a focus on particular historical content precludes history’s universality while a focus on the universal simply ignores history and its particular content, then what might a history absent of any particular content make possible? Might it not allow history to matter in a way that it
does not for Roberts and Thomas and enable history’s universalization, and thus progress, as Breyer fails to achieve? Might it not even change the way that we make the kind of political decisions that we see represented in these court cases? Dagoberto Gilb’s 1994 novel The Last Known Residence of Mickey Acuña portrays just such a contentless relationship to history and insists on the past’s relevance despite its radical emptiness. Gilb’s work is highly critical of particularized difference, which plagues Mickey’s self-understanding to the point that he can no longer determine whether his history really belongs to him; but Gilb also remains leery of universalism’s history-erasing impulse. In short, Gilb wants to be postrace while keeping race, and the history it implies, alive. Consequently, Mickey’s identity constantly vacillates: sometimes he is a universal, a guy just like any other guy, while at other times he is a particular, a Chicano living on the United States–Mexico border at the end of the twentieth century. Unable to make much of the particularities of his historical difference, Mickey spends much of the book paralyzed with inactivity and indecision. But once he evacuates history of all meaningful content, treating it instead as a hollow form constituted by the fact of historical loss in general, he achieves a universal that no longer conflicts with the particularities of his life. Crucially, this innovative relationship to history articulates a field of universality and particularity that changes the way we think about race, difference, and the law. If history is conceived as the pure fact of loss—as a determinate absence—then acts of identity formation and acts of legal judgment can still account for the fact of history without relying on the indeterminate differences among historical particularities that, as Breyer’s opinion shows, preclude the universal. I will discuss exactly what this might look like at the end of this chapter.6

“Making the Difference”

Gilb’s novel begins as Mickey moves into the El Paso YMCA where he rents a room with a view of the United States–Mexico border. The duration of the novel concerns his stay at the Y, where very little happens: he sleeps a lot, he plays handball and ping-pong and never loses, he flirts with women, he gets high or drunk with his buddies, he eats at McDonald’s, watches a cock fight, works out, takes a job working at the front desk, and later gets fired. Most of all, Mickey tells stories, primarily about his past, occasionally about his future, and always surrounded with veils of mystery. Although he implies that he has been involved in some shady dealings somewhere in his past, neither his friends at the Y nor the novel’s readers ever discover
any details about his personal history. In the opening pages we learn that he needs a permanent address because he plans to receive a large sum of money in the mail; but we never learn why or from whom, and by the end of the novel, although he has checked his mailbox multiple times every day, the Godot-like money never arrives. After an epiphany in the desert that helps him know that he is “alive,” everything changes for Mickey: he stops waiting for the money and checks out of the YMCA, walking “south, the direction of downtown, or the border” (218).

Paralyzed by the indeterminacy of his past and the radical unknowability of his future, Mickey is stuck—spatially at the YMCA and temporally in the present—throughout the majority of the novel. When asked to identify himself on his registration card, for example, he is a blank slate: he “filled it out as a person named M. Acuña, from New Mexico, with a previous address he made up . . .” (6). Here his identity is unmoored not only from history, but also from geography and even language, as the narrator gives us no reason to believe that any of this information, including his name, is accurate.9 Further obscuring his past, the narrator summarizes the kinds of things that Mickey would tell anyone inquiring into the particulars of his past:

Once upon a time, he’d tell you, he used to pride himself on his confidence and clarity—he knew what he was doing, he knew where he was going. He’d done shit. He’d been brave in battles and he’d been mean. He’d been smart when he was right, he’d gotten smarter when he was wrong, he’d been good when he knew it was good, bad when he knew it was bad. Modesty aside he was convinced he’d once had admirers. . . . So what happened? Where and when did he lose it? Or had he become so convincing that he’d even deceived himself? (7)

In other words, his history is entirely indeterminate. Believing that “he [doesn’t] have to be specific,” his “once upon a time” fairy tales deal in broad and frequently tautologous generalities that refuse to acknowledge “why he was in El Paso, what or who he was waiting for, what the deal was, why he had to hide out.” Even when dropping what the narrator calls “unsubtle hints,” we only learn of “something that he wasn’t exactly happy about having done, that he was ashamed of one minute and proud of the next. While some people would think what he’d done was good, took guts and hair, others might pronounce it as bad or even, according to those with stronger views and no uncertainty, as criminal” (11). And on the rare occasion that Mickey does tell a story with apparent certainty, he remains skeptical of its truth: “Didn’t it mean it wasn’t a hundred percent true if he
had to convince himself, double-check his memory? And if he wasn’t sure, if the truth of something was questionable even to himself . . . ” (59).

This indeterminacy is not just your everyday ethical uncertainty (Mickey’s acts can be judged both good and criminal), nor is it merely postmodernism’s well-worn epistemological uncertainty (how can Mickey know what is true?). Rather, this indeterminacy extends all the way to Mickey’s ontology, calling the material content of his past into question and in turn challenging his ability to both know and to be who he is in the present. For example, when Mickey meets a man who recounts a story about Mickey being thrown out of Denny’s, Mickey does not just wonder if the man’s story is true but if the event was real and if that person in the story was he (126). Gilb’s novel thus asks the foundational question of identity: what makes us who we are? Is it some core truth that seamlessly sutures our entire existence as an essentialized view would claim; is it an identity that is constructed, both intentionally and unintentionally, as the antiessentialists contend; or, as I think Gilb will reveal, is it perhaps how we are in the world—the form rather than the content of our experiences? Until he can answer these questions, Mickey remains in ontological limbo at the YMCA.¹⁰

To connect these identity choices to the language of universal and particular from the beginning of the chapter, identity correlates to universality and difference to particularity. Essentialist conceptions of identity rely on universal categories to describe and understand the substance of identity—a kind of “unitary status” of the self. Conversely, antiessentialism, which predicates its constructed understanding of identity on historical, cultural, social, or performative differences, needs concrete particulars to distinguish one history from another, one performance from the next. Too much universality might slight a given group’s historical specificity, threatening them with unwanted assimilation and the indiscriminate reach of the universal. But too much particularized difference provides no basis for coalition building, political action, or the comfort of collective identities. Moreover, as long as the precise location of difference remains indeterminate (e.g., should we differentiate among individuals, races, ages, foot sizes?), any difference-based theory of identity remains susceptible to a relativized perspectivalism.

Mickey’s personal ontological limbo, which stems from just such indeterminate differences, suggests that because of these compromises and contradictions, neither version of identity formation brings adequate meaning to his life. He cannot figure out how his historical specificity makes any difference for his identity in the present, and he does not know how to locate a difference in his history that will provide a solid ground for his self-understanding. In discussing the “truth” of Mickey’s stories, for example,
the narrator reveals that “Mickey couldn't understand what difference to him it made—who believed, who didn't, what was true, what was not true. If he couldn't tell them apart, why concern himself? If they couldn't, why concern himself? And so on” (60). Crucially, Mickey’s inability to see what difference his past makes stems not from a lack of difference but from an abundance of difference, from the fact that difference could be anywhere and could be anything. His history makes no difference to him because its indeterminacy makes too much difference; he has too many ways to tell his stories, too many ways to interpret his past, and too many possible paths leading into the future. Paralyzed by the freedom that difference brings, Mickey’s condition nicely allegorizes the theoretical and practical limits of antiessentialist conceptions of identity in general, and of border-defined Chicano identity in particular. In fact, given the U.S. and Mexican halves of his name, he embodies border difference itself. Inside the text Mickey imagines his own allegorical representation of the problem of difference: a businessman who thinks that the “different color and different textures” of his clothes are “difference” itself. Mickey ridicules the man’s belief that “mixed pants and jacket meant 'liberal,' matching meant 'conservative.'” Instead, Mickey contends, “A man like that . . . shouldn’t . . . think himself less dazed and confused and frightened . . . than some hippie-looking guy clutching a radio” (54). Just like the differences that Mickey has access to (different stories, different interpretations, different histories), the differences that the businessman identifies in his mixed and matched outfits do not make any determinate difference to his identity; they do not meaningfully differentiate him from other identities or change the fact that he is as “dazed and confused” as the next guy.

In this passage we see that Gilb does not predicate his indictment of difference on a nostalgic longing for identity. He is not arguing that the differences that you think make you who you are do not really determine who you are, but he is, in fact, suggesting something much more radical: that there is no “who you are.” Difference-based identities are not identities at all because the arbitrariness of the difference precludes identity altogether. Instead, there is only the indeterminacy of being “dazed and confused and frightened.” We should note, however, that Gilb’s indictment aims at a specific kind of difference: the indeterminate difference that exists among particular pieces of content—the content of Mickey’s stories or the content of the businessman’s wardrobe—which fail to produce meaning and truth because the differentiating criteria remain equivocal and fungible. To move on from the Y, therefore, Mickey does not need to reject difference in favor of presence, but he must instead make difference determinate by finding a universal rather than a particular form of difference.
From the moment that he checks in at the Y, this burden is upon him. Fred, the man working at the counter, asks Mickey if he wants a room “with or without a bathroom.” When Mickey asks, “What’s the difference?” Fred jokes, “Shitting or showering in the room by yourself, or shitting and showering down the hall with everybody else.” Mickey sighs and tells Fred that he is interested in the monetary difference, not Fred’s perspectival difference. Mickey wants to make the difference quantifiable, meaningful, and true in a way that Fred’s articulation of the difference as a matter of perspective is not. By the end of the novel’s second section, Mickey makes some headway in identifying this meaningful difference. Rather than just sitting idly in his room, he decides to take a job working behind the desk at the Y, and the narrator tells us, “It would be either the best choice or the worst, Mickey couldn’t be sure. There was something about his working the desk that was going to make the difference” (69).

Before Mickey can determinately make his difference, however, he must first confront the lure of identity, of presence, which appears in two forms: God’s intentionality and the myth of the “wild West.” While sharing her conversion narrative with Mickey, Mária, one of his romantic interests, suggests that life’s contingency and chaos is all part of God’s plan. As proof, she tells Mickey about a previous relationship she had with a “bad man,” explaining that “she had given herself to anything he asked of her, until she didn’t know the difference between love and fear” (83). Trapped by the undecidability of this difference and needing to have her difference “made,” she went to church where a vision of God told her that “nothing is unintentional, and that we are God’s vessels” (84). Mária’s religious belief and acceptance of God’s ultimate intentionality successfully makes her difference determinate, as the empty vessel represents, but it then fills up that difference with God’s presence.

Although Mickey remains skeptical of Mária’s story, he finds his own version of God’s comforting presence in a cowboy novel that he finds in his room. The novel, which coincidentally takes place in El Paso, tells the story of Jake, a “rock-hard” cowboy who spends his time chasing the Apaches who have kidnapped Consuela, his one true love. The first time Mickey leaves the Y after reading the book, we learn that “the effect of the book . . . was that his eyes were on the Old West” (14). As Mickey proceeds to pick up a woman named Ema and walk her home to the Mexican side of the border, he imagines himself as Jake and Ema as Consuela, allowing the cowboy novel to filter out Mexican poverty and to romanticize away the border differences such poverty highlights. Eventually, however, the novel’s seamless suturing of Mickey’s reality leads him to toss it in the trash: “he was tired of Jake doing so well. Tired of it going so smooth out in his Wild
West, for him and everything he did being believable” (207). In other words, Jake lives a life expunged of difference; he is his essential identity in an entirely unproblematic way, and Mickey finds such ease, whether manifest in Mária’s personal relationship with God or Jake’s testosterone-fueled romp through the Wild West, ultimately unpalatable. Both may offer comfort, but they also overdetermine and preempt lived experience, leaving Mickey no difference at all with which to assert agency, choice, and freedom.

**Borders and Histories**

Such totalizing modes of existence not only threaten Mickey’s individual subjectivity but also mitigate the differences required for a collective politics. While not particularly committed to his Chicano identity, Mickey nevertheless preserves its differential status whenever political issues arise. When he throws away the cowboy novel, for instance, the narrator reminds us of Mickey’s chagrin over the text’s misspelling of “Consuela”—“not spelled Consuelo like people in Mexico commonly and on this side too named their daughters, beautiful or not” (14). Notice here that Mickey does not indict the novel for erasing the difference between Mexican and U.S. citizens; he is not suggesting that it racistly Anglicizes the Mexican spelling of the name, since people “on this side too” name their daughters “Consuelo.” Instead, his critique retains an awareness of the border despite the fact that no difference exists between the U.S. and Mexican spellings of the name. That is, Mickey is upset not because the novel erases one identity in favor of another but because it ignores the formal fact of the border itself, independent of any content-based differences it might signify. In effect, this critique of the novel’s misspelling achieves universality (there is no difference between the Mexican and Anglo spellings of the name) while preserving a purely formal difference (the fact of the border) that does not register on the level of content.

In much the same way, many of Mickey’s daily interactions seem simultaneously apolitical and attuned to the fact of the border. When an employer calls him “Mexican” and speaks endlessly of “you Mexican boys,” Mickey snaps, “Don’t call me Mexican again,” and he refuses to return to work the next day. Later, when Mickey tells his friend Sarge that he has not crossed the border to see Ema recently, Sarge comments, “I never go over there anymore. . . . It’s not safe. It’s too filthy, and practically everybody over there is a thief, envying everything about you that’s American.” When Mickey challenges him, asking if that means that Sarge’s “parents are filthy pelado thieves too,” Sarge defensively reports that his most immediate
family was born in Texas. In both of these scenes Mickey insists on the fact of difference but refuses to use it as the foundation for identity. After the exchange with his employer, the narrator reveals that Mickey views “Mexican” as a word, not an identity—a floating signifier which sometimes “didn’t mean anything and other times [meant] a lot. It was dependent on how it was used, on the point being made, on how it was pronounced even” (31). Similarly, Mickey’s taunting sarcasm undermines the apparently Chicano sympathies articulated in his conversation with Sarge; despite ironizing Sarge’s description of Chicanos as “children of criminals and beggars,” Mickey neither takes up the cause of Chicano identity nor identifies himself as Chicano (45).

Mickey thus seems intent on embracing difference, specifically the difference marked by the border, as a given, but not as the constitutive difference of Chicano identity. We see the fine line he walks when the narrator describes how Mickey might explain his personal history: “Mickey would explain to you how he was American, a U.S. citizen of Mexican parents, one from this side of the río, one from the other, both with families that were on this land only after the indios, many years before his people taught those cowboys to ride horses and be cowboys. Mickey’d tell you he was from the New Mexico Territory and the desert . . . ” (11). Although this self-description of historical identity is loaded with political claims, their generality and conditional narration render them indeterminate. We have a dictionary definition of Chicano: “a U.S. citizen of Mexican parents”; we have a politicized genealogy of who was here first and who taught what to whom; and finally, in his claim that he is “from the New Mexico Territory,” we find a reference to the 1848 Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo in which Mexico ceded the land that would later become the southwest United States, the treaty that made Chicano identity possible in the first place. But with typical ambiguity, it is not clear if Mickey “would” make this reference to describe a neutral fact or to highlight the injustices of a treaty born from a war prompted by U.S. imperial aggression. In light of this ostensibly depoliticized history, it is all the more telling that the word “Chicano” appears only once in the novel, and even then Mickey deploys it facetiously to mock Sarge as a “sensitive Chicano.” Add to these ambiguities the many ways in which the text calls attention to the border but refuses to assert an explicit border politics, and we have a novel that teases us with its politics while refusing to make any political claims—a novel that begs to be read as a border narrative while only ever uttering the word “Chicano” ironically and resisting that reading at every turn.

This border politics which is not one echoes Gilb’s strategically ambiguous relationship to his own Chicano identity. Born in Los Angeles to an
undocumented Mexican mother and a German father from Kentucky, Gilb never gives a straight answer when interviewers interrogate him about his identity and the politics he attaches to it. On the one hand, Gilb seems quite attuned to the particularities of difference. In recounting a University of Arizona search for a “Latino” author, for example, Gilb displays incredulity that the department was considering a Cuban and a Puerto Rican for the position: “in Tucson, Arizona, there is no Cuban community, there is no Puerto Rican community, and it’s just, like, appalling that you would suddenly call that Latino. . . . This is Chicano land and you don’t get to just pretend that we don’t exist here” (Smith). But for every time he notes that “we are people who were here generations previous to the western expansion” (Devereux Interview) or that “the Southwest . . . was Mexico once upon a time” (Farnsworth Interview), he also insists, “I’m not a Chicano, I’m just a culture of me, one guy. This is it. Fuck you, I don’t need to be your Chicano-whatever” (Smith). When it comes to borders, Gilb’s comments are equally rambunctious and opaque. For example, he answers a question about figurative “border-crossing” by instructing the questioner to never cross a border if there are “trocas de migra [immigration trucks] on the other side and you see them and they have their beams on you.” Conversely, when asked if he believes in “something universal in the human spirit which can overcome all boundaries,” he quips, “I think that is called ‘sleep’” (POV Interview). While granting that it might very well be unintentional, I nevertheless want to suggest that this self-contradictory blend of arrogance and silliness actually articulates a unique and productive relationship between identity and difference. In the same way that Mickey’s description of the common spelling of “Consuelo” erases border difference while taking note of the fact of the border, and in the same way that Mickey’s personal history both does and does not name a legacy of political injustice, so too is Gilb dismissing history’s relevance while simultaneously asserting its enduring presence. This pragmatic approach that disavows both the possibility of universal equality and the value of difference for its own sake is nicely captured in Gilb’s advice to “bi-racial and intercultural youth”: “work harder, do more, be better. Be proud when the time comes. Be humble and be generous. But don’t take any guff” (POV Interview).

Taking these personal comments into consideration, I suggest that we absolutely cannot read Gilb’s novel as a border narrative, which is precisely how reviewers and critics consistently treat the sum of his work. Instead, as a narrative that indict the equivocating difference at the heart of border identity, Mickey Acuña is, in fact, a narrative about antiessentialism’s inability to politically resignify the border’s differential logic. We might read the mystery and undecidability surrounding Mickey’s sto-
ries as an allegory of border-induced difference, but to be sure, Mickey does not revel in the confusion and ambiguity surrounding the truth of his past. Instead, the novel mocks the desire to treat the border as the differential grounding of Chicano identity, as a thinker such as Gloria Anzaldúa does when she emphasizes the border’s pluralism, ambiguity, contradiction, and indeterminacy while insisting that these differentiating categories constitute the identity of the border subject. This same logic of creating identity out of difference leads Ramón Saldívar to claim, “[L]iving on borderlines, Chicanos and their narratives have assumed a unique borderland quality, reflecting in no uncertain terms the forms and styles of their folk-based origins” (25). For Mickey, however, who experiences the proliferation of indeterminate difference as an ontological unmooring, not as the basis for identity formation, there are only “uncertain terms.”

While the border offers a convenient way to understand the political stakes of difference and its relationship to identity, its metaphorical potency comes not just from its reference to an irreducible geographical divide, but also from the temporality of historical difference embedded in it. That is, the border does not just mark the territorial difference between Mexico and the United States; it also signifies the variable history of that difference: the fact that today’s border is not the same border that existed in 1519 when Cortés began decimating indigenous Mexico, in 1819 when the Adams-Onis treaty established the boundary between colonial Mexico and the United States, in 1836 when Texas declared its independence, in 1848 at the end of the Mexican-American War, or in 1853 when the Gadsden Purchase was made. Accordingly, Mickey’s primary source of problematic difference throughout the novel is historical, not geographical, suggesting that Gilb’s critique extends to a tendency in Chicano Studies, particularly prominent in the late 1980s and early 1990s when Gilb was writing Mickey Acuña, to treat history not just as the fundamental ground of a distinct Chicano identity but also as a potential source of political liberation. Anzaldúa concludes the critical section of Borderlands, for instance, by laying out a course of action in which history plays a vital role: “Before the Chicano and the undocumented worker and the Mexican from the other side can come together, before the Chicano can have unity with Native Americans and other groups, we need to know the history of their struggle and they need to know ours” (86). Even more challenging to an author like Gilb, who is clearly skeptical of history’s significance for the present, Saldívar writes, “For Chicano narrative, history is the subtext that we must recover because history itself is the subject of its discourse. History cannot be conceived as the mere ’background’ or ‘context’ for this literature; rather, history turns
out to be the decisive determinant of the form and content of the literature” (5). If we compare this claim to Mickey’s various attempts to “recover” his history, however, we quickly see that Gilb’s novel is not your ordinary “Chicano narrative.” But why exactly has Gilb concluded that history is a paralyzing source of indeterminacy rather than the “decisive determinate” of Chicano narrative and identity?

Perhaps he has been reading too much Walter Benn Michaels, who has been arguing for more than a decade that identity is a function of what one thinks and does, not a function of individual or collective history. Michaels prefers thinking and doing because they allow for the possibility of disagreement and change—two things required for politics—while history cannot be debated or changed. Accordingly, history for Michaels actually precludes the possibility of politics because different histories amount only to different perspectives that we must respect, not different ideas that can be promoted or assailed. At the heart of antiessentialism’s call to respect difference, Michaels sees a malignant tendentiousness that lets essentialism in through the back door: “In racial antiessentialism, the effort to imagine a history that will give people an identity” is no less essentializing than biological essentialism’s attempt “to imagine an identity that will connect people through history” (Shape 137). Deeming it illogical to treat race as both socially constructed and a reality, Michaels instead reasons that a true commitment to the social construction of race should lead to the conclusion that race does not exist, not that racial differences should be respected. In the same way, the fact that Mickey can construct a multitude of identities from his proliferation of difference means that identity does not exist in any meaningful way for him, not that he is liberated from racist oppression. Ultimately, for both Gilb and Michaels, difference makes identity much more complicated than the difference-based logic of sociocultural construction allows.

The Shape of the Universal

As I suggested earlier, Gilb’s critique of difference-based identity does not retreat to the comfortable terrain of essentialized presence, Mickey’s flirtation with the cowboy narrative notwithstanding. Similarly, Michaels avoids antiessentialism’s inevitable tumble into essentialism by altogether rejecting difference as a viable ground for identity and turning instead to universalism, specifically the universality implied by all acts of disagreement. For Michaels, universality does not require consensus because “it is the mere possibility of disagreement that is universalizing.” He explains, “[T]he fact
that people have locally different views about what is universally true in no way counts as a criticism of the universality of the true. Just the opposite; the reason that we cannot appeal to universal truths as grounds for adjudicating our disagreements is just because the idea of truth’s universality is nothing but a consequence of our disagreement” (Shape 31). In predicating universality of disagreement, Michaels avoids the essentialism that would follow from a universalism of totalizing presence. Consequently, despite championing beliefs, ideas, and arguments, and despite his very Kantian assertion that “the claim that something is true . . . is always a claim that it is true for everyone,” Michaels never actually tells us what “the true” is (179). Because he never attaches it to content, Michaels’s universal remains purely formal, defined solely by its negative form.

In much the same way, Ernesto Laclau’s search for a universal that transcends difference leads him to embrace pure negativity as the only politically viable form of the universal.16 Specifically, Laclau’s _Emancipations_ argues that particulars and universals are not mutually exclusive, and demonstrates instead how a politically productive universal might emerge out of particulars without entirely subsuming them. If for Michaels the universal is a consequence of whatever particular content two people disagree about, then for Laclau it grows from particular instances of oppression. For example, Laclau imagines a hypothetical minority group suffering under a totalitarian regime, and he then postulates other antagonistic forces arising against this group—a depleted water supply, a threat from a different state actor (as the Iraqi Kurds face from Turkey), or an AIDS epidemic. Functioning as equivalent threats to the group’s identity, these particular oppressions suggest a commonly antagonistic element that the minority group then recognizes as such. In such a scenario a set of circumstantial particulars gives rise to a politically potent universal that defines the group’s equivalent oppressions. Furthermore, because the commonly universal element is antagonism itself rather than some positively defined content, Laclau argues that his hypothetical reveals a “general negativity” that transcends the specificity of each different threat, a “universal impossibility which penetrates the identity in question” (14). As he writes later, “The universal emerges out of the particular not as some principle underlying and explaining the particular, but as an incomplete horizon suturing a dislocated particular identity” (28). Rather than the particularity of a given subject position precluding the universal, here we see it actually producing the universal. Moreover, rather than ignoring politics by dissolving the particularities of ethnic, cultural, and national history, Laclau shows how the universal’s radical emptiness—its purely formal expression of differential content as universal equivalency—actually makes democracy
possible in the first place. After all, giving content to the universal, Laclau reasons, “would imply that a particular body had been found, which would be the true body of the universal.” But identifying the “true body of the universal”—L’État, c’est moi, for example—leads to totalitarianism, not democracy, which instead requires that “the universal has no necessary body and no necessary content” (35). For the same democratic reasons, Michaels always speaks of truth formally without ever naming its actuality.

Admittedly, this solution devalues particularized content, imagining as it does that identity (for Michaels) and politics (for Laclau) will be determinately constituted by the universal’s empty form rather than indeterminately constituted by differentiated content. But this slight to the particular is a problem for constituting identity and politics only if universals and particulars are mutually exclusive, and Michaels’s disagreement and Laclau’s antagonism commonly demonstrate that this need not be the case. They allow us our universalism and our particulars too. Nevertheless, one very large problem remains, and that is history, which, as we have seen, flummoxes both Mickey’s desire to secure his identity and the Supreme Court’s juridical intervention in racial politics. Both Michaels and Laclau only describe a universality that emerges out of particulars situated firmly in the present, not in the past, implying that there might be something unique about history’s particulars that actually resists universalization in a way that a disagreement’s particular sides or a minority group’s particular oppressions do not.

Michaels is, in fact, resoundingly clear when it comes to the role that history plays in disagreement’s universality: none whatsoever. This is because, according to Michaels, grounding identity in history guarantees that our differences will always remain experiential matters of relative perspective rather than cognitively determinate ideas that can be debated and argued. This “disarticulation of difference from disagreement” occurs whenever we allow history to determine who we are, a process that Michaels finds particularly maddening when that history is one that has not even happened to us (Shape 30). For example, he writes, “If history isn’t able to serve as a source of identity, it isn’t needed to serve as a source of ideology. It isn’t able to serve as a source of identity because things that didn’t happen to us can’t count as part of our history. And it isn’t needed as a source of ideology because beliefs need reasons rather than sources” (158). Having jettisoned history, Michaels commits himself not just to a universal that emerges only in the present moment of disagreement, but also to a universal that must constantly re-emerge with each ensuing present moment. If history weakens disagreement into mere perspectival
difference, then I am prevented from drawing on the position I held in yesterday’s disagreement to support my side of today’s disagreement. This is true for two reasons. First, because the universal is actually the formal negativity that defines the space of disagreement, appealing to the content of yesterday’s ideas entirely misidentifies the universal’s location. Second, my recourse to yesterday’s ideas is not so much an appeal to my thought as it is an appeal to the fact that I held a position yesterday and so will also hold it today; it reduces my ideas to my situatedness. For Michaels, therefore, “the true” only ever amounts to “whatever is true now.”

Although he forgoes Michaels’s disembowelment of history, Laclau’s approach also implicitly severs universality from the past if only because it remains difficult to imagine how a historical particularity could constitute an oppression equivalent to those confronting a minority group in the present. Even if a given oppression in the present, like institutional racism, derives from history, the relevant temporality of that oppression is its present and not its past. In fact, because of his focus on a revolutionary politics of liberation and unity, the temporality of Laclau’s universal actually belongs to the future—hence his description of it as an “incomplete horizon” that must remain perpetually empty (28). Fortunately, although his examples do not describe how historical particularities might produce the universal, Laclau does not entirely rule out the possibility in the same way that Michaels does. In fact, Laclau provides a useful opening onto history when he notes, “Any term which, in a certain political context becomes the signifier of the lack, plays the same role”—that is, the role of making a universal politics possible (44).

This, I contend, is how history can remain relevant to identity and its political formations without condemning them to the indeterminacy of particularized perspective: “history” need not name specific historical content and can instead function as the “signifier of the lack.” As that which is no longer present, history represents an apt candidate to designate the universal form of loss itself. Because Michaels views history merely as something that people claim to constitute their identity, it is easy for him to reject it out of hand. For Gilb, however, history is also something that happens to people, a series of losses that subjected them in the past and continues to do so in the present. And yet, at the same time, he is loath to dwell on history’s particularities, leaving him in the difficult position of identifying a historical universal that both avoids history’s relativizing particularities and accounts for the experiential truth of oppression—what Gilb calls “guff”—both past and present. Michaels and Laclau have shown that universal and particular need not be mutually exclusive as long as the universal is conceived negatively. It remains up to Gilb, however, to
figure out whether the same can be achieved in a historical context while remaining sensitive to a politics of loss.

The duration of this chapter will argue that Gilb successfully identifies the pure empty form of history as a negatively grounded universal that makes difference determinate without entirely erasing historical particularities. Like Michaels and Laclau, Gilb depicts a scenario in which the universal emerges from a given set of particulars, but for Gilb, both particular and universal remain intimately connected to history. More specifically, a universal conception of history as the form of loss—history as that which is lost—emerges out of particular instances of loss, which when treated solely as specific historical content are only ever indeterminately true. Their universal truth is realized, however, when those losses are sublated into historical form—that is, into the pure form of their absence. The Supreme Court’s conservative justices may offer universalities, but they do not give us the flexibility of the negative. Michaels’s universal may offer absence, but it does not account for historical loss. Justice Breyer may offer historical loss, but he compromises the universal when he insists that “the facts of history” must be remembered. However, by predicking his universal on loss rather than presence, and by locating that loss in history rather than on disagreement in the present, Gilb’s novel offers a productive alternative to Michaels’s presentism and to the Supreme Court’s paradoxical relationship to U.S. history.

A Contentless History

Throughout the novel, Sarge, Mickey’s primary companion at the YMCA, represents the hollowness that comes with the complete rejection of historical loss that Michaels advocates. Sarge lands at the Y after his wife takes their children and leaves him for a “man with more hair in [a] city more lush than El Paso” (39). But the past is entirely irrelevant to Sarge, who is a “proud, yessir soldier type, confident in the most cheery, can-do, rise and shine, whistle a happy tune fashion, no questions asked” (35). Fully believing that we are what we do and not where we come from, Sarge embodies a Michaels-like universal in which the truth is always now. His belief that deeds are more valuable than words leads him to replace Mickey’s novelistic description of “good guys and bad guys” with his own rigid philosophy of “good work and bad work, good jobs and bad jobs” (42). Sarge not only reduces Mickey’s plight of uncertainty and indeterminacy to the fact that he does not have a job, but he extends this diagnosis to Mexico as a whole: “In terms of natural resources, Mexico is one of the
wealthiest [countries] on earth. All they have to do is show some discipline and strength and both our countries would prosper” (44). This is the remark that elicits Mickey’s “sensitive Chicano” jab, suggesting just how drastically Sarge’s equation of identity with work erases history, culture, and politics.

Resistant to Sarge’s ethos, Mickey wants universalism—to know “what would be true”—but he does not want it severed from history; he does not want work, discipline, and manly handshakes to be the only true things (24). Mickey’s response to Sarge’s loss nicely captures just what this might look like: Mickey interprets the loss of his wife and children as “particulars not too unique.” Citing the “proof [that] scuffed up and down the linoleum halls in overused slippers” at the Y, Mickey concludes that such loss is “predictable” and “had to be expected” (39). In effect, Mickey’s evaluation purges the details from Sarge’s history while leaving its form—the fact of loss—intact. Sarge’s history is more important to Mickey than it is to Sarge, but it is important only because the particular losses that make up its content bespeak the universal truth of history as loss.

In his own life, achieving universal truth from contentless form proves more difficult, as Mickey’s meditation on his employer’s use of the word “Mexican” reveals. His observation that the word’s relative offense depends on how it is used, not on its referential content, is a purely formal insight. Indeterminate content intrudes, however, when he notes that the event’s political significance depends on how the person hearing the word is feeling, an affective contingency that binds the word’s political significance to a particular subject position (31). The content of the listener’s feelings relativizes the event’s “truth,” leaving meaning as indeterminate as it is in Mickey’s stories that fail to “make a difference.” Content similarly intrudes when Mickey thinks about his future in purely formal terms. In one of the many scenes describing his state of anxious waiting, the narrator explains, “Mickey wished he could figure out what form [the future] might take, so he himself could be ready, but he came up with too many scenarios” (49). Here again the presence of “too many scenarios” creates too much content-based difference, rendering formal knowledge indeterminate and action impossible.

To avoid this paralysis, Gilb suggests that content—like the “feelings” and “scenarios” in the above examples—must be actively purged from the form of an event, which is one thing that Mickey’s constant winning helps him realize. Wondering why Charles Towne, another Y resident, gets so mad when Mickey beats him at ping-pong, he notes, “Losers, like poor people, dwell on the details, the small shifts of personality and attitude” (52). Here Mickey rejects the relativizing content of feelings in favor of
the pure form of the game, a formal lesson that Gilb reiterates on the same page when Mickey asks Butch how he knows that Charles is angry about losing. Butch replies, “It’s not lo que dice, bro. It’s how.” In this case, however, Mickey’s denigration of details seems rather imperial and insensitive, as he realizes when he second guesses his interpretation and retreats to the mushier ground of subjective perspective, wondering if “Charles Towne saw something from his end that Mickey didn’t.” While Mickey’s formal impulse is correct here, he is also correct to second-guess his winning ways because they represent a formal turn that ultimately proves hollow and meaningless. Since it is mindless and unaware, Mickey’s unfettered winning represents just another version of indeterminate difference. It makes no difference to him if he wins or loses, and he wins only because “[h]e can’t lose if he isn’t trying to win” (101). To make his life meaningful again, he requires a more consciously considered sense of determinate loss. Achieving a purely formal relationship to experience will involve not just moving from a form populated with details to one purged of details, but also moving from a form absent of detail because one’s life is fraught with indeterminacy to a form absent of detail because that is the universally determinate nature of experience.

Mickey evinces such knowledge in his assessment of Sarge’s loss, and he comes closest to highlighting the determinately contentless form of his own life while recounting a story about a woman in Albuquerque. He insists that the details of his story are unimportant:

The point is, the thing that happened, was how we were, how it was. It’s hard to explain except that we were in love. We were in love and it had to do with that I wasn’t staying, that I was leaving. And that’s what did it, that’s why it got the way it did. We cared about each other because we weren’t going to see each other again. ’Course I knew where she lived, and I got her phone number, that sort of thing, but we both knew I wouldn’t ever see her again and she wouldn’t ever see me. (58)

Rather than an absence of details stemming from Mickey’s mindless indeterminacy, here we see the opposite: a purely formal experience purged of details because of a very determinate absence—the shared awareness of impending loss. In a novel where no one knows anything for sure, this passage stands out because both Mickey and the woman “know” the truth of the other’s future absence; the determinate knowledge of Mickey’s eminent departure entirely predicates the love that defines their formal relation to each other. And this formal relation to the woman in Albuquerque differs categorically from his formal relationship to winning because the former is
predicated on his knowledge of a determinate absence while the latter rests solely on not caring one way or the other. And yet, even here details eventually intrude: “I see her perfectly, all these details of us being together, so many little things about her body and her voice, how she looked when she slept, how her hair felt. I remember the plastic clock by her bed, the green light on it, the metal second hand circling” (59). Not surprisingly, with this return of historical content, the very next paragraph highlights Mickey’s inability to know the truth of his story: “It was, he’d say, a true story. And he was sure it was true. Except why was he sure of it? Didn’t it mean it wasn’t a hundred percent true if he had to convince himself, double-check his memory?” (59). Their time together avoids the relativity of situated perspective and instead becomes something true and known only when Mickey and the woman from Albuquerque empty their future of all meaningful content. Once Mickey recognizes the same truth about his past as he recognizes here about his future—the determinate truth of its loss—he will be able to leave the Y and move on with his life.

Late one night on a hillside overlooking El Paso, Mickey achieves this broader understanding of history as the universal form of loss. To do so, however, he must reject Máriá’s belief in God’s presence-giving intentionality. As he meditates on her assertion that “nothing is unintentional,” he tries to apply that logic to the nocturnal scene before him: “Nothing was unintentional. Not the star-punctured sky, the bleached moon, not the blackened earth below: a gulf of flat desert ringing to the curved brim, falling into the emptiness of this world.” This initial attempt to understand the intention behind these various pieces of heaven and earth—stars, sky, moon, earth, and desert—juxtaposes them to an emptiness that defines their outer limit. Upon further consideration, however, Mickey decides that these various presences are not positive proof of God’s intentional hand because “the emptiness wasn’t really at that faraway edge. The emptiness was all around . . .” (196). Here Mickey rejects Máriá’s belief in God’s plan, seeing instead a determinate absence and emptiness in the very presences that she might describe as God’s intentional creations.

To reinforce the implications of this insight, Mickey offers an alternative creation story that embraces the contingency and chaos of a universe in which nothing is intentional in the most determinate of ways:

Those lights below—window lights, streetlights, head- and taillights—were broken glass, shards and slivers and chunks moonlit to sparkle yellow and white and green and red and blue, the remains of bottles from a celebration still going on, and they’d been tossed against this mountain. It was a good party, fun. People drank, and some drank too much. They laughed
and argued. Men and women fell in love, made love, fought against and for. (196)

This bacchanalian description of El Paso’s creation rejects Christianity’s notion of God as an intelligent designer in favor of the whimsical caprice of Classical gods and goddesses. By the end of this hillside epiphany, Mickey dismisses the logic of presence and intention and accepts the logic of determinate “emptiness.” Significantly, the narrator ends the scene with Mickey’s first difference-making choice in the novel: “Right then, he’d say, he decided” (196).

Armed with his determinate knowledge of emptiness, Mickey loses his first postepiphany handball match with Sarge despite his stated intention to win (199). His epiphany also allows him to differentiate himself determinately from the other residents of the Y. Throughout the novel, Isabel, one of the housekeepers, stops by Mickey’s room to clean and change the sheets, and, without fail, a chronically flatulent man across the hall farts, embarrassing both of them. But when Isabel arrives the next morning and the man releases his wind, “Mickey, for the first time, wasn’t ashamed, didn’t feel like he’d been the one with the farts. He laughed, guiltless, too” (197). Finally, in addition to gaining individualized intent and a distinct identity, Mickey secures determinate access to his past. Walking around El Paso the next day, he remembers his boyhood: “He rode horses. There were lots of birds: doves and mockingbirds, hawks and grackles, quail, owls. Dogs howled, cats brawled. He cried about thorns and needles and stings. Crickets and cicadas. There were fly balls and passes. He aimed a .22 rifle at a can, and he dreamed of adventure and fame” (210).

Of course, his intent, his nonfarting identity, and his past are all presences, but they are not a priori presences plagued by indeterminate difference. Instead, they are presences made possible only by his understanding of a determinate and all-encompassing emptiness. That is, the point of making difference determinate was not to reject content and presence out of hand, but to identify a form of difference strong enough to make presence justifiable and not just a matter of relative perspective. As Gilb’s indictment of this mushy perspectival difference that grounds the subject-based politics of antiessentialist discourse suggests, this is precisely what the difference of historical content fails to do. Only the determinate difference of pure emptiness, not the difference of particularized historical content, gives true meaning and significance to a life.

Consequently, when Mickey later wants to “remember true and real things,” he does not remember the history of his Chicano ancestors, the woman he was with in Albuquerque, the embarrassing incident at Den-
ny’s, or Mária’s message of God’s intentionality. Instead, he thinks of the “everpresent wilderness” that surrounds his daily life, of the “desert and the mountain [that] were still everywhere he walked.” “Rocks might be gathered and piled and sorted, mixed and separated, they might be used in fences and foundations and for walls of homes, but they were never under control . . . and the dirt . . . no matter what temporary domination or management, won over most front and backyards, alleys, easements, and lots” (209). The chaos of Mickey’s El Paso creation story here returns in the indomitable power of nature, a power that for Mickey is a function of time: “He’d found an old tennis ball and, walking, bounced it on the sidewalk cracked by time and filled in by weeds” (210). This, then, is how Mickey solves his problem of relating to the past. The indeterminacy that paralyzes him throughout the novel is swept away once he embraces the universal truth of the world’s radical emptiness and here links that emptiness to geological and evolutionary history. Emptied of ethnically, culturally, or nationally specific content, it is a history that denotes little more than the purely formal fact of past-ness, represented here as the truth of time’s passing. In other words, only the pure form of historical change awakens Mickey to the fact of time and thus to the truth of his existence, which is a foundationally temporal truth.

A Contentless Narration

Thus far, in an attempt to pin down Gilb’s ideas about difference and identity, particulars and universals, I have intentionally avoided discussing the text’s formal elements. However, given that my content-based discussion of those ideas has led to the conclusion that content is irrelevant for producing meaning and grounding identity, the text’s narrative form will presumably provide a useful example of just what a contentless approach to the past might look like. Indeed, reading this novel representationally overlooks the proliferation of metafictional moments in which Mickey’s approach to storytelling might be productively applied to the narrator’s own stories about Mickey. Are those stories—which recount past events in Mickey’s life—rendered indeterminate by a proliferation of content that leaves readers unable to determine what difference they make and whether or not they are true? Or, despite having to tell a story about the past, does the narrator manage to evacuate the story’s content, leaving only a formal relationship between Mickey’s past and the narrative present in which “[i]t’s not lo que dice . . . It’s how” (52)? Before answering this question, we should remember that deriving the universal from a formal negativity
does not preclude particulars. As I argued earlier, Michaels’s and Laclau’s work is so exciting because it demonstrates that universal and particular need not be mutually exclusive. Consequently, to successfully evacuate the story’s content and highlight the purely formal fact of its past-ness, the narrator need not remain silent. Instead, with the proper treatment of a story’s particulars, the narrator can both tell a story that recounts specific events and achieve a universality predicated on the fact of history’s absence.

To do so, Gilb deploys a narrative mood that accentuates the radical indeterminacy governing Mickey’s past, present, and future, and he achieves this indeterminate narrative mood through the narrator’s consistently ambiguous use of the “’d” contraction. The “’d” in lines such as “[h]e’ d snap that he didn’t have to be specific” (11), “he’d tell you knowledgeably” (14), and “[m]aybe, he’ d say, it was better” are narrated in a conditional mood that renders their precise meaning utterly undecidable (21). In these and other sentences like them, the “’d” clearly means “would,” as in “Mickey would say this” and “Mickey would say that,” but the conditions that would make the conditional determinate are never given. In fact, almost every time a “would” or “’d” appears, it does two things simultaneously. First, it creates a sense of repetition and typicality—as in “He would say this thing frequently” or “This is the kind of thing he would often say.” Second, it implies a more temporally circumscribed conditionality—as in “If this scenario were actually occurring, this is what he would say.” In the same way that Mickey cannot determine the truth and significance of his own stories, this narrative mood obscures the truth of the narrator’s story. When we read “He’d snap that he didn’t have to be specific,” are we learning that Mickey frequently and consistently refuses to be specific or that he would refuse to be specific if we were to ask him about his past? With the discourse always appearing as indirect discourse, we do not know if these are things Mickey really did say, if they are merely typical of what he would frequently say, or if they are things that he would hypothetically say in a particular set of given circumstances. This indeterminacy utterly dominates the first chapter that introduces Mickey and his past, and although the increased presence of direct discourse limits such ambiguity in the next three chapters, it reappears whenever the narrator is not directly recounting a specific event that Mickey experiences at the Y. Significantly, in the fifth and final chapter, once Mickey has his epiphany about emptiness, the ambiguous “’d” entirely disappears from the narrative (e.g., his boyhood recollections are narrated in past tense), but not before it intrudes into the epiphany’s concluding line: “Right then, he’d say, he decided” (196).

In effect, then, these passages both produce and are about indeter-
minate meaning. When we read about the ambiguity with which Mickey describes his history (“Mickey’d tell you he was from the New Mexico Territory”), that same ambiguity adheres to the history being narrated to us as readers. And when Mickey has an epiphany about the determinate emptiness of existence, the “d” of his “decision” embeds a similar emptiness at the heart of the description of the epiphany. But these narrative evacuations of historical content produce only a localized indeterminacy about the particular event being narrated; they do not yet achieve a purely formal emptiness that might point us toward the universal. This is because they function by blurring the relationship between what Gérard Genette describes as the “singulative” and “iterative” frequencies of narrative. If a singulative narrative narrates what happened once, while an iterative one narrates what happened many times over (or narrates many times over what happened once), then our narrator’s prolific and ambiguous use of the “d” makes it impossible for us to know if the narrated event is singular or iterative. With each ambiguous use of the “d,” we are confronted with the paradoxical relationship between the particular and the universal; the singulative particularity of the “d” fails to overcome its indeterminacy and produce a universal truth, while its iterative universality cannot outrun the particular’s relativizing shadow.

If this ambiguation of historical content cannot be considered tantamount to its entire evacuation, then we must still figure out how a universal can emerge from these local indeterminacies. This requires us to shift the scale of our thinking once again. That is, just as “truth’s universality is nothing but a consequence of our disagreement” for Michaels, just as a collection of oppressive forces entails a universally equivalent antagonism for Laclau, and just as Mickey’s attempts to empty specific historical events of their content prepares him for the universal truth of history’s formal absence, so too do the novel’s particular instances of narrative ambiguity point us toward a universal narrative truth. Specifically, the conditional narration not only produces indeterminacy but also highlights the fact of narration itself. By so thoroughly foregrounding history’s narrative construction, Gilb implies that the only historical truth not determined by narrative and thus not permanently condemned to indeterminacy is the formal fact of history’s absence. When the narrator highlights the past’s indeterminacy while refusing to fill in Mickey’s past with any content, the only truth readers ultimately have access to is the past-ness of his past, the fact of its loss. On the text’s narrative level, therefore, we see the same universal—the past’s present absence—emerge out of a set of indeterminate and ambiguous particulars.
On two different occasions, Mickey intuits this connection between narrative and the universal truth of history. First, while feeling particularly unsure about his place at the Y, Mickey imagines a future when his present “time would be forgotten, and he’d be like someone else, and it’d be like nothing unpleasant even happened to the new guy he’d have become. . . . He could tell this as a story” (61–62). And much later, during a sexual encounter with Rosemary, the daughter of an employee at the Y, the narrator describes Mickey’s response to her breasts: “[I]n the throes of caressing them, he reminded himself that he would like them more as time passed, when he wasn’t touching them” (171). In both of these scenes Mickey realizes that he will be free to narrate his past however he likes. This, however, is not the realization that gives him solace—after all, the freedom of narrative construction is what renders his life so indeterminate and distant from truth in the first place. Instead, the truly comforting part of these realizations comes from the simple fact that Mickey’s “now” will eventually become a “then.” The truth of these events is not what they mean in the present or what Mickey can manipulate them to mean in the future. Their truth is that they will be lost; their truth is a negatively defined universal that emerges from but does not preclude their myriad particularities. This is presumably why the narrator tells us nothing about Mickey’s history. Because the relevant truth of his past is that it is lost to him, it remains lost to readers as well.

A Return to Politics

The universal absence of the past thus provides a universal that is both empty and historical. Moreover, this universal emerges out of particulars that it unites through the common form of loss rather than falling prey to their differences. Instead of being subsumed into the universal’s negativity, life’s particularized content, in both the past and the present, becomes determinate and meaningful, which is why Mickey’s epiphany about nothingness leads to substantial and positive changes in his life rather than to nihilism. But is the universal truth of history’s formal absence strong enough to ground a politics? Does it allow us to account for the enduring effects of historical racism, oppression, and violence, or has too much content been purged from its formal emptiness? What would it mean to treat history’s particularly politicized losses (e.g., slavery, segregation, racism, the Mexican-American war, police brutality) as merely the common ground of universal loss? If Chicanos embraced the universal truth of this
purely formal loss, then what would be the proper relationship for them to adopt toward the Mexican-American War and its violent legacies? Or for African Americans to adopt toward slavery and *de jure* segregation?

According to the model I have elicited form Gilb’s novel, the details of these events are no longer relevant—not just because they did not actually happen to those living today, but also because foregrounding those details and insisting that they be remembered ensures that they will never lead to universal equality. However, the Chicano’s or the African-American’s *formal* relation to the events remains entirely relevant, and because that formal relation is one of historical loss in general, those particular instances of loss continue to register in the present, albeit in a universal and negative form. This permits a much more nuanced relationship to history than we find in Michaels, for whom history is simply that which is not present and thus irrelevant. In locating the shape of the universal in history’s absence, Gilb takes the notion of history as that which is not present and uses it to universalize specific experiences of loss that would otherwise amount to little more than indeterminate differences of perspective—experiences that will never cohere into an enduringly effective politics.

This is precisely the kind of universalization that Justice Breyer’s minority opinion needs. By grounding his decision in “the stubborn facts of history,” he asks the nation to accept that its historical particularities will remain permanently inassimilable to its universal ideals. This is also the kind of universalization that the majority need, since they locate their universal entirely in a timeless present: the moment of unitary status is a history-erasing moment of universality that exists outside of time’s passing. In offering a historically situated universal, Gilb challenges both Breyer’s “facts” and the majority’s failure to consider history. How then does Gilb’s historical universal require the Supreme Court cases to be solved? How would the decision be affected if the universal truth at issue were history’s permanently present absence rather than the detemporalized achievement of unitary status?

According to Roberts and Thomas, once racial inequality is fixed, the nation is done fixing it, and race no longer matters. According to Breyer, race will always matter because racial inequality is a founding fact of history that can never be totally fixed. According to Gilb, however, racial inequality can be fixed, but it always remains susceptible to coming unfixed, and so race sometimes does and sometimes does not matter. This last scenario thus recommends a constant return to the question of inequality. For example, we might have an annual trial to determine if schools are fully integrated. If they are not, then we fix them, and if they are, then we do nothing. Although this sounds like mere pragmatism, it is a pragmatism
that finds a strong theoretical justification in the empty universal of historical form. The universal truth of history’s present absence requires that we constantly acknowledge the past, but it does not require us to refer to particular events in the past. Consequently, our annual court cases could fix problems in the present without having to worry about redressing past wrongs or establishing permanently universal ideals. The simple fact of history’s absence replaces the timeless presentism of the majority’s universal and demands our constant return to the question of racial equality. And this is history’s only role: its universality justifies our continued evaluation of the problem without requiring us to discover racism and inequality every time we return to it. In this way, Gilb’s contentless and thus universal version of history retains Breyer’s investment in the past while providing a universal that can justify a ruling in the way that Roberts and Thomas think their universal does. Best of all, this universal justifies not just one faction’s ideas, but whatever decision is reached year after year; any decision reached in the present is equally grounded by its purely formal relation to the past. This is a universal that actually promotes particularity, an identity principle that actually produces difference.

It is telling that our courts do not work this way—that they insist on rehearsing an irresolvable debate between “strict constructionism” and socio-historical context. It tells, in particular, of a nation’s reluctance to think historically and of a citizenry’s inability to include time in the way it imagines its politics. These failures are nowhere more prominent than at the Supreme Court, where nominees who pay sycophantic obeisance to stare decisis during the nomination process promptly overturn significant precedents upon joining the Court. (I am thinking here of Chief Justice Roberts; Justice Alito; and the ruling in Gonzalez v. Carhart, the 2007 “partial-birth” abortion case that overturned the Court’s ruling in Stenberg v. Carhart, a nearly identical case decided just seven years earlier.) Of course, the logic of strict constructionism allows them to argue that they are not rejecting the universality of precedent but are, in fact, returning law to the most universal precedent of all—that of the founding fathers’ original intent. And in their defense, I would suggest that their recourse to “founding intent” is not entirely their fault. Given our collective failure to treat timeless universals and timely particulars as anything other than mutually exclusive, these conservative justices do not have anyplace else to look for universals that might coherently ground their legal opinions. And the opposing view, which bases legal decisions in the socio-historical context of the time, has no claim on universality whatsoever. Ultimately, however, neither of these approaches thinks about time in a way that allows it to contribute meaningfully to the juridical process.
But what if time itself, abstracted from all content, were the universal that grounded our judicial system? Then we would not have to count on timeless first principles that might have grown irrelevant or inapplicable over the centuries, and we would not have to limit every legal decision to its relative context. Instead, overturning precedent, changing the law to meet our contemporary needs, would not represent an affront to universality but would instead be justified by it. In this way, Gilb’s historical universal, freed of all content, provides a universal justification for overturning precedent that rests on neither presence nor the present; it should be overturned not because the relative content of the present is different from the relative content of the past, but simply because the past is universally absent from our present. This would then allow for universal grounding, political change, and the continued significance of history.
n many of his works, Fredric Jameson has associated our contemporary moment with “the end of temporality,” a demise characterized by “a dramatic and alarming shrinkage of existential time and the reduction to a present that hardly qualifies as such any longer, given the virtual effacement of that past and future that can alone define a present in the first place.” As “a situation faced by postmodernity in general,” he contends that anyone producing art and ideas in the wake of temporality’s end is “obliged to respond” to this fundamental change in the nature of experience (“End” 708). Contrary to the spatial turn that most scholars identify in those responses, Qualified Hope has argued that we should not, in fact, view typically postmodern literary forms—ideological knowingness, elaborate narrative terracing, collage, or a privileging of the signifier—as signaling an acceptance of temporality’s end. Instead, we should see them as an active resistance to that end. The tendency not to understand them as such—to view them as spatializing techniques—is symptomatic of what Jameson calls “the ideology of communication,” which “discredit[s] any philosophical representations that fail to acknowledge the primacy and uniqueness of language, the speech act, or the communicational exchange” (706). Whenever language-based thinking foregrounds the irreducible difference between subject and object, meaning and reality, or particular and universal—that is, any irreducible difference stemming from the inevitable mediation of representation itself—then the epistemological viability of temporal experience is being suppressed. This need not be the case since, as Jameson argues, “to position language at the center of things is also to
foreground temporality, for whether one comes at it from the sentence or the speech act, from presence or the coeval, from comprehension or the transmission of signs and signals, temporality is not merely presupposed but becomes the ultimate object or ground of analysis” (706). Only when linguistic mediation becomes incontrovertible Truth and reduces temporality to the present are we left with the false choice between an ironically savvy and detached approach to knowledge and one that revels blindly in the transparent and immediate bounty of experience. But this false dichotomy, which poststructuralism has wielded like a blunt club to chase phenomenological inquiry from the field of “play,” oversimplifies the nature of temporalized thought. Recuperating temporal experience need not ignore the truth of linguistic mediation if approached as a question of production, which is always a mode of experience that depends on rather than ignores processes of mediation and the irreducible differences they entail, be they epistemological or ontological.

This is something that all of the authors discussed in *Qualified Hope*, committed as they are to locating difference in the productive temporality of a reader’s interaction with literary form, clearly understand. However, because each author’s turn to time occurs in the context of a specific political concern, we have seen temporal difference highlighted in assorted ways and to various effects. Perhaps the least effective texts that I have discussed here are Mailer’s *The Armies of the Night* and DeLillo’s *White Noise*, both of which struggle against an array of governmental, technological, and media forces that overdetermine the meaning and significance of the future. Mailer resists these forces by altering his writing style according to the material being treated, while DeLillo constantly reveals and exposes instances of such overdetermination. In both cases, however, literary form—Mailer’s metanarrative and DeLillo’s self-knowing and revelatory narration that transforms *White Noise* into de facto metafiction—succumbs to the very preemptive logic it aims to fight. Metafiction, that most postmodern of forms, simply cannot resist political co-optation unless it is temporally mediated, as in Nabokov’s *Ada* and Foer’s *Extremely Loud*. Put differently, in demonstrating that the future cannot simply be unknown and that self-consciousness cannot be wished away, Mailer’s and DeLillo’s novels teach us that the future alone cannot be the exclusive location of political hope and change. This is precisely the message that Automatic Alto delivers to N. in Nathaniel Mackey’s *Djbot Baghostus’s Run*, telling him that whether he predicates future progress on the wholeness or the fracture of African-American identity, he will just be spinning his wheels. Consequently, Mackey’s own consideration of the political potential of futurity leavens every forward advance with an erosive retreat, predating
wholeness and fracture of each other to yield a temporal form that moves forward, but only recursively and under constant qualification.

Of course, the future is not necessarily the preferred temporality of all politics, as Reed, Pynchon, Foer, and Scalapino all suggest in their various attempts to alter a reader’s formally temporal experience of the present. For different reasons—Reed to avoid the circular relationship between essentialist and antiessentialist racial politics and Foer to overcome the temporal trauma of terror—these two authors are almost exclusively invested in the temporal form of the present in the same way that Mailer and DeLillo focus exclusively on the future. Committed to highlighting process over content (in Reed’s case, the process of identity formation, and in Foer’s, the process of understanding), both paratactically populate their novels with artifacts and images that force readers to experience the “how” rather than the “what” of political response. Scalapino is up to something similar, but rather than pursuing the kind of present-based performativity we see in Reed and Foer, she incorporates past and future into every present moment, creating a “thicker” version of instantaneity that she actually conceives as “duration.” Given the history of feminist political thought in which her work intervenes, it makes sense that her presentism would also account for the past and the future. After all, the pure performativity of an isolated present could not critique choice-based feminism in the same way that her unique understanding of simultaneity—past, present, and future occurring all at once—allows. And yet, as the content of her poetry reveals, folding the past and the future into the present clearly runs the risk of incoherence and unintelligibility, something that Pynchon’s own unique reformulation of the present instant successfully avoids. If Scalapino collapses the durational continuity of past, present, and future into the present, then Pynchon maintains that linear continuity but places it in the middle of an expanded instant. In doing so, he opens up a space of reflection—which in Mason & Dixon is also a space of narration—that accounts for the various durations that the rationalistic technologies of the Enlightenment exclude in their race to instantaneity and immediacy.

Finally, as is already apparent from Mackey’s erosive retreat, Scalapino’s incorporation of the duration of past, present, and future into the present, and Pynchon’s attempt to embed it there, the past, somewhat counterintuitively, proves to be a particularly rich source for the political imaginary. Of the several authors who evince a concern about the future’s overdetermination (I am thinking here of Mailer, DeLillo, Spiegelman, and Scalapino), Spiegelman most thoroughly commits himself to recuperating temporal experience with assistance from the past. Similarly, Gilb also sees the past as the appropriate site of political possibility, although he does
Concluding reflection on the need for a temporalized politics.

- Mickey in *Maus* seeks to overcome his pastness to resurface the present.
- Spiegelman draws on history's content to reanimate his life post-9/11.
- Gilb's formal techniques illustrate the specific political concerns addressed in text.

**Conclusion:**

Even though all of these authors clearly develop different literary techniques to address different political questions and do so with different levels of success, two common conclusions can be drawn. First, in rehearsing my claims about each text here in the conclusion, I have attempted to read across the “Culture of Politics”–“Politics of Culture” divide in the book to suggest a common trajectory within each section that moves from future, to present, to past. Although I would hesitate to claim that those authors who most thoroughly address the past somehow do a better job of achieving a temporalized politics than those who are more concerned with the present or the future, this organizational structure is intended to suggest that a politics of time might be found where we least expect it: in what has already occurred. Not only do those authors who turn most forcefully to the past discover productive ways to manage their particular political problems (Spiegelman, Mackey, and Gilb), but they also demand that we rethink the very nature of the present’s relation to the past. In general, any invocation of history for political purposes—as in *Beloved*’s famous championing of “rememory,” Justice Breyer’s commitment to the “stubborn facts of history,” or Anzaldúa’s call to learn the oppressive histories of other minority groups—treats the past as something to be remembered and honored for its own sake, simply because suffering and trauma have occurred there. However, as Mackey’s texts highlight and as Saidiya Hartman describes in chronicling her travels to African slave ports, this emphasis on remembering quickly turns into an almost nostalgic relationship to trauma and oppression. Conversely, the treatments of the past that
we have seen from the authors discussed in *Qualified Hope* teach us that history does not exist to be remembered for its own sake; instead, its temporally formed form and content are to be used to produce political difference in the present.

Lest I overstate the importance of this productive relationship to the past, the second common conclusion to be drawn from this array of texts maintains that any temporal politics should ground itself in more than a single panel of time, be it future, present, or past. Contrary to Grosz’s futurism and Edelman’s presentism, *Qualified Hope* has implicitly argued that the best models of temporal politics are those that integrate and intertwine multiple panels of time to produce unique temporal forms that incite us to think about politics in radically new ways. This is why simultaneity has played such a crucial role in so many of the book’s chapters. When grounded in epistemological or ontological difference, politics adheres to a logic of mutual exclusion that limits its access to the kinds of productive temporal forms that phenomenological differences grounded in temporal experience make possible. Of course, crucial to this process is the formal flexibility of literature, which is free to shape temporal experience in ways that merely speculative thought can, at most, only describe.

As a corollary of this analysis of the political value of time, therefore, I have highlighted the prominent and complex role that temporal form plays in any literary text’s production of meaning, and in so doing, I have demonstrated a mode of reading that need not reduce literary form to theme. I intend this reading model, practiced in each of *Qualified Hope*’s chapters, to reveal a way to talk about the temporal form of the reading experience without ignoring the complicating insights about the irreducibility of difference that postmodernism’s linguistic turn has taught us. As a result, *Qualified Hope* has identified some very convoluted temporal forms, some very complicated ways of knowing, and some very compromised politics. Looked at differently, however, these compromised approaches to time, knowledge, and politics are also newly qualified approaches, as they have wrested us from some extremely intractable paradoxes that have thoroughly dominated and, to my mind, limited postmodern thought. I do not claim to have solved the paradoxical relationships between time and knowledge, identity and difference, or universal and particular—after all, they are called “paradoxes” for a reason. Instead, I make the more limited claim that literary form can imagine and produce unique versions of temporal experience that allow us to think around these paradoxes and discover new ways to be political at the beginning of the twenty-first century.
Introduction

1. Throughout Qualified Hope, I assume an experiential understanding of time. Science would of course tell us that time does not actually exist, that it is an illusion created by the relative motion of objects, but this scientific truth has yet to influence our affective and physical sense of time’s role in our lives. Although the way we understand our own temporal experiences may not be true and accurate, that understanding, grounded as it is in the basic experiential categories of “earlier,” “now,” and “later,” nevertheless affects nearly every aspect of our lives, including the political alliances, struggles, and ideals that we choose to pursue. At the same time, however, I do not think that “experiential” is synonymous with “linear” or “transparent,” as my recourse to Bhabha’s “ambivalent temporality” suggests.

2. Louis Althusser’s work provides a spatial articulation of the same paradox: “Now it is this [scientific] knowledge that we have to reach . . . while speaking in ideology, and from within ideology we have to outline a discourse which tries to break with ideology, in order to dare to be the beginning of a scientific (i.e. subjectless) discourse on ideology” (“Ideology” 173). Whether conceived spatially or temporally, the paradox derives from the tension between part and whole: we cannot simultaneously be part of a whole and have knowledge of it; and if we remove ourselves from the whole to better secure our knowledge, then the resulting whole is not the same whole of which we desired knowledge in the first place. In addition, the paradox reveals an irresolvable tension between content and form, or what Yeats describes as the impossibility of separating the dancer from the dance. Van, for example, cannot fully know the content-term “Time” because time’s form, the fact that knowing “takes time,” shapes and determines the process of knowing time as an object.

3. In suggesting that Grosz abandons intelligibility and content for “the new,” I am focusing on the ultimate effect of her temporal grounding of politics, charging it with an immanence that cannot support political claims or acts. Grosz works very hard to develop a theory that accounts for time and knowledge, form and content, but I think she achieves this only in theory and not in terms of a feminist politics that can be put to any practical use. She achieves it theoretically by drawing on Deleuze’s virtual ontology which allows for the simultaneity of immanence and difference and thus of time and knowledge. She explains: “Duration is a mode of infecting self-differentiation: difference is internal to its function, its
modes of elaboration and production, and is also its ramifying effect on those objects located "within its milieu" ("Thinking" 28). This union of immanence and difference (duration as both a "mode of elaboration" and a "ramifying effect" that can be known) allows Grosz to have it both ways: she achieves an immersion in time's flow and the difference required for any production of meaning and knowledge. As a practical matter, however, and as Grosz readily admits, Deleuzian ontology leaves her with a contentless politics. Moreover, in equating time's self-differentiation with Deleuze's notion of immanent difference, she takes what for Deleuze is a rhizomatic network of differences and makes them linear and future-directed. The result is a single-paneled approach to the politics of time. (In chapter 2 I suggest that Pynchon's *Mason & Dixon* imagines a self-differentiating temporality that differs in more than just one direction.)

See Deleuze's *The Fold* for an explanation of virtual ontology and the debt it owes to Leibniz's notion of possible worlds. See Grosz's "Deleuze's Bergson" for her most explicit description of the role Deleuze's virtual ontology of becoming plays in her own thought. Also, see the Introduction to her more recent *Nick of Time* where she backs away from her attempt to reconcile time and knowledge, at least when time is the object of said knowledge.

4. I employ an expansive definition of "form" throughout the book, taking it to refer to any aspect of a text that affects how it is read.

5. For additional examples of this core impasse of the phenomenological project, see Bergson's distinction between intuition and intellect in *Creative Evolution*; Heidegger's "Letter on Humanism," which describes the limits and complications of *Being and Time*; and Deleuze's *The Logic of Sense* on the struggle to represent "Aionic" time, which I discuss in chapter 2.

6. See Jacques Lezra's *Unspeakable Subjects*, particularly the Introduction and first chapter, for an argument that sees speculation's tendency to reiterate the problem it wants to solve as a symptom of time's stagnation.

7. In general, I will use the term "postmodern" to designate a time period beginning after World War II. The texts I address are all marked by socio-political events unique to the postwar era, and this history is the primary referent of the word "postmodern" throughout *Qualified Hope*. At the same time, however, I do not intend my treatment of postmodern literature to contravene other approaches to and understandings of postmodernism, be they social, economic, or cultural.

8. Although not explicitly about literature, see Soja's *Postmodern Geographies* and its sequel, *Thirdspace*, two texts which not only describe but also fuel postmodernism's spatial turn.

9. For such characterizations see Ermarcht, Heise (*Chronoschisms*), Elias, McHale, and Hutcheon (*A Poetics*).

10. See, for example, Avery and Newfield, whose edited collection maps multiculturalism; Davis and Womack, whose collection maps ethics; and Elden, who maps time itself. Brian Jarvis's *Postmodern Cartographies* describes the late-twentieth-century's love of maps in full.

11. On borders see Anzaldúa, José Saldívar, and Michaelson Johnson's edited collection *Border Theory*; on liminality see D'haen and Bertens's edited collection; and on "third space" see Soja (*Thirdspace*) and Toro.

12. This is, of course, a broad generalization, as epistemological and ontological questions are never so mutually exclusive, and any given politics will always confront both. I thus want to emphasize that I am merely arguing that epistemology constitutes the primary but not exclusive thrust of one form of politics, while ontology defines the primary but not exclusive thrust of the other.

13. See Chow for a compelling argument about the foundational similarities between "critical theory" and "cultural studies."

14. In transferring Lacanian ideas about signification to queer bodies, Lee Edelman's difference is simultaneously epistemological and ontological, a function of linguistic mediation and
other people, but he most certainly does not locate difference in time. However, when Elizabeth Grosz highlights time's self-differentiation as the feature that permits knowledge in the midst of an otherwise intense immanence, she does locate difference in time rather than in language or being. Indeed, my own work would not be possible without Grosz's foundational argument about temporal difference. Nevertheless, by grounding her work in philosophical and scientific notions of time, Grosz limits time's self-differing to its linear motion into the future, effectively severing time from practical, political knowledge. To avoid this limitation, *Qualified Hope* contends that literary form allows time to differ in more than just one direction, creating the possibility for new political knowledge.

15. Edelman makes a similar point about queer identity when he notes that for both the right, which wants to "eliminate queers," and the left, which wants to honor their difference, "queerness . . . must mean nothing . . . : on the right the nothingness always at war with the positivity of civil society, on the left nothing more than a sexual practice in need of demystification" (*Post-Partum* 184). In other words, the moment the left invites queers into its liberal society that esteems their difference, the queer is annihilated, absorbed into the identity of liberal politics.

16. Of course, meta-epistemology is not unique to postmodernism. Knowledge has always been an object of study, and ever since Kant placed his famous "block" on knowledge in the First Critique, contending that part of what constitutes knowledge is the very fact of its limitations and imperfections, knowledge's failures have also been an object of study. (See, in particular, the Introduction to *Critique of Pure Reason* where Kant broadly discusses the underlying premises of his transcendental philosophy.) For Kant, knowing knowledge's limits makes it a bit more whole and perfect, albeit negatively. What marks postmodern meta-epistemology, I am arguing, is its utter self-absorption with its own limits and its inability to synthesize them and move beyond them. Throughout the book I will be suggesting that time in its many forms can move us beyond meta-epistemology's wheel spinning precisely because temporal experience produces knowledge.

17. Hutcheon more or less understands irony in terms of self-consciousness, a self-reflexive statement that calls attention to itself by undermining its own truth-value—hence, its critique will always remain provisional. See Paul de Man's "The Concept of Irony" for a description of irony that sees it as a function of time.

18. For defining collections that herald this turn to ethics, see Rainsford and Woods, Garber et al., Davis and Womack, and the special *PMLA* issue on ethics from 1999.

19. See the Autumn 2001 issue of *New Literary History* for a broad examination of ethical objectivity in the context of Mohanty's ideas.

20. Although they understand "ethics" to mean something more like moral and intellectual improvement and not necessarily progressive politics, both Martha Nussbaum and Wayne Booth also offer theories that treat ethics as something already located in textual content. See, for example, Nussbaum's *Love's Knowledge* and Booth's *The Company We Keep*.

21. The temporality of the ethical encounter is similarly preempted in Paula Moya's description of the creation of "post-positivist realism," a school of thought, closely associated with Mohanty, which aims to treat identity objectively: "The scholars who initially came together did so partly in response to the excesses of the wide-spread skepticism and constructivism in literary theory and cultural studies and partly because they were interested in formulating a complex and rigorous theory of identity that could be put to work in the service of progressive politics" (footnote 4).

22. For book-length examples of this language-based, deconstructive ethics, see J. Hillis Miller, Bauman, Critchley, Eaglestone, and Newton. Miller takes a de Manian, tropological approach while the others are clearly influenced by what might be called Derrida's "Levinasization" of deconstruction throughout the 1990s.
23. See, in particular, Grosz’s “Thinking the New,” which adopts an epistemological framework, and the interview with Grosz in *Found Object*, which focuses instead on ontology, describing epistemology as “a kind of theft from ontology, from the real.”

24. For another example, see Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri’s *Empire*, particularly their discussion of the multitude in Part Four, “The Decline and Fall of Empire,” which emphasizes the crucial role that temporalities of production play in negotiating the vexed relationship between immanence and difference.

25. See Slavoj Žižek’s *The Ticklish Subject*, particularly chapter 3, “The Politics of Truth,” for an analysis of Alain Badiou’s theory of the “Truth-Event” that links truth to “the temporal process of Being” without succumbing to rigid ontologization or postmodern subjectivism.

26. See Barthes’s *S/Z* and Morson’s “Narrativeness” and *Narrative and Freedom*.

27. Although Barthes’s notion of the writerly text grants form a significant role, its emphasis on a text’s performativity similarly reduces the temporality of reading to a narrow sliver of pure presentness. See, in particular, the opening pages of *S/Z* where Barthes describes the writerly text as “a perpetual present, upon which no consequent language (which would inevitably make it past) can be superimposed” (5).

28. See Mitchell for an even more explicit defense of form as the primary site of literature’s politics. He writes, for example, that “a commitment to form is also finally a commitment to emancipatory, progressive political practices united with a scrupulous attention to ethical means. Insofar as formalism insists on paying attention to a way of being in the path rather than to where the path leads, it seems to me central to any notion of right action” (324).

Chapter 1

1. Just to give authorial intent its due, DeLillo contends in a 1985 interview with Caryn James that he never set out to write an apocalyptic novel.

2. See Žižek’s *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, particularly pages 36–40, on the ideological function of “as if.”

3. See, for example, Lentricchia and the essays therein by Lentricchia, Ferraro, Moses, and Cantor. See also Duvall, Billy, do Carmo, Heller, and Boling.

4. See, for example, Hayles, King, Reeve and Kerridge, Heffernan, Maltby, Caton, and Phillips.

5. For a rare exception to such readings, see Heise’s “Toxins, Drugs, and Global Systems.”

6. This effect is nicely described in Frank Lentricchia’s Introduction to *New Essays on White Noise*. He cites two undergraduate students’ reactions to reading the novel, and both seem to argue that the book does not just speak to them, but that it *is* them: “‘This is the first book in the course about me.’ Another undergraduate tells me that he did not ‘read’ White Noise; he ‘inhaled’ it” (7). Lentricchia does not reveal if inhalation is here a metaphor of life or addiction.

7. In this and many other scenes, Jack remains silent while Murray expounds on the surrounding cultural curiosities. But once the text accrues a layer of reading, Jack’s silence actually reinforces the preemption of textual meaning that comes with Murray’s all-too-knowing commentary. After all, because ideology is a function of knowledge, not of speaking, Jack’s silence does not exempt him from the iterations of watching as long as he knows the game being played. And as the aforementioned discussion about rain suggests, DeLillo gives us no reason to see Jack as unknowing; he is plenty hip to ideology’s cruel games. His role as narrator requires it. If ideology is a function of knowledge rather than speaking, then the only character possibly exempt from ideological mediation is Wilder, as I will discuss later in the chapter.
8. This same form-content conflation appears to be a side effect of Dylar, the drug Babette takes to allay her fear of death. When Willie Mink, Babette's supplier, becomes addicted to Dylar, one symptom includes misconstruing signifiers, merely uttered words, as their signifieds. Thus, because the words are the actual things they name, Jack attacks Willie by simply saying, "Hail of bullets" and "Fusillade" (311). The scene suggests that we might think we are better off because we know that words are not things, because we can see the difference between them, but our recognition of that difference is dangerous because reversible. That is, our recognition of the difference simply reverses the word-thing relation, leading to Heinrich's self-satisfied (and no less dangerous) complacency with all things, like rain, just being words.

9. I made a similar point in the Introduction's discussion of Nabokov's *Ada*. There I noted that Van's failure to know Time stems from the fact that the content and form of his investigation are identical. Nabokov solves that problem by engaging a different medium or form (the novel) to think about time.

10. Treating metaphor as a totalizing assertion of presence is not necessarily an incorrect interpretation of the trope's function. It seems, after all, that if one wanted to keep the ways in which one thing "is not" like another thing present in the trope, one might use a simile rather than a metaphor. To say that one thing "is like" something else certainly implies the ways in which it is also not like that thing; conversely, metaphor's assertion that one thing is another thing clearly suppresses such differences.

11. Eugene Goodheart's *The Reign of Ideology* offers an opposing view. Goodheart believes that ideology critique argues "that there is nothing but ideology," and he calls for a return to "aesthetic value," "reason," and "transcendence." This opposition between ideology and absolutes, however, is tendentious—a simple, oppositional reversal that structurally reiterates the ideological opposition between "truth" and "concealment" that Goodheart wants to abolish. He is correct to argue that exposing and recognizing the ideological underpinnings of a language whose meaning is purportedly open for all to see is no longer a sufficient critical task. But demystifying ideology critique's demystifications is also no longer sufficient because ideology no longer functions as mystification and illusion. Thus, attempts like Goodheart's to avoid or transcend ideological mystification have simply become ideology *par excellence*.

12. Post-ironists do not reject irony in favor of sincerity but rather try to ironize irony, to announce it so self-consciously that its tendency to sting and distance can instead be defused and enlisted for those sincere and sentimental ends for which we all truly long. Such authors take Wallace's point about irony's pathological metastasis, but they suggest that it can be configured and deployed in a way that produces generally sincere effects.

13. See Hungerford for an indispensable argument in favor of historicizing the contemporary, and see McGurl for an example of how we might do so.

**Chapter 2**

1. The same theme appears in Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49* when Oedipa Maas drives north to visit John Nefastis, inventor of the Nefastis Machine, which engages the fictitious Maxwell's Demon to keep hot and cold molecules in perpetual motion, thereby contradicting the second law of thermodynamics. This law states that heat energy (as opposed to kinetic, potential, or electrical energy, for instance) is a lower-quality energy because it cannot be reversed into its original form. Violating this law creates a closed system which, despite being unable to draw energy from an outside source, would nevertheless remain in perpetual motion.

2. Contemporary scientists measure the most quickly occurring events in attoseconds. One attosecond is a billionth of a billionth of a second. That means that 1,000,000,000,000,000,-
000 attoseconds elapse over the course of one second. (There are only 2,366,820,000 seconds in a life spanning 75 years, which means that there are 422,507,837 times more attoseconds in a second than there are seconds in a lifetime.) See Labrador.

3. Puns achieve this same effect by meaning two things simultaneously. Specifically, in the moment of its event, a pun contains both the simultaneity of meaning that characterizes it as a pun and the temporalized deferral of meaning that allows us to hear a pun first one way and then another. Not surprisingly, an aural pun on “Horology” instigates Emerson’s introduction of the watch. He tells Dixon that the watch “will revolutionize the world of Horology,” and Dixon responds, having heard “whore-ology,” by asking if it “calculates when she’s over-charging and by how much” (317). Also, just after Dixon shows the watch to R.C., R.C. speculates as to whether the watch might earn the prize money that the Longitude Board is offering for standardizing the longitude. Dixon describes the Board as “tight-fisted,” explaining that one must open one’s grip on the money with a “Prying-Bar,” to which R.C. punningly responds, “Must be why they call it 'Prize' money” (322).

4. For more on parallactic form, see Burns.

5. When I say “larger” here, I am speaking not of measurable space but of multiple versions of time contained in one instant of time. Fractalization is usually a spatial metaphor; it denotes highly irregular shapes, generally formed by iterative and recursive structures that are noncategorizable according to the principles of Euclidean geometry. The particularly innovative feature of Pynchon’s use of this idea, then, is that he fractalizes narrative temporality, not just its spatial content. The particular irregularity of Pynchon’s temporality is that it is neither linear nor circular, but both.

6. Asserting that humans experience the world as a continuous flow rather than as a succession of isolated moments, Bergson’s *Time and Free Will*, published in 1888, treated time as a phenomenon of consciousness that he called *durée*. This interiorization of temporal experience instituted a rigid mind-material divide that the 1896 *Matter and Memory* and the 1907 *Creative Evolution* overcame by extending *durée* to all components of the material world, a gradual exteriorization of *durée* that Deleuze describes as the accrual of a “complex ontology” of duration (*Bergsonism* 34). Insisting that time can exist only as an uninterrupted flow, Bergson contends that even temporal concepts such as sequence, succession, and simultaneity spatialize and thus corrupt time’s true essence.

7. Jacques Derrida exploits this notion of instantaneity as the opposite of *durée*, using it to prove the impossibility of the gift, a theme he pursues in both *Given Time and The Gift of Death*. In the former, Derrida argues that gifts and exchanges are radically different: gifts are of the instant, while exchanges require duration. Gifts belong to the instant because a true gift lacks all conditions. Because claiming that a gift should lack conditions is itself a condition, however, the gift can be defined only by its own impossibility. Or a gift can be a gift only instantaneously. The moment that time extends beyond the instant—which it always does, because time keeps “moving”—the gift necessarily becomes an exchange and, by definition, not a gift: “the temporalization of time (memory, present, anticipation; retention, protention, imminence of the future; 'ecstases,' and so forth) always sets in motion the process of a destruction of the gift” (14). In suggesting that the temporality required for exchange precludes the possibility of the gift, Derrida thus implies that the instant only ever functions as the opposite of duration.

8. In a sense, Mason and Dixon’s journey in the New World could also be read through the lens of anthropology, a discipline long concerned with the problematic relationship between time and cultural understanding. Marcel Mauss, Claude Lévi-Strauss, and Michel de Certeau all address the problem, and Johannes Fabian’s *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes Its Object* organizes much of their work, arguing that “time is involved in any possible relationship between anthropological discourse and its referents” (28). Although somewhat short
on practical solutions, Pierre Bourdieu strongly makes the same case in *The Logic of Practice*, and in *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, he shuns the “phenomenological reconstitution of lived experience” (4), arguing instead that anthropology requires that one “situate oneself within ‘real activity as such,’ i.e. in the practical relation to the world” (96).

9. The four key moments of the Transit mirror the structure of the chapter containing its description. The chapter begins in the frame tale, corresponding to the period before Venus's initial, external contact: (1) the transit is then narrated in exemplary generalities, a narrative style corresponding to Venus's ingress into the sun; (2) the narration of the actual event corresponds to “Venus now standing alone against the Face of the Sun” (97); (3) the actual event then ends with a transitional section narrating Mason and Dixon's departure from Capetown which corresponds to the planet's egress out of the disc of the sun; and (4) the chapter concludes back out in the frame tale, where it began, just as when Venus fully detaches from the sun's disc.

10. This relation can be figured as a Klein bottle. Essentially a three-dimensional mobius strip, this shape, identified by the German mathematician Felix Klein, is formed by elongating a bottle's neck, passing the neck through the bottle's side, and joining its opening to a hole in the base. The effect is a one-sided surface without volume that nevertheless functions as a container. The bottle is both its own inside and outside, a singular surface with multiple properties.

I offer this model of “mutual invagination,” which denotes a relation of singular multiplicity, as an alternative to deconstruction, which operates according to a logic of mutual exclusion. In this model the two terms, like the inside and outside of a Klein bottle, need not be negated; unlike deconstruction, “singular multiplicity” need not name its paradoxes “impossibilities.” This is because the two terms are not deconstructed to the point that we can say that all insides are really just outsides and vice versa. To do so would ignore the fact that Klein bottles successfully function as containers.

11. The Mason-Dixon Line, which we should read as a metaphor for the novel itself, also manifests a motion born of a subdivided instant. Like a model of Bergsonian *durée*, the line moves forward inexorably, flowing on in perpetual motion. With his relocation of aleatory openness in the instant, however, Deleuze would remind us that the line also divides each moment along the way. That is, the line is vertically as well as horizontally asymptotic, functioning as that infinitely subdivisible space which ensures that two entities will never converge into one. Because of this irreducible, vertical gap between them, Pennsylvania and Maryland, like Mason and Dixon, or even like Emerson sitting “inches from [Mrs. Emerson's] Quill,” converge forever without uniting, producing another version of perpetual motion.

12. Occasionally, Cherrycoke's cranky frame-tale listeners force him to abandon the “representational sense” of his narration. For instance, Cherrycoke alters his narrative after Uncle Lomax charges him with “Parsonickal interpolation” of others' words. Although he initially defends the liberties he takes with his narration, Cherrycoke eventually concedes that his characters “withdrew out of my hearing, so that regretfully I quite miss’d the Information” (652).

13. As E. J. W. Hinds's “Sari, Sorry, and the Vortex of History” discusses the role of anachronism in *Mason & Dixon*, I will not repeat the same argument here. I would simply note that anachronism allows Pynchon to enact the same structure of a future collapsed into a past present that Cherrycoke's narration employs.

14. Pynchon makes the tropological implication of this argument clear as images such as the shuttle of a loom and the shuttling across the river intersect with images of the turning of the heavens around the star named *tropus*. Vehicles such as the ferry and Cherrycoke's mysterious carriage thus metaphorize metaphor itself, thereby suggesting the integral role that language, and even more importantly the temporality of language's production of meaning, plays in achieving timely knowledge.
Chapter 3

1. For an elaboration of Freud's ideas on the temporality of trauma, see Laplanche (“Notes on Afterwardness”), Caruth, and Freud's own Beyond the Pleasure Principle.

2. As Joseph Witek explains, “The 'x' of the word 'comix' distinguishes the irreverent and iconoclastic self-published black-and-white comic books often associated with the Sixties counterculture from their mainstream, four-color, corporately produced cousins.” Spiegelman's early work in underground publications is clearly in this vein, and his use of the “x” here aligns In the Shadow of No Towers with that tradition. Following Spiegelman's lead, I will use “comix” to refer to his work and “comics” to refer to the reproductions of historical material that he appends to the end of his book. (In the Shadow of No Towers includes a non-paginated Introduction; ten newspaper-sized pages of Spiegelman's comix; another nonpaginated meditation on historical comics entitled “The Comic Supplement”; and seven examples of old comics, numbered Plates I–VII.)

3. See Abel for a reading of DeLillo's essay that treats its cinematic temporality as an alternative to “simile and analogy.” Abel believes that DeLillo's essay treats “narrative as a mode of seeing” (1240)—thereby demonstrating “the impossibility of saying anything definitive about 9/11—especially anything that captures the event's meaning” (1237). Abel's ideas offer a provocative way to read DeLillo's recent novel Falling Man, which has been widely described as his “9/11 novel.” If Abel is correct, however, it must be a 9/11 novel that refuses to actually be about the meaning of 9/11.

4. See Nancy Miller for an interesting reading of the “Portraits of Grief” series that The New York Times published to honor and remember the attacks' victims. Also see Hirsch for a discussion of Spiegelman's use of images in In the Shadow of No Towers. Both essays rely on the “punctum,” the term Roland Barthes uses to designate the “piercing quality” of photographic “details that shock and disturb, grab, puncture and wound” (Hirsch 1211).

5. See Baudrillard, Žižek’s “Welcome to the Desert of the Real,” Spivak, and Pease for competing theoretical perspectives on the attacks. Grounded in his thinking about hyperreality and simulation, Baudrillard theorizes a series of reversals in which 9/11 functions as the irreducible real that overthrows pre-9/11 fictions but then eventually succumbs to the fictionalizing power of the event's infinite mediation. See Wilcox and Butterfield for different takes on whether or not the reality of 9/11 can withstand the Baudrillardian logic of simulation.

Žižek too interprets the event through the logic of reversal. In arguing that 9/11 gave the United States “a taste of what goes on around the world on a daily basis,” he reads the event as a symmetrical reversal in which the inside becomes the outside and the unreal is made real (“Desert” 388). He offers a similar reading of the torture at Abu Ghraib: “What we get when we see the photos of humiliated Iraqi prisoners is precisely a direct insight into 'American values,' into the core of an obscene enjoyment that sustains the American way of life” (“Rumsfeld”).

While Baudrillard's and Žižek's insights are certainly illuminating, their reversals endessly perpetuate themselves without substantially engaging the temporal imperatives of our post-9/11 world. Spivak, however, comes much closer to addressing the temporal implications of the problem when she insists that any response to 9/11 must “pre-figure change.” Instead of a preemptive response that forecloses the future, Spivak describes an action in the present that prefigures the future. Admitting that figuration's imprecision makes such response risky, she nevertheless contends that cognitively based “consciousness-raising” “closes off response altogether” (87). This is what Donald Pease does when he contends that Bush's policies cannot be countered “until the global state of emergency state is itself exposed as the cause of the traumas it purports to oppose. Its exceptions will then be recognized as the criminal violence of a terrorizing state” (18; my emphasis).

6. McGlothlin relies on the distinction Gerard Genette makes in Narrative Discourse
among story (the world of the narrative’s content), discourse (the world from which the story is narrated), and narrating (the metacommentary on the other two levels) to identify these interlocking stories. As she admits, one could quibble with her application of Genette’s terms since the discourse, which comments on the story and its narration, is also metafictional. Thus, the level of narrating could be called meta-metafictional, as it comments on both the commenting and the story.

Chapter 4

1. For a more thorough description of these events, see McGrath.

2. A fourth book, Bass Cathedral, was released in 2008, well after the completion of this chapter.

   The band, named the Mystic Horn Society, consists of N., who plays the bass clarinet, bassoon, and saxophones; Lambert, who plays the harmonica and saxophones; Penguin, who plays the oboe; Aunt Nancy, who plays the violin and congas; and Djamilaa, who sings. The drummer, whom they find in the second book and play with in the third, is Drennette.

   The Mystic Horn Society, who later change their name to the Molimo m’Atet, play a genre of jazz that is akin to free jazz, an extremely cerebral and theoretical experimental style that was developed in the 1960s as a response to the quick appropriation and commodification of African-American music by the dominant culture. Free jazz abandons the ordering constraints of melody and harmony, frequently producing walls of sound frequently described as “inaccessible.”

3. Hereafter, Bedouin Hornbook will appear as BH; Djibot Baghostus’s Run as DBR; Atet A.D. as AD; and Discrepant Engagement, a collection of Mackey’s critical essays, as DE.

4. Mackey’s work belongs to an important tradition of black literature typically deemed too experimental and aesthetically driven to be considered political, a tradition of writers such as Robert Duncan, Kamau Braithwaite, William Kelley, Will Alexander, and Harryette Mullen. Of course, as Mackey’s own scholarship on many of these authors reveals, their work is adamantly engaged in the politics of race despite its apparent inaccessibility. See Nielsen’s ground-breaking Black Chant for an analysis of the politics of black experimental literature, including work by many of these writers.

5. Freud devotes the first section of “The Uncanny” to an etymological investigation of the word heimlich which eventually reveals that the word contains its own opposite—that it means everything from “homely” and “familiar” to “concealed,” “secret,” and “covert.” Thus heimlich also means unheimlich; or the home contains its own undoing. The word applies well to slaves and their descendants, then, whose “home”—be it in Africa or the “New World”—is always a non-home. A further analog might be drawn to Du Bois’s notion of double-consciousness and the linguistic and epistemological duplicity it entails. In addition, as will prove relevant later in the chapter, heimlich lends itself not only to split consciousness, but also to split speech and puns.

6. This idea that sublimity can project “social roles” relies on a specifically Kantian formulation of sublimity; whereas an early thinker like Longinus located sublimity variously in the genius of the author and in the excellence of the text, Kant contends that sublimity arises solely in the audience through a two-step, masochistic process. First, sublimity’s horror and fear arise when the understanding is confronted with a mathematically or dynamically massive object that it cannot comprehend. Second, the pleasure of that pain comes when that original failure of our understanding makes us aware of an even stronger mental process, the supersensible aspect of reason, which is the faculty that demands a comprehensive totalization of the understanding’s apprehensions in the first place. The pleasure comes from learning that cognition is
not just limited to sensory apprehension but is also governed by supersensible powers of reason. For Kant, therefore, sublimity resides in the mind, not in things; it is a mental process, not a characteristic of an object or event (Critique of Judgment §25–29). It is this cognitive function, this ability to effect new modes of thought, that makes the sublime potentially political.


8. See Bhabha, 204–5, for a discussion that envisions the temporal cut as the founding condition of modernity itself, resulting in what he characterizes as the temporality of “time-lag.”

9. I intend for this idea of “disposition” to echo the discussion of Althusser’s “Cremonini” essay in chapter 1.

10. “Aliquant” is an appropriate word choice for this excess as it is from the Latin alius for “other” and quantus for “how great” or “how much.” Thus the aliquant remainder also functions as an index of othering (literally, “how much other”).

11. In “The Uncanny,” Freud cites E. Jentsch’s belief that one of the more uncanny moments in fiction occurs when the reader is uncertain “whether a particular figure in the story is a human being or an automation” (132). When applied to From a Broken Bottle’s racial themes, we should hear an implied return to slavery, to an instrumentalization of the black body, echoing in this discussion of uncanny automatism.

12. Djeanne’s association with “the X-ray wafting of an imaginary musk” aligns her with Djamilal’s similarly forward-looking “X-ray accessibility.” At the same time, however, the “X-ray”-ness moves from the seductions of her “musk” to the distaste of her spittle, thereby revealing that “X-ray” anything is probably too good to be true.

13. See, for example, Žižek, The Sublime Object of Ideology, 118.

14. Dubey makes a similar diagnosis, criticizing the temptation to identify alternative third spaces that appear to avoid postmodernism’s totalizing logic of identity and difference. Instead, she notes, “This romance of the residual that beguiles so much postmodern thinking about race . . . exempt[s] black culture from the contingencies of the postmodern condition. . . . Converting a structural position of relative powerlessness into a desirable ontological condition, we mine sites of material deprivation for their cultural capital” (8–9). Also see Kevin Gaines for a discussion of the lackluster treatment scholars invested in black politics and culture give to “time and history.” Gaines believes that their “concern for the recovery of a usable past . . . has often led to an ahistorical preoccupation with a search for origins,” resulting in an impotent historicism complicit with the very discourses it seeks to challenge (224–25).

15. Dimitri Anastasopoulos and Paul Naylor effectively argue that Mackey’s embrace of transcendence distinguishes his work from more conventionally postmodern literature.

16. Baraka’s discussion appears in the tenth chapter of Blues People.

Chapter 5

1. On the epistemological, ontological, and political limitations of “the possible,” see Deleuze’s Difference and Repetition, particularly chapter 4, “Ideas and the Synthesis of Difference.”

2. Although this loose feminist taxonomy of “waves” is much contested, it nevertheless offers a helpful shorthand for my schematic purposes here. I associate second-wave feminism with essentialist notions of the female body and women’s experience, a rigidity that was perhaps necessary as the second wave, which focused on de facto discrimination and oppression, was aiming at a more protean target than the first wave, which was primarily fighting against more fixed, de jure forms of sexism. Accordingly, the third wave resists the second wave’s essentialist
tendencies by embracing a more poststructural understanding of difference, effectively taking aim not just at patriarchal hegemony but at any logic, including that of feminism’s second wave, which inhibits and hypostatizes the proliferation of difference. Consequently, the third wave expands feminism’s reach, allowing it to critique all forms of dualistic thinking—not just the male-female dichotomy—and all forms of imperialism. This is why when Grosz talks about “global patriarchy,” she refers to “corporate capitalism, international racism or local government regulation.” Leslie Scalapino’s feminism will also seem conspicuously uninterested in gender, but only because she sees poverty, capitalism, and AIDS as feminist issues par excellence.

3. See also Stone and Bennetts for two book-length studies that avoid such ideological arguments in favor of pragmatically materialist ones. Coming to complementary conclusions, Stone suggests that women “opt-out” of the public sphere because most workplaces sexistly marginalize women who have children, and Bennetts argues that more women should resist the “mommy track” because women, even those who are married to a financially solvent partner, need economic independence in case of divorce or some other form of financial abandonment.

4. In particular, see the interviews with Frost and Hinton. Also see Frost’s “Signifyin(g) on Stein” where she makes bold feminist claims about Scalapino’s poetry, arguing that Scalapino’s and Harryette Mullen’s works politicize Gertrude Stein’s writing, which Frost views as more personal, private, and detached from the public sphere.

5. For an array of perspectives on the political possibilities of Language poetry, see Bernstein, Silliman, Hartley, Mack et al., Perloff’s Radical Artifice, Perelman, Golding, and Andrews.

6. See, for example, Elizabeth Frost’s “Time-less or Hieroglyph.”

7. The same reading could be applied to the poem’s seriality as a whole. The lack of relation among the words mirrors a lack of relation among the stanzas and sequences of the poem in its entirety.

8. Scalapino’s ideas about time and motion come as much from Gertrude Stein’s understanding of “the inherent nature of a being, object, or event as motion” (Phenomena 30) as they do from contemporary physics’ insight that “because all of the infinity of factors determining what any given thing is are always changing with time, no such a thing can even remain identical with itself as time passes” (way, epigraph). The foundational nature of change and motion, therefore, creates a version of simultaneity that is highly disjointed. If a thing will never, at any moment or over any period of time, be identical to itself, then the present is always in a state of turmoil, is always and simultaneously “again,” “first,” and “before.”

9. Scalapino’s example of language without referential content comes from her teen-age years at Berkeley High School where she heard kids deploy “a fragment of speech functioning as a musical phrase, ‘Sh(a)-ma-faa,’” ostensibly a recasting of “shit-mother-fucker.” Scalapino interprets its use this way:

The phrase had a benign, communicative use, which was exclamation of awe, or pretended exclamation of awe, which was therefore a commentary meaning the opposite; or both at the same time, both ironic commentary on and exclamation of awe.

It was nonreferential words, the obscenity taken into a different (not transcendent) usage by being that (by being obscenity). Therefore it seemed to imply being outside the ‘social’ as the act of creating that ‘social’ (communing, as two people speaking to each other only then).

By their speaking they could go past the bounds of speaking—and were also outside any ‘social’ apprehension and interpretation. (Public 57)

As the idea of being “outside any ‘social’ apprehension and interpretation” suggests, nonrefer-
ential language simply refuses to ground its politics in any act of recognition—even the post-
structuralist recognition of the limits of language or the arbitrariness of reference and meaning.
Instead, without being blindly transparent, the referents of the words are the forms of the words;
the words’ meanings derive from the fact of their being, not from their ability to refer.

Chapter 6

1. As most histories of Brown detail, Congress was reluctant to pass legislation that would
enforce the Court’s decision. Many school districts simply refused to adhere to the decision,
and those that were inclined to pursue integration frequently lacked the means and resources
necessary to achieve such a large feat of social engineering. In the decades following the ruling,
therefore, integration was sporadic and resisted at nearly every turn. The Swann decision, how-
ever, provided school districts a court-tested means to integrate their schools. See Clotfelter’s
After Brown.

2. Although the districts’ particularizing categories were not specifically “white” and
“black,” they were equally clumsy and awkward. In Louisville, students were either “black”
or “other,” while in Seattle they were either “white” or “non-white.” Presumably the schools
thought these categories adequate, but in applying the criterion of “narrow tailoring”—a con-
cept, developed in the Adarand Constructors, Inc. v. Peña decision from 1995, requiring that all
state-mandated racial classifications demonstrate a “compelling government interest”—Chief
Justice Roberts’s majority opinion takes issue with just how broadly these programs are “ta-
lored.” He explains, for instance, that “under the Seattle plan, a school with 50 percent Asian-
American students and 50 percent white students but no African-American, Native-American,
or Latino students would qualify as balanced, while a school with 30 percent Asian-American,
25 percent African-American, 25 percent Latino, and 20 percent white students would not”
(15–16).

3. While Justice Thomas joined the majority opinion striking down both race-conscious
assignment programs, he also felt compelled to write his own opinion, drawing a strict distinc-
tion between segregation, which he contends can only be de jure, and racial imbalance, which,
to his mind, is “innocent” and in no way amounts to de facto segregation.

4. Further blurring the racial lines of this debate, both white and black families brought
the Seattle lawsuit, suggesting that these problems are not easily reduced to the bogeyman of
“reverse discrimination.”

5. Explicitly highlighting the temporality of this process, Justice Thomas reasons, “As for
Louisville, its slate was cleared by the District Court’s 2000 dissolution decree, which effectively
declared that there were no longer any effects of de jure discrimination in need of remedia-
tion.” To emphasize the point, Justice Thomas adds in a footnote, “Contrary to the dissent’s
argument . . . the Louisville school district’s interest in remedying its past de jure segregation
did vanish the day the District Court found that Louisville had eliminated the vestiges of its
historic de jure segregation” (9). Moreover, “[r]emediation of past de jure segregation is a one-
time process involving the redress of a discrete legal injury inflicted by an identified entity.
At some point, the discrete injury will be remedied, and the school district will be declared
unitary” (10).

6. Noting the “cruel irony in the Chief Justice’s reliance on our decision in Brown v.
Board of Education,” Justice Stevens, who concurred with Breyer’s dissent, charges Roberts
with “rewriting history.” Mocking Roberts’s declaration that “history must be heard,” Stevens
suggests that his interpretation of Brown better exemplifies the “familiar adage that history is
written by the victors” (2).

7. Viewing these claims as “a cruel distortion of history,” Breyer avers, “The lesson of his-
tory . . . is not that efforts to continue racial segregation are constitutionally indistinguishable from efforts to achieve racial integration.” Instead, history has taught Breyer that whatever the cost of using race-conscious means to achieve race-neutral ends, “that cost does not approach, in degree or in kind, the terrible harms of slavery, the resulting caste system, and 80 years of legal racial segregation” (67).

8. At first, the Supreme Court arguments about race, which seem most preoccupied with African Americans and the legacy of their particular history, might seem to have little to do with Chicano identity and border consciousness. I would contend, however, that they speak quite directly to Chicano concerns because the cases are not about race as much as they are about the ambiguity of race, particularly when it becomes a function of history. Justice Roberts and Justice Breyer quarrel about what makes you the race that you are—is it your skin color or your history—and this same tension rests at the heart of Chicano identity itself. Perhaps even more than for African Americans, discourses of Chicano identity manifest a fundamental undecidability about exactly what race Chicanos are. On the one hand, the first national victory for LULAC (League of United Latin American Citizens) involved classifying Mexicans as “white” on the U.S. Census in 1936. On the other hand, Chicano identity has been deeply committed to its “indigenous” status ever since El Movimiento adopted “El Plan Espiritual de Aztlán” in 1969 at the First National Chicano Liberation Youth Conference. Chicano Studies stabilizes the ambiguity of the race question, I would suggest, by locating the differential status of Chicano identity in the border rather than in race—hence the title of this chapter. If chapter 4, on Nathaniel Mackey’s work, is about race, then this chapter is about the undecidability of race when it becomes linked to history. The existence of race is not at issue in Mackey’s work, which is concerned instead with racial advancement, as it is in both the Supreme Court cases and Gilb’s novel.

9. The name Mickey Acuña certainly sounds fabricated. “Acuña” is the name of a border town in Mexico, approximately 150 miles due west of San Antonio, Texas, while “Mickey” obviously conjures images of a large rodent with red pants most popular on the other side of the border. This yoking of Mexican and U.S. terms symbolizes one of the many tensions at the core of Mickey’s identity. Also, “acuñar” is Spanish for “to coin,” as in “to invent,” an apt description of Mickey’s stories, and perhaps even of the name “Acuña” itself.

10. In ascribing words, thoughts, and actions to Mickey, I realize that I am making assumptions about identity that I have just suggested the book radically undermines. Nevertheless, because I am treating his character as a representation of a specific philosophical problem that Gilb tries to solve, treating him as an ontologically stable identity allows me to set up the precise terms of the identity crisis that I will be describing. Later in the chapter when I discuss the narrator’s depiction of Mickey, his representational “identity” will prove to be more in line with the ontological compromises I describe here.

11. See, for example, Donahue, Saez, and the Birnbaum interview.

12. To be fair, Saldívar is interested in the dialectical interaction between the content and the form of Chicano narrative. My citation focuses solely on the content side of that process and is thus appropriately stagnant. In fact, Saldívar’s turn to the dialectic permits him a much more coherent theory of the relation between identity and difference than Anzaldúa’s, which contradictorily predicates identity on difference.

13. See also Gutiérrez-Jones and Pérez-Torres on the relationship among history, the border, and political resistance. For influential critical works that complicate this relationship see Pérez, Mendoza, and Brady. Pérez’s Foucauldian model deconstructs the discursive articulation of Chicana identity rather than liberating it—hence she describes her work as “decolonial” rather than “postcolonial” (127). Mendoza shifts our attention to the discrepant relationship between historical and fictional Chicano texts to “enable a vision of a future that is not predicated on past injustices” (275). And Brady nicely combines notions of history and the border by insisting
on a spatial analysis of Chicana literature that emphasizes the production of space over time.

14. See *The Shape of the Signifier*, particularly the Introduction and chapter 1, for Michaels's argument about disagreement. See also Warren and Castronovo, writing in a special edition of *New Literary History* devoted to "post-identity," for similar arguments.

15. See Michaels's "Plots against America" for a provocative argument that links the call to respect racial and cultural difference to neoliberalism’s desire to ignore the economic disparities so crucial to its successful function. And see Palumbo-Liu’s “Assumed Identities” and “Awful Patriotism” for critiques of this "economics-first" argument.

16. In “After Identity,” Eric Lott turns to Laclau’s work to fill in the gaps he sees in Michaels’s otherwise compelling reasoning. I think that Lott sells Michaels’s negativity short and that significant parallels are to be found between Michaels and Laclau on the universal.

17. The criticisms of Michaels’s approach to history are legion. See, for instance, Ross, 835–42; Millner, 546; Lott, “The New Cosmopolitanism,” 121–28; Gunn, 660; Glass, 12; Wiegman, 433; and Perloff, “Modernism without the Modernists,” 101–5. For a general critique of post-ethnicity’s ahistoricism see Palumbo-Liu, “Assumed Identities,” 777.

18. See Freeman for an excellent discussion, in the context of feminist politics, on the political power of empty history, or what she calls "the interesting threat that the genuine past-ness of the past sometimes makes to the political present" (728).

19. The version of time Mickey embraces here bears striking similarity to Wai Chee Dimock’s notion of “deep time,” which she uses to transnationalize our understanding of “America.” See *Through Other Continents* for her attempt to empty American literature of its nationalistic history by making recourse to geological and astronomical scales of time.

20. Gilb reveals nothing about the novel’s narrator. We do not know the narrator’s sex, age, location in time, relation to Mickey, investment in the story, and so on.

21. See the “Frequency” chapter of Genette’s *Narrative Discourse*.

**Conclusion**

1. For a more comprehensive discussion of the ideas Jameson raises in “The End of Temporality,” see *A Singular Modernity: Essay on the Ontology of the Present*. 
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