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Rick Elmore, Jonathan Elmore, Guido Isekenmeier and Andrew Lindquist

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Mundik, *A Bloody and Barbarous God: The Metaphysics of Cormac McCarthy*.

Hawkins, *Cormac McCarthy's Philosophy*.

Three Ways of Looking at a Horse: Literature and the Media / The Medium of Literature

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Cormac McCarthy, Philosopher

Review of:

Chris Eagle (ed), *Philosophical Approaches to Cormac McCarthy: Beyond Reckoning* (Routledge, 2017): 230pp

Petra Mundik, *A Bloody and Barbarous God: The Metaphysics of Cormac McCarthy* (University of New Mexico Press, 2016): 432pp

Ty Hawkins, *Cormac McCarthy's Philosophy* (Palgrave, 2017): vii+145pp

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The field of Cormac McCarthy scholarship has long been concerned with the philosophical nature of his fiction, from Vernon Bell's landmark study of McCarthy's "ambiguous nihilism" and Edwin Arnold's spirited defense of McCarthy's ethics to Dianne Luce's influential exposition of the Gnostic, Platonic, and metaphysical dimensions of his work: not to mention the increasingly voluminous readings of his modernist, Christian, existentialist, and anti-capitalist thematics. While early studies tended to focus on whether one could draw from McCarthy's dark and violent tales a positive moral lesson and catalogued the various philosophical influences at work in his fiction, more recent engagements, especially the three titles we take up here, expand the question of McCarthy's philosophy. More specifically, Ty Hawkins', Petra Mundik's, and Chris Eagle's works develop the notion of McCarthy as philosopher, seeing in the language and content of his novels a systematic and original philosophical position. The central provocation of these works is the claim that McCarthy's corpus represents a unique philosophical system in its own right and not merely the expression of this or that philosophical theme. In this way, they break with much of the existing literature and chart a new and promising, if not fully realized, course in the philosophical study of Cormac McCarthy. For example, Eagle's recent collection, *Philosophical Approaches to Cormac McCarthy: Beyond Reckoning* gathers essays, primarily by philosophers, that put McCarthy's work into conversation with "a much wider range of philosophical topics and [...] philosophical

interlocutors,” from Heraclitus, Heidegger, and Blanchot to critical animal studies, *Naturphilosophie*, and eco-phenomenology (2). The goal of this broadening is to begin to suss out “McCarthy’s philosophy,” one located in his “expressive style of writing” itself (2). In the same way that Heidegger saw in Hölderlin the “naming of Being” or Derrida saw in Joyce the play of *différance*, Eagle suggests that future philosophers may well find in McCarthy not merely this or that philosophical theme, but “the execution or incarnations” of “philosophical elements that only literary language [...] can [...] explicate” (2). There is, thus, the promise of a unique philosophical position in McCarthy’s fiction, one expressed in the author’s “remarkably vast and occasionally neologistic diction, [...] his experiments with positional syntax, and [...] his elaborately speculative similes” (2). While this possibility remains largely speculative for Eagle, there are two other recent texts that tackle the question of McCarthy’s philosophy head on.

In *A Bloody and Barbarous God: The Metaphysics of Cormac McCarthy*, Petra Mundik develops a systematic account of McCarthy’s philosophy. Following his metaphysical, spiritual, and theological elements, Mundik contends that McCarthy is a proponent of what Aldous Huxley calls, following Leibniz, Perennial Philosophy: a “metaphysics that recognizes a divine Reality substantial to the world of things and lives and minds; the psychology that finds in the soul something similar to, or even identical with divine Reality; [and an] ethic that places man’s final end in the knowledge of the immanent and transcendent Ground of all being” (2). For Perennial Philosophy, materiality itself is divine, constituting both Reality and Truth, and manifest in everything from matter to consciousness. To know divine reality is the ultimate purpose of human life, insofar as existence itself is nothing other than the recognition of life’s identity with this divine principle: life the realization that we are, like all things, part of the oneness of reality. This emphasis on the experience of Reality explains, for Mundik, McCarthy’s focus on “mystical experience,” these experiences offering “a glimpse of [...] ultimate ‘Truth’ or spiritual Reality” (2). To access this glimpse of Reality and thereby the possibility of hope proves central to McCarthy’s thought in Mundik’s analysis. In addition, while she acknowledges that other metaphysical traditions help to constitute Perennial Philosophy, including “sufism, Hinduism, or Neoplatonism,” Mundik limits her analysis to the Gnosticism, Christian mysticism, and Buddhism found in the post-Appalachian novels (i.e. *Blood Meridian* on). She imposes these limits both due to the practicalities of scholarship, and because she finds, like many scholars, an “important shift in interest” in McCarthy’s later fiction (5). Following his Western turn, McCarthy abandons the “wholly dark Southern Gothic themes” of the Appalachian books and opts for an increasingly “metaphysically complex and spiritually affirmative” position (5).

Encompassing fourteen dense chapters, *A Bloody and Barbarous God* begins with four sketches exploring McCarthy's Perennial Philosophy in *Blood Meridian*, with each subsequent chapter moving chronologically through the last five novels. In elucidating the progression of McCarthy's Perennialist position, Mundik analyzes many of the most remarked upon characters and scenes from McCarthy's later work. She includes a chapter each on *The Judge* (chapter 2), the kid (chapter 3), and a philosophical reading of *Blood Meridian* as a whole (chapter 4). She has four chapters on *The Crossing*, one on each of its books (chapters 6–9), and two chapters on *Cities of the Plain* (chapters 10 and 11). Her account is exhaustive, and, while it's thorough and well-researched, readers may feel overwhelmed by the sheer level of detail. The key to her reading is what she describes as McCarthy's "anticosmic" vision of the world as "flawed" or "fallen" (8). While this vision accords with the longstanding Gnostic readings of McCarthy, to which Mundik is indebted, it is this vision that also, somewhat paradoxically, opens up the possibility of an affirmative reading of his philosophy: the notion of reality as illusion implying, if only in the negative, the existence of a non-illusory Reality. It will be the articulation of this Reality and the possibility of hope entailed in it that not only guides Mundik's reading of *Blood Meridian* but reveals the primary strength of her Perennialist account.

Given Perennial Philosophy's insistence on the divine but largely inaccessible nature of Reality, this philosophy helps to explain the paradoxical nature of McCarthy's philosophical worldview: his emphasis on violence and brutality, for example, a rumination on the appearance rather than essence of Reality. As Mundik puts the issue in her reading of *Blood Meridian*, we are left at the novel's end "not [...] with the judge's eternal dance of war, violence, and spiritual death but [...] with the unconquered solitary figure, slowly working towards his goal of freeing the divine element from the prison of manifest existence" (99). Following this solitary figure defines, in many ways, the rest of her volume, Mundik finding in all of McCarthy's later work this metaphysical interplay of reality and appearance. Moreover, it is this interplay that ultimately opens up the possibility of hope in McCarthy's thought, this hope explicitly manifest in *The Road*.

For Mundik, *The Road* is the realization of McCarthy's project and the culmination of his Perennial Philosophy. Given her focus on the divine nature of reality, Mundik highlights the many instances of the child's association "with all traditional markers of divinity," juxtaposed by the father's association with the fallen, pre-apocalyptic world (310). While she ordains the child a "Gnostic savior," the promise of redemption in the novel, and in McCarthy's Perennial Philosophy more generally, comes from the way in which he conceives the world's destruction as "an unmaking, a reversal of error and return to the state of wholeness and perfection before the rupture of creation" (302). In the apocalypse of *The Road*, we see the realization of redemption: all the false

appearances of the world washed away to reveal the possibility of something new, the possibility of a world in which appearance and reality would not be so at odds. Such a possibility is, for Mundik, only potential, this potentiality manifest in the element of “mystery” with which the novel ends. As Mundik puts it: “‘Mystery’ is both literally and figuratively the final word of *The Road*; its various connotations embody all of the themes developed throughout the novel and, indeed, the essence of the Perennial Philosophy underlying all of Cormac McCarthy’s works” (326). Hence, for Mundik, while there is a deep sense of hope in McCarthy’s thought, it is only a potential hope, one neither assured nor ultimately expressible.

Understood broadly, Mundik’s book finds in McCarthy an original development of a philosophical tradition extending from Plato to Aldous Huxley. While certainly the most developed of its kind, this approach of reading McCarthy as the representative or legate of this or that philosophical tradition is hardly special to Mundik. For example, Eagle’s collection contains a number of essays that develop similar, if less exhaustive, readings. In the volume’s first chapter, Julius Greve argues that McCarthy’s Southern novels are committed to a conception of matter that originates in the Platonic “‘idea’ of matter in *Timaeus*” and is developed in both the “German idealist tradition of *Naturphilosophie*” and the speculative realism of thinkers like Grant and Negarestani (7). Working through the early novels, Greve reveals that McCarthy’s work is “suffused with a metaphysics of nature according to which materiality exceeds its embodiment and ideational envelopment in equal measure” (26). Through this conception of matter, we come to see McCarthy’s fiction as “not just a form of contemplation *about* nature but an activity *of* it” (26). For Greve, as for Mundik, McCarthy’s work develops a metaphysical position out of which follow his claims concerning human nature, society, and ethics. Similarly, Ian Alexander Moore sees in McCarthy’s presentation of the Judge a “disquieting” metaphysics and “an ethos to live in accord with it,” “best understood in terms of the ancient Greek philosopher Heraclitus” (93). For Moore, McCarthy’s metaphysics adheres to the Heraclitian notion of reality as “conflict” or “war,” a position he develops through analyzing the Judge’s understanding of war as well as the novel’s insistence on fire as the essential element of reality. Like Mundik, Moore wishes to see in this metaphysics the possibility of hope or redemption, McCarthy’s metaphysics challenging us to develop an “ethos to live by” other than that of the Judge. In contrast to these more hopeful analyses, Alberto Siani argues that McCarthy is “committed to a thorough realism,” one that he explains via the work of Thomas Nagel (202). For Siani, “*Suttree* and *The Road* present us with a consistently developed and unified picture of a world in which humans occupy no special place, where their actions are just events, their systems of values and cognitive claims only

lies, and the only truth is the nothingness of death substantiating existence” (213). For Siani, the lesson of McCarthy’s fiction is a posthuman realism meant to reveal the fundamental indifference of the world to human affairs. Putting aside the potential tensions between these various readings, all of which are among the strongest in Eagle’s collection, what all these pieces share is an understanding of McCarthy’s philosophy as an original expression of some previously existing philosophical tradition: McCarthy variously figured as Perennial Philosopher, Schelling-eques materialist, Heraclitian metaphysician, or posthuman realist. Such approaches push beyond seeing McCarthy’s relationship to philosophy as merely thematic, finding in his work a systematic philosophical position. For such interpreters, McCarthy is ultimately a philosopher, a notion even more clearly developed in Ty Hawkins’ *Cormac McCarthy’s Philosophy*.

While much of the existing scholarship on McCarthy and philosophy, outlined above, paints McCarthy as a representative of this or that philosophical school—what Hawkins describes as the “McCarthy and” approach—Hawkins proposes the far more “radical” claim that “McCarthy is an actual philosopher” (2–3). The radicality of this claim rests on the notion that while influenced by various philosophical and theological traditions, McCarthy nevertheless develops his own, entirely original philosophical position complete with metaphysics, ontology, epistemology, and ethics. For Hawkins, McCarthy is no philosophical acolyte but the author of a distinctly McCarthian philosophy, one organized by a set of metaphysical and ontological commitments on the basis of which McCarthy’s epistemology and ethics emerge.

McCarthy’s metaphysics is, Hawkins argues, a form of Platonic realism, existence defined by the dialectical interplay between universality and particularity, Form and being. For Plato, something exists only insofar as its being or materiality accords with its Form: the existence of a chair, for example, comprised of the identity between some specific material and the Form of chairness. It is this accord that, for Plato, constitutes not only the existence of all things but the possibility of truth and justice as well. As Hawkins puts it, “[t]he Form of the Good is the ground in Plato’s realism necessary to call a thing’s achievement of integrity—the alignment of being and Form— both true (its nature) and just (its rightful purpose)” (4). Were this accord to breakdown, say because a chair were smashed against a wall, then not only would the existence of the chair cease, but so too would its possibility of truth (nature) and justice (correct purpose), a pile of wood unable to be either truly called a chair or to follow out the teleos or correct purpose of a chair. It will be this breakdown of accord between Form and being that in many ways defines the essential provocation of McCarthian Philosophy, McCarthy committed to a Platonic formulation of existence, truth, and justice, while simultaneously denying the very possibility of universal Truth and Justice.

For Hawkins, it is the simultaneous demand for, and rejection of, universality that proves the most paradoxical and important conviction of McCarthy's philosophy, this rejection "the root causes of the strangest, yet most compelling, ramification of McCarthy's philosophy: its simultaneous demand for and negation of justice" (4). At the heart of McCarthy's metaphysics is a "dialectical" tension between the desire for and denial of universality understood as both Truth (nature) and Justice (right purpose). For McCarthy, the problem of existence, and particularly human existence, is our inability to know its truth and by extension its purpose, this impasse a result of the breakdown in accord between being and Form. In order to resolve this tension, Hawkins gives a reading of the figure of the "frontiersman" in McCarthy's work. We see in this figure the embodiment of McCarthy's struggle with what Hawkins calls the "absent referent" of Truth and Justice, the frontiersman's paradoxical inclusion in and exclusion from the social order providing a test case for how we might live in response to the simultaneous need for and denial of meaning and purpose. Key for Hawkins is McCarthy's focus on Will rather than Justice, the question of the right or just purpose of human existence transmuted into the question of whether humans can, through an act of will, give themselves purpose, and what such an act of will might entail.

Hawkins argues that McCarthy rejects both a "pragmatic" and a "utopian" account of will. For Hawkins, McCarthy's commitment to realism puts him at odds with pragmatism's vision of truth as socially constructed, as well as contesting pragmatism's confidence in the progressive potential of science. As Hawkins summarizes the issue, for McCarthy, "the pragmatic method naturalizes consequentialism in the form of a revised scientific method. It then conflates this method with progress in a circular fashion always folding back on itself, insofar as each failed perching is yet another flight, and vice versa" (62). To assert the human ability to construct the world as they see fit is to both overestimate humanity's power over the world and, more seriously, to posit a kind of idealism that ignores the real indifference of the world to human wants and desires. Similarly, McCarthy's critique of utopianism rests on the claim that utopian ideals are, like the reactionary ideologies they contest, ultimately grounded on a false universality. Contrasting McCarthy's account with those of Fredric Jameson and Slavoj Žižek, Hawkins argues that McCarthy's problem with utopian politics is twofold. First, these utopian positions fail to see their own involvement in the ideological violence they aim to contest, the "utopian order [...] as [much] a Machiavellian structure of practical social organization concealed behind [...] sham universality" as the capitalist and authoritarian systems it aims to contest (89). Second, utopian politics posits a disturbing evacuation of individuality into ultimately ideological collective ideals. In response to these shortcomings, Hawkins argues that McCarthy posits an Arendt-style

critique of modernity that eschews both capitalist and Marxist alternatives in favor of radical individualism. It is on the basis of this individualism that McCarthy builds his ultimate answer to the dilemma of human existence.

Having worked through McCarthy's critique of utopian and pragmatic politics, Hawkins's final chapter turns to McCarthy's "solution" to the impasse between Form and matter. Using Alain Badiou's notion of "subtraction," Hawkins shows that McCarthy develops a notion of Will, figured as "ardentheartedness," that "subordinates intellection to the narrative act" (108–109). To engage in an act of willful narration is to "believe [...] in the possibility of grace and in so doing, [...] regain [one's ...] agency, even while risking one's very being" (109). He shows how this notion of ardentheartedness develops over the course of McCarthy's Appalachian novels until it is named in the Border Trilogy and finally realized in the father of *The Road*. For Hawkins, the father of McCarthy's apocalyptic tale is a figure of "grace" who, in the face of the utter absence of any collective ideals, nonetheless asserts a sense of meaning via his quest to secure the safety of his son. In so doing, the father ultimately secures his son's safety but only at the loss of his own existence. As Hawkins concludes, "[t]he father dies necessarily not knowing whether the child will be safe after he is gone. However, *The Road* itself 'carries the fire,' imagining a future for the boy, in the form of his new family, and therefore a legacy for Papa, whom the child pledges he will 'talk to every day' (*TR* 286). By doing so, *The Road* imagines grace, Will interceding on behalf of Papa's will; in turn, *The Road* completes a McCarthian philosophical system" (132). For Hawkins, the realization of McCarthian philosophy is a kind of existential Kantian gamble, the father acting "as if" his son will have a future against all evidence to the contrary and in so doing securing for his son that most improbable of futures. It is, Hawkins insists, this very improbable possibility, not unlike Mundik's concept of mystery, that is the ultimate lesson of McCarthy's philosophy, McCarthy showing us not only the absurdity of existence but a way to live with that absurdity. For Hawkins, as for Mundik and Eagle, McCarthy's philosophy attempts to understand the precarious and unstable nature of human existence while nonetheless refusing to fall into nihilism, the heart of McCarthy's philosophy its insistence on the possibility of hope, redemption, and human potential. Yet, while insisting on the notion of McCarthy as philosopher and coming to similar conclusions, these works chart very different approaches to the question of McCarthy's relationship to philosophy.

As outlined above, the recent books on McCarthy and philosophy move beyond a thematic approach, reading McCarthy as a philosopher rather than a philosophically inclined novelist. There is, in McCarthy's work, much more than philosophical themes and tropes, his corpus developing a systematic philosophical system. Putting aside

for the moment the question of how best to read the character of his philosophical system, it is the notion of McCarthy *as philosopher* that is, for us, the most exciting and provocative element of these recent works. Yet while important, the question of McCarthy as philosopher is, in our estimation, hampered by the approach these recent books take. More specifically, these studies each explicate McCarthy's philosophy via its relationship to some preexisting philosophical thinker or system. McCarthy is, on these accounts, either the proponent of an existing school of philosophical thought—a Perennial Philosopher for example—or he puts forward philosophical claims akin to this or that philosopher, adopting for example a Platonic notion of truth or an Arendtian critique of modernity. While these comparisons have merit, illuminating key elements of McCarthy's thought, they tend to cite passages and quotations that support their position while ignoring or downplaying those that do not. One sees this, for example, in Mundik's acknowledgement that her study puts aside “the sociopolitical and historical themes surrounding the southwestern region,” and, in so doing, avoids the question of how these themes, dominant in much of the literature on McCarthy's western novels, might constitute a key component of McCarthy's philosophy (5). If it is true that McCarthy has his own distinctive philosophical system, then to detail that system requires that one account for all of its components, following the internal development of McCarthy's philosophy on its own terms. It is the need for just such a following that animates Hawkins' call to abandon the kind of “McCarthy and” approach of scholars such as Mundik.

More than any other study, Hawkins' explicitly categorizes McCarthy as a philosopher, as “advancing a systemic philosophy” of his own. And yet, like Mundik and many of the essays in Eagle's collection, Hawkins details this philosophy entirely through what he characterizes as a “dizzying” array of other philosophers and their work (3). While he justifies this methodological choice as necessary, since “a good deal of philosophical assistance is required to translate McCarthy's philosophy from narrative into academic argument,” the final result is a McCarthian philosophy that appears less its own position and more an amalgamation of various, perhaps even incompatible, philosophical ideas. On Hawkins's account, McCarthy's philosophy is a Platonic, Arendtian, anti-pragmatic, anti-Jamesonian, anti-Žižekian, Badiouian individualism in which, like good Kantians, we must ultimately act as if there is hope and possibility even if there is not. What is revealing in this formulation is the way in which, despite his stated desire to give us McCarthy's philosophy, what Hawkins' delivers is his own version of the “McCarthy and” approach, eschewing a close reading of McCarthy's texts in favor of emblematic analogies with various philosophical ideas and positions. It is not that one cannot proceed in this way nor that there is no value in

doing so, but it does raise the question of why we cannot detail McCarthy's philosophy by simply following the themes of McCarthy's novels themselves.

If the question at the forefront of McCarthy-and-philosophy is how to detail McCarthy's distinctive and original philosophical position, then the task that still faces us is to demarcate and identify the contours, aims, and character of McCarthy's philosophy *on its own terms*. Given the distinctiveness of McCarthy's language—of what Eagle calls his “expressive style”—such a project would require that we follow McCarthy's account of materiality, truth, ethics, etc. not as they relate to this or that philosopher or tradition but as they appear in McCarthy's work itself. If, as scholars now agree, McCarthy is one of American literature's most philosophical writers and most literary philosophers, it is time we wed these two identities completely, developing, without mediation, the distinctive and original character of McCarthian philosophy. To engage in such a project promises to develop, in exciting ways, the work of Mundik, Hawkins, and Eagle, their work a contribution to which any future thinking of McCarthy's philosophy will be undeniably indebted.

Three Ways of Looking at a Horse: Literature and the Media / the Medium of Literature

Review of:

Justin St. Clair, *Sound and Aural Media in Postmodern Literature: Novel Listening* (Routledge, 2013), 186pp

Simon Barton, *Visual Devices in Contemporary Prose Fiction: Gaps, Gestures, Images* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 202pp

Jørgen Bruhn, *The Intermediality of Narrative Literature: Medialities Matter* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 134pp

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Given that the three books reviewed here all work on the relation of literature to various media and all take “literature” to mean post-WWII (Anglo-)American narrative/prose fiction, it is amazing how little they have in common. This is partly due to the fact that they address different media(lities) and that they manage to devise corpora of primary texts that do not overlap on a single author, let alone an individual text.

It is, furthermore, the result of their differing approaches: St. Clair's is firmly rooted in (American) cultural studies and tries to come to terms with postmodern literature's ideological stance with regard to its sonic cultural context; Barton's derives from the history of books and constitutes an attempt to inventory the ways in which narrative texts turn visual; Bruhn's grows out of continental European intermediality studies and aims to establish a generalisable methodology for analyzing literature's interactions with other media. But while these affiliations with different traditions of scholarship on literature's relation to (other) media account for some of the strengths and weaknesses of the three studies (as is the case for St. Clair), there is also plenty of leeway for idiosyncratic peculiarities and shortcomings (as exemplified by Bruhn). The differences in approach—and each book's persistent refusal to even take note of the alternative paths that the other two represent—make it difficult to realize that, *together*, they represent a comprehensive vision of the intricate relations between literary and other-media texts and cultures, and of the various ways they cross-fertilize and shed a light on one another. Reading the three together one sees that, for a single field of study to ever fully cover this variety of relations, it would have to encompass an interest in all the areas that these three volumes represent: the mediality of literature, the complexities of intermedial reference, and the cultural functions of literary intermediality.

In good cultural studies manner, St. Clair takes as his starting point an outline of a sonic regime that imposes itself on the American soundscape of the twentieth century. It involves four 'media' (the player piano, Muzak, the radio, television) which continue the work of commodifying sound begun in the nineteenth century (St. Clair specifically credits John Picker's 2003 *Victorian Soundscapes* as "model and inspiration" [10]). He traces the process of backgrounding sound begun by the player piano's commodification of music (chapter 1) through radio's mediation of subjectivities or identities (chapter 2) to television's 'schizophonic' reliance on an audio track separated from its pictures (chapter 3). Each of these media is said to contribute to the rise of "an age of unrelenting background sound" (6), by starting off a "proliferation of background music in public space" (the player piano), by offering "an unmitigated stream of half-attended audio" that "occasions a variety of cultural ventriloquisms" (the radio), and by serving up an "audio stream always already in the background, but one that nonetheless sustains interaction" (television; 121). Put this way, Muzak, the branded commercial background music provided by the company of the same name since 1934 (and purchased by the aptly named Mood Media corporation in 2011), appears as the logical, if not necessarily chronological, vanishing point of St. Clair's sound cultural narrative (in chapter 4, "Listen to the Muzak: The Social Implications of Background

Sound”). Muzak, “backgrounded by design,” provides “music as aural anesthetic, sonic persuasion” (121), and thus serves, as one reviewer has it, as “the fulcrum of the study” (Grosso). In other words, St. Clair’s is the story of how the three other “aural media” aspire to the condition of Muzak.

In addition to offering a compelling cultural-historical ‘background story’ (which the other two books are largely missing), another strength of St. Clair’s approach is its clear-cut formulation of the specific function of the postmodern novel within the sonic constellation just outlined, framed as a “dialectical engagement with media aurality” (blurb). The literary texts (by Burroughs, DeLillo, Dick, Gaddis, Pynchon, Reed, and Vonnegut) discussed in this volume under the label of the “heterophonic novel” are seen “to repudiate and to utilize” (3/blurb), “to condemn media aurality and co-opt it simultaneously” (13): “On the one hand, such narratives echo and amplify literature’s media anxiety [...]; on the other hand, these narratives allow print fiction to appropriate some of aural media’s (seemingly subliminal) thunder” (5). This functional hypothesis proves to be flexible enough to accommodate strategies of literary appropriation that are specific to the respective medium addressed (thus Vonnegut’s emulation of player piano rolls with the help of em dashes [30]; or, more sweepingly, “Pynchon’s Muzak,” that is, his novels’ deployment of “wordless melodies” and “‘out-of-frame’ audio” [123]). At the same time, it is rigid enough to accentuate the essential similarities of these strategies for staging aurality, with the help of concordant if slightly formulaic conclusions (“By formally remediating the player piano, they [Vonnegut, Dick, and Gaddis] not only emphasize the importance of a discarded [...] technology to twentieth-century aural culture, but also manage to enrich print traditions” [43]; “Pynchon both formally enriches his fiction and simultaneously critiques a competing media form, articulating, once again, the dialectic of heterophonia” [147]).

More problematic, though very much in line with a cultural studies approach, is the lack of a coherent conceptual framework. St. Clair’s idea of the ‘heterophonic novel,’ for one, is vaguely based on Bakhtin’s notion of heteroglossia (thus “multisoundedness” in the place of “multilingualness” [3]), but makes no attempt to take other Bakhtinian concepts into account (for example ‘dialogism,’ or, even closer at hand in its reference to orality/aurality, ‘polyphony’). In addition, the introductory chapter (“Toward Postmodern Soundscapes”) confines itself to listing a number of concepts used in earlier works on sonic environments (from ‘audile technique’ to ‘keynote sounds’) without making any attempt to arrange them into a theoretical model of the makeup of ‘soundscapes’ in general (another term cursorily passed over). One conspicuous symptom of St. Clair’s rather eclectic handling of critical concepts is the fact that some of them do not come up until needed for analysis, while others are

brought up at length in the introduction, even when they are only later needed in one of the chapters.¹

In all this, St. Clair's study is a fitting heir to *visual cultural studies*' famed 'indiscipline' (W.J.T. Mitchell) – an area of study with which St. Clair otherwise maintains an ambiguous relationship. He laments the “visual chauvinism of contemporary culture” and the “sensory hierarchy endemic to our culture” (4/5), all the while framing his own approach in visual terms (as heterophonic novels “create images of sound” [5], not to mention the visual metaphors used to deal with sound ‘scapes’, such as ‘foreground’ and ‘background’ etc.). That uneasy relationship with visuality also results in an examination of DeLillo's *White Noise*, in particular, that is willing to split up its analysis of the novel into two parts (in the radio and television chapters, respectively), but equally unwilling—outside a single footnote²—to address the novel's consistent critique of postmodern visuality. Which makes one wonder if the “sensory hierarchy” is adequately problematized by simply neglecting all things inaudible.

In contrast to St. Clair's interest in the contours of a historically specific sonic cultural condition to which postmodern literature answers, Barton's sense of history is limited to a vague idea of contemporaneity (“readers' tastes have already been transformed by exposure to the devices, texture and rhetoric of contemporary graphic culture” [2]). While he notes that “[n]ovels with unusual visual devices are increasingly found throughout contemporary fiction” (9), no attempt is made to motivate this development from a visual-cultural or media-historical perspective. One feels hard-pressed indeed to see how ‘contemporary’ prose fiction could have been “critically marginalised in the past” (1), or, inversely, how ‘contemporary’ the ‘graphic’ culture of the 1960s (from which the earliest primary texts Barton discusses originated) actually is. It might be best to simply think of Barton's book as a classificatory exercise, whose typology of visual devices in prose fiction happens to have been developed with the help of a relatively close-knit corpus of Anglo-American postmodern texts (including

¹ For example, the category of ‘acousmatic interjections’—when “readers ‘hear’ the television audio without ever ‘seeing’ the corresponding video” (85)—is only introduced, together with its foundational concept of ‘acousmatic sound,’ in the third chapter. While that might be excusable with regard to the fact that the constellation addressed is specific to television (and impossible in the other media), it does not explain why the introduction carefully demarcates ‘paracusia’—technically “the clinical term for the auditory hallucinations that often accompany various psychotic disorders”, used here to denote the “frenetic remediation [...] of other media forms within the world of the text” (7)—from ‘paracusic’—the “ability to hear individual sounds more clearly in cacophonous environments” (6)—even though that latter term is never mentioned again. ‘Paracusia’ itself is then not used again until the beginning of the chapter on television, then once more towards its end, only never to be heard of again either.

² The footnote addresses *White Noise*'s oft-quoted “Most Photographed Barn in America,” thus covering only one of the novel's visual inter-media (as the name suggests, photography); the medialities of televisual image also often dealt with in the novel—let alone its references to film or the sensory complexities of commodity packaging—go unmentioned).

British authors Johnson, Brooke-Rose, Hall, Phillips, and Rawle, and, stateside, Gass, Federman, Larsen, Danielewski, and Safran Foer). From this perspective, you will sometimes deplore the absence of references to earlier specimens of “typographically unconventional” (8) fiction other than the unavoidable book historical classic *Tristram Shandy* (Lewis Carroll’s “The Mouse’s Tale” in *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* comes to mind), or to otherwise ‘experimental’ books (like Edward Powys Mathers’ *Cain’s Jawbone*), as well as to other literary traditions (*The Little Prince*’s snake/hat drawing or W.G. Sebald’s photographs in *Austerlitz*), all of which neatly fit into one or another of Barton’s categories. But it will allow you to appreciate the merits of the attempt at systematizing the variety of graphic devices found in a sizable number of texts that transgress the model of the “conventional presentation of a page in prose fiction” (13).

Barton organizes this variety in three chapters (and two extended case studies) ranging from the only vaguely visual, material manipulations of the body of the book in B.S. Johnson’s *The Unfortunates* (which comes as a box of separately bound chapters) to the extensive use of reproduced photographs in William H. Gass’s *Willie Masters’ Lonesome Wife*. The book outlines the following classes of visual devices and generously illustrates them with examples: chapter two—“Textual Gaps”—includes the use of extended/additional blank spaces, content crossed out or otherwise marked as missing, blocks of monochrome color and physical holes cut into pages; chapter three—“Textual Gestures”—comprises typographic arrangements that can be read iconically (as “visually reminiscent of something else” [72]);³ and, finally, chapter four—“Images in Prose Fiction”—addresses pictures (“illustration, photograph, diagram or facsimile”) which can either (“supplementary images”) assist readerly visualisation of the “text-based narrative” (107) or replace it altogether (“narrative images”). The wealth of examples assembled in these chapters is complemented by two case studies dealing more sustainedly with Gass’s novel (an instance of the pictorial type) and with Raymond Federman’s *Double or Nothing*, which employs diverse variants of iconic textual gestures as well as textual gaps.

Apart from these two case studies, which expertly demonstrate the semantic surplus of visual devices and the interpretative complications they occasion (which has been one of the central concerns in the discipline of Book History’s struggle against its status as mere ancillary to literary studies), the impulse to classify brings about an even greater

³ By way of further typology, these can be arrangements made either from the narrative text itself (“narrative textual gestures” as in Carroll’s tale, whose layout suggests the shape of a mouse’s tail) or from words that are not properly part of the continuous narrative (as with the “Fossil fish reconstruction” in Steven Hall’s *Raw Shark Texts*, which arranges words denoting the fish’s body parts into an image of its shape). In the latter case, the arrangement may either contribute to forwarding the narrative (“iconic narrative,” as in the flip book sequence later in Hall’s novel that visualizes a shark attack with the help of a ‘word-shark’) or not (“iconic textual gestures,” like the fish reconstruction).

tendency to selectively engage with some aspects of a text at the expense of others than in St. Clair's partial readings of one and the same text's dealings with one or another medium. Mark Z. Danielewski's *House of Leaves*, for instance, is discussed at some length in the Textual Gaps chapter, but almost exclusively with regard to its versions of marking missing content (43–52). Other aspects of its visual–typographical makeup are only briefly alluded to (its use of additional blanks) or do not come up at all (its use of coloured text is only briefly mentioned in a separate discussion [21], while other visual features of textuality that it deploys, such as the use of differing fonts, are not addressed anywhere in Barton's study). *House of Leaves* resurfaces under the heading of narrative textual gestures, where Barton discusses at least one of its many uses of iconic narrative (also used for representing topographical features of the eponymous house, such as staircases and corridors), but is never mentioned in the chapter on images despite its extensive use of pictures, including (reproductions of) “Sketches & Polaroids” and “Collages” in its appendix. Despite the study's effort at systematizing the types of visual devices, this piecemeal, selective way of processing key primary texts seems far from systematic in that it neglects the manner in which the individual devices work *together* to produce a form of hyper-textuality that is responsible for the ‘ergodic’ character of a novel like *House of Leaves* (see Aarseth).

In all of this, Barton imagines working in a neglected field of scholarship, “rarely commented upon in the critical arena until relatively recently” and “critically marginalised in the past” (1). While that might just be true if we limit ourselves to ‘concrete prose’ (“there is a dearth of critical material on textual gestures in prose” [72]) or take “the past” to be at least half a century distant, these claims to novelty still seem to rely on a whole series of blatant omissions. For one thing, to assert that “[t]raditional literary criticism has always ignored [...] the physical form of the book and its pages” is itself to ignore the numerous proclamations of that insight and the work they have inspired over the last several decades (18). In fact, that very sentence sounds like something Friedrich Kittler may have written (and probably did) – in the 1980s. Richard Shusterman called that critical stance “aesthetic blindness to textual visuality” – in 1982 (and went on to talk about Carroll's tale/tail of a mouse). What is more, many of the claims made on word-and-image combinations seem seriously overblown. To say that “an absence of appropriate terminology” prevents literary criticism from tackling “works of prose fiction that include illustrations [...] and photographs” (9) is to ignore scholarship on the illustrated novel of the nineteenth century (think of the Dickens–Cruikshank collaboration) or the rich discourse on “literature and photography” in recent intermediality studies.⁴ Which is not even to

⁴ de Gruyter's 2015 *Handbook of Intermediality*, for example, has a whole section under that title: see Rippl (ed), chapters 8–11.

mention that the pronouncement that “[p]hotography, illustration and diagrams [...] only rarely appear in works of adult twentieth and twenty-first century prose fiction” has to be taken with a grain of salt (92). None of this should take away from Barton’s typological endeavor, which deserves full credit, but it goes to show that you can only invent the wheel so many times.

In contrast to Barton’s hyperbolic claims to the idiosyncrasy of his corpus, the focus of Bruhn’s study is on “relatively conventional narrative texts” and explicitly excludes “more radically medialized texts” (7). *Medialities* might *Matter*, but the consideration of the “medial materiality” (5) or the “material mediality” (7) of literary texts is reserved “for future studies” (7). And unlike both St. Clair and Barton, Bruhn is also not interested in grouping texts—whether according to formal or functional criteria—as the book takes a firmly trans- or ahistorical stance according to which “literature has always been under the influence of other medialities” (5) – which makes *his* choice of these studies’ shared wellspring of mid-twentieth to early twenty-first century anglophone texts all the more accidental (things are slightly complicated by the textual history of Vladimir Nabokov’s “Spring in Fialta”, originally written in Russian in 1936, but first published in English in 1947). Effectively, the book presents a series of intermedial readings of individual literary texts, from Nabokov (chapter 3) through Raymond Carver’s “Cathedral” (chapter 4) and Tobias Wolff’s “Bullet in the Brain” (chapter 5) to Jennifer Egan’s *A Visit from the Good Squad* (chapter 6). One would be inclined to call these readings ‘case studies’, were it not for fact that Bruhn himself declares that “between the research discussing and slowly establishing the basic concepts of the field on the one hand, and the rich harvest of detailed case studies of isolated phenomena or concepts on the other, I want to place myself in the middle” (6). The key here, however, is not so much the reference to “case studies” as that to their “detailed” consideration of “isolated phenomena”. Bruhn’s aim, set against this, is nothing less than a comprehensive or total interpretation of these texts from an intermedial point of view, at worst “pinpointing the one interpretation with the best chance of explaining the highest number of aspects” (46), at best enabling us “to understand literary texts fully” (112).

To support this interpretative fiction of wholeness (or ‘totalistic fallacy,’ to borrow the ethnological term for, as Catherine Bell has it, the “assumption that a group is dominated by a single, holistic set of ideas” [188]), Bruhn purports to offer a “method,” or even a “methodology,” for the “mediality analysis of literary texts” (29). In other words, the way “to smooth out the difficult road between, one the one hand, media theory and intermediality studies, and on the other hand literary criticism and textual analysis” is suggested to be an interpretative procedure “based on a set of repeatable analytical rules” (9/29). After such anticipatory braggadocio, the eventual

platitude of the “method” (outlined in chapter 2, “What is Mediality, and (How) does it Matter? Theoretical Terms and Methodology”) can only come as a surprise. It comes in the shape of a “three-step model” comprising the “sequence of register–structure–context/interpretation” (33/37): “The method, in short, consists of three steps: first, searching for and then writing a register of medial presences; second, structuring this register into a meaningful mediality relation; and third, interpreting the possible causes, often relating to text-external discussions, behind the medial presence and relations” (10). It is hard to overstate the commonsensical nature of this procedure. Suffice it to say that it is essentially a generic recipe for working with literary texts, except that in each of the steps we are looking for media-related phenomena (instead of, say, gender-related ones or what have you). Apart from vague instructions on how to read in general, the specifically intermedial character of the “method” never comes to the fore. At most, it is hinted at in imperative formulations that gesture towards hermetic knowledge: when registering “representations of media products, mediality types, and mediality aspects in the given text,” look not for just any, but for “*medially interesting* phenomena” (34, my italics); when “the chaos of the list is made into some kind of comprehensible and coherent structure,” do not just do it, but do it with “rigor” (34); and in order to contextualise your rigorous structure, keep in mind that the “larger context [...] may fall into numerous and very different categories” (35). So much for “repeatable analytical rules.” That Bruhn does manage to arrive at quite perceptive readings of his primary texts is, by all means, not the result of his adherence to this “method,” but of an ability to somewhat miraculously judge what is interesting, rigorous, or useful in each instance.

Hence there are, to be sure, moments in which the book successfully manages to bridge the frequently invoked gap between intermedial theory and textual analysis. For example, the concept of “medial projection”—that is, “[p]erceiving and describing particular aspects of the world as if it was, or could have been, either a qualified mediality or a technical mediality” (28)—is at once a striking generalisation of what earlier critics have called pictorialism (to perceive the fictional world as if it were a painting) and an invaluable tool in coming to terms with individual texts’ mediated worldviews (see, for instance, the remarks on “cinematic projection” with regard to Nabokov’s short story [52]).⁵

⁵ In a section entitled “‘All Dissolved’: Cinematic Aspects” (51–53), Bruhn demonstrates that despite the fact that the story does not explicitly mention film, it can be shown to contain various moments of ‘cinematic projection’ by its characters and to end in a scene that “perfectly exemplifie[s]” the blending effect made possible by the filmic technique of the dissolve. One of the advantages of Bruhn’s term is that it is not limited to formal imitations of film in literature (as is a concept like ‘filmic writing’), but can accommodate thematic references as well (which are often denigrated as a low-grade variant of intermediality).

These moments, though, hardly mitigate the overall impression that the study is characterized by pretensions of method as well as, at certain points, a disarming disingenuity about its own procedures: as, for example, when it claims to have chosen its primary texts exactly because they do not lend themselves to intermedial analysis (“I have not attempted to find cases where my method is easily applicable” [6]). This is strange in more than one way, but above all when one considers “that narrative literary texts very often, if not always, include significant amounts of what appears to be extra-literary material – formally and in content” (1). And, of course, one remembers the declared intention to postpone considerations of the mediality of literature itself to “future studies” when, for the Egan chapter, one comes across the proposal to “demonstrate a more comprehensive interpretation of a text that includes both the material mediality of the given text and the represented medialities of the text” (7). Which makes one wonder how intermedial analysis could not be “easily applicable” to a novel that, in one of its chapters, remediates the ‘medium’ (or ‘qualified mediality’) of the power point presentation.

As indicated at the outset, these three books are—despite a concern with other media’s relations to literature and a recent-American emphasis in their sample texts—about as different as can be: one is a genuinely historicized, theoretically eclectic account of postmodern literature’s encounter with sonic culture; one is a vaguely historically localized overview of the visual materiality of literature itself, with a focus on typology; and one is an essentially ahistorical outline of an intermedial approach to interpreting more or less any literary text, overgeneralised into a semblance of method. What is more, each of them seems at some point to be gesturing towards the bodies of work represented by the others, without ever acknowledging so much as the existence of those alternative approaches. Thus, when St. Clair declares that “Vonnegut, Dick, and Gaddis employ the player piano as more than a critical target or thematic inclusion – they actually remediate it, incorporating the logic of the technology into the formal construction of their fiction” (16), this reiterates one of the basic tenets of intermediality studies (namely the distinction between intermedial thematisation and intermedial imitation) without ever mentioning it by name. And when Bruhn muses about “notions of the incorporeality of language” and indicates that “all literary texts have a highly specific visual element attached to them” (21), it might not have hurt to at least refer to the kind of scholarship that investigates (as Barton does) that ‘element.’ Finally, as for Barton, it seems quite remarkable that the complaint about literary studies’ neglect of the mediality of literature is never qualified with reference to the kind of research in which the other two books are engaged. After all, it is in dealing with the ways in which literature addresses other media “in order to incorporate itself amongst [...] visually

led cultural forms” that attention is turned to the specific medial makeup of literary texts themselves (Barton 26).

Ironically, it is—of all things—in according literature a merely derivative status vis-à-vis media/visual/aural culture that the three studies find common ground. This can be seen most clearly in the inflationary use of the prefix ‘re-’ in St. Clair, who thinks of his book as an “examination of how the postmodern novel reflects, refracts, and responds to the American soundscape” (8). The same stance can be found in Bruhn’s declaration that the “invasion of medialities in everyday life has resulted in changes of the form and content of what we call ‘literature’” and that literature has “always been *under the influence of other medialities*” (4–5, my italics). And it can also be felt in Barton’s contention that “readers’ tastes have already been transformed by exposure to the devices, texture and rhetoric of contemporary graphic culture” (2), and that it is this prior exposure to media visualities that prepares them for their encounter with literary ones. It is as if the relationship between media and literature were a one-way street, with literary texts on the receiving end of cultural developments unfolding ahead of them.⁶ But if literature only struggles to catch up with visual culture by becoming (more) visual, if it only reacts to medialities already ‘invading’ our lives by ‘incorporating’ them, then why should we study it in the first place? Why not just study the media themselves, if literature only “retransmits” (St. Clair 5) or ‘remediates’ them?

That basic question – Why Literature? – is hardly addressed in these three volumes. The closest we get to an answer is St. Clair’s suggestion that “[a]lthough much of this response might be deemed mimetic [...], aurality is often deployed in postmodern fiction as an environmental critique” (8). That still does not explain, however, why we had not better turn to a philosophical (or pedagogical etc.) critique than a literary one. The least we should expect, it seems to me, is an explanation along the lines of what has been called negative media theory, which starts from the assumption that a medium cannot show itself in its own products, but only in their remediations in the texts of another medium. In this way, staging heteromedial formal strategies in literary texts would be a way of coming to terms with medialities by not only explicating, but also restaging them in a different format. Which is still a long way from the more emphatic claims of Intermediality Studies’ primal scene, when Kittler or Joachim Paech were discussing instances in which literature did not simply re-present the medium of film

⁶ It might actually be this derogatory stance toward literature that results in the three authors’ choice of primary texts largely originating in a postmodern cultural context. After all, it is only when media proliferate (and finally converge in the ‘universal medium’ of the computer), and their cultural significance soars to previously unbeknownst heights, that literature’s long-held cultural prestige is diminished to the point at which it is no longer seen as avant-garde, ahead of its time in at least some ways, but as retrograde register of other media’s capabilities.

(as in Barton's remark about a "sequence" in *House of Leaves*, in which "the narrative is attempting to represent, or remediate film" [80]), but pre-presented it by anticipating ostensibly filmic devices like parallel montage etc. But at least the "negative" approach gives us a way to conceptualise what goes unarticulated in these three studies of recent literary mediality: the value of literature as a medium.

"Where in the World is American Literature?" Tracing the Postnational in Postmodern and Contemporary Fiction

Review of:

Christopher Coffman, *Rewriting Early America: the Prenational Past in Postmodern Literature* (Lehigh University Press, 2019): 186pp

Pedro García-Caro, *After the Nation: Postnational Satire in the Works of Carlos Fuentes and Thomas Pynchon* (Northwestern University Press, 2014): 282pp

Scott McClintock, *Topologies of Fear in Contemporary Fiction: The Anxieties of Post-Nationalism and Counter Terrorism* (Palgrave, 2015): 223pp

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In their contribution to Thomas Bender's collection of essays, *Rethinking American History in a Global Age* (2002), historians Charles Bright and Michael Geyer, concerned over the extent to which the critical focus of American historiography could be geographically bounded, asked, "Where in the World is America?" Indeed, their question is suggestive of the degree to which any bounded conceptualization of the United States inevitably encounters ambiguities, both internally (in terms of a "national" culture) and externally (in terms of its imperialist and neo-imperialist aspirations). For Bright and Geyer, this is the "paradox of U.S.-American history for a global age," the realization that, "[i]n idea and practice, America was always larger, more boundless than the United States, and in this respect always already a global nation" (66). We can see in Bright and Geyer's analysis of the tension between American domestic sovereignty and its global presence the defining aspects of what Shelley Fishkin would, two years later in her address to the American Studies Association, dub the "transnational turn" in the field of American Studies—a turn that took as its central principle the notion that "understanding the multiple meanings of America and American culture ... requires looking beyond the

nation's borders, and understanding how the nation is seen from vantage points beyond its borders" (20). A deliberate turn away from framings of American history in which the United States seems to emerge—to have been wrested—from the wilderness of the American continent, historical scholarship in the final decades of the twentieth century sought instead to destabilize exceptionalist narratives of national history through a geographic and demographic broadening of critical focus.

The three texts of concern in this review adopt a generative mixture of transnational, postnational and hemispheric approaches in their studies of fiction, examining the ways in which postmodern and contemporary literature is invested in an historical sensibility that destabilizes the "official" narratives of national histories – the sort of histories that have given shape, in the American context, to a logic of exceptionalism and elsewhere to a homogenizing national teleology, both of which underwrite the distinct forms of violence endemic to nation-building that Frantz Fanon has famously analyzed. In their handling of postmodern fiction and poetry, these books emphasize the *postnational* dimensions of literature in the second half of the twentieth century, critically updating Fanon's emphasis on the "international dimension" of national consciousness through frameworks developed by scholars like John Carlos Rowe, whose conception of postnationalist discourse, laid out in *Post-Nationalist American Studies*, demands a "less insular and parochial, and more internationalist and comparative" approach to American Studies (Rowe 2; Fanon 179). Although the discourses to which these texts contribute vary—Christopher Coffman and Pedro García-Caro advance primarily literary arguments framed by an understanding of literature as the vehicle of cultural history, while Scott McClintock's literary analysis is subordinate to his political and cultural thesis—each offers a refreshingly expansive approach to postmodern and contemporary literature. Coffman's *Rewriting Early America*, which admittedly downplays its engagement with discourses of postnationalism, nonetheless expands our ideas about the role of history in postmodern fiction by bringing to light the frequently overlooked affiliations between postmodern American literature and the colonial/early national period. In drawing these parallels, Coffman illuminates at the level of culture the contested and uncertain character of "national" identity and literature within the territorial space of the United States. García-Caro's *After the Nation* further widens our understanding of what constitutes American postmodern literature by adopting a comparativist hemispheric approach in which the field is reconceptualized as postmodern literature *of the Americas*. By placing into conversation the works of Thomas Pynchon and Carlos Fuentes and thus highlighting the interrelations and distinctions between the trajectories of nation-building in the United States and Mexico, García-Caro exposes the overlaps and specificities of the authors' shared postnational

narrative strategies. McClintock's *Topologies of Fear*, the most theoretically dense of the three, crucially adds to what he perceives to be an insufficient theoretical apparatus for analyzing the contemporary phenomenon of "terrorist" political violence and the various policies, procedures and institutions that constitute "counter-terrorism." In a comparative framework in which terrorism and counter-terrorism are best understood as transnationally historical developments, McClintock provides a much-needed corrective to analyses of the political violence depicted in contemporary American and Indian literature. *Topologies of Fear* thus moves beyond the theoretical tools offered by Subaltern Studies by evincing a critique of "anti-terror discourse" in postnational terms, in which the figure of the "enemy combatant" is produced not as a subaltern figure within but as an exceptional body outside the political and juridical domain of nation-states. Taken together, these books provide three distinct models—domestic, hemispheric and transnational—that enable us to reconceptualize the very terms of American literary studies by demanding that we account, in our scholarship, for the generative instability of "American" as a bounded category.

Though published most recently, we might begin our review with *Rewriting Early America*, as it lays out in a general sense the field of concerns permeating all three texts—namely, the relation between literary texts and national(ist) historiography. *Rewriting Early America* emerges out of what Coffman identifies as a missed opportunity in the study of postmodern and contemporary American fiction, proposing a much-needed recalibration of the relation between postmodernism and historiography through a reconceptualization of Linda Hutcheon's *A Poetics of Postmodernism* (1988). Hutcheon's text, he notes,

has been (mis)read in some quarters as convincingly arguing for a view of contemporary fiction as only involuted, ahistorical, and entirely detached from reality—formally inventive because substantively vacuous. This is hardly her point; few critical books delineate as clearly as does hers postmodernist fiction's deep engagement with historical material. (Coffman xv)

The central concerns of the book thus involve, on the one hand, emphasizing the historiographical dimensions of postmodern fiction and, on the other, situating the American colonial and early national period as a site of special interest, as a context ripe for contemporary critiques of exceptional narratives of American history. Yet the original contribution of *Rewriting Early America* moves us beyond a Hutcheonian affirmation of the historiographical investment of postmodern literature primarily as a means of critiquing or unsettling the logic of American global hegemony after the second World War. Instead, Coffman develops what he terms a "reparative" reading of

the past, an interpretive stance that foregrounds postmodern literature's presentation of alternative historiographical modes through which the American colonial past is reconsidered "in terms that promise healing conceptions of American letters and community rather than only exposures of hegemonic traditions that derive from and continue to promote conflict" (xxii). *Rewriting Early America* thus offers a crucial reassessment of postmodern literature in which its authors "rewrite" the legacy of the colonial and early national period as a space and time characterized not by inevitable hegemony but by ambiguity, uncertainty and possibility.⁷

Coffman's reparative reading of the colonial past through postmodern fiction begins, interestingly enough, with a fairly standard reading of two texts that seem to resist recuperative analyses. The first section of *Rewriting Early America* positions John Berryman's "Homage to Mistress Bradstreet" (1956) and John Barth's *The Sot-Weed Factor* (1960) as works less concerned with recuperating the past than with critically interrogating the practice of historiography, foregrounding a conception of history not as a determined series of events but as a site of interpretive struggle and conflict. In Coffman's analysis, Berryman's sympathetic identification with the historical figure of Anne Bradstreet and the poem's subsequent collapsing of temporal distance dismantles a teleological narrative of literary history in which Bradstreet would serve as a discrete point of origin and Berryman as this history's culmination. In contrast with Berryman's strategy of authorial identification, Barth's historiographic critique is threaded through the proliferation of identities in the text's colonial setting. Coffman persuasively positions not Ebenezer Cooke (the author of the Marylandiad giving the novel its title) but Cooke's mysterious accomplice, Henry Burlingame, as Barth's historiographic representative. While Cooke, the "novel's literary naif, free of the burdens and lessons of the past," can be understood "as a commentary on the illusory nature of historical innocence in colonial America" (26), Burlingame, with his seemingly endless disguises and general distrust of historical documentation—which Coffman, significantly, reads in relation to the novel's "mélange of forms and modes" (28)—presents a pluralist, contested notion of history that ties the work of historical interpretation to the ambiguities of textual representation.

What distinguishes Coffman's reading of Barth from other scholars, however, is his reassessment of the novel in terms of the recuperative historical investments of postmodern literature. For Coffman, Barth's seemingly radical, pluralist historiography, defined by the ontological inaccessibility of its textual representative, Burlingame, is fundamentally *conservative*, functioning as "a rejection of the colonial as a sufficient

⁷ Coffman's "reparative" reading strikes a fascinating parallel with recent scholarship on early American literature. See, for example, Godeanu-Kenworthy, and Gustafson.

means to move forward” (40).⁸ It is in Coffman’s second and third sections, then, that the “rewriting” of early America—as a site of redemptive potentiality rife with alternate models of history and literary representation—begins to emerge. In a reading that is at once sartorial and metaphysical, he examines Paul Muldoon’s *Madoc: A Mystery* (1990) in terms of the debate between Hans-Georg Gadamer and Jürgen Habermas over the degree to which, in Coffman’s words, “tradition, as embodied in language, forms a rigid horizon of understanding” (49). The central claim here is that the arrest of Muldoon’s tyrannical Robert Southey, due to his possession of the mysterious valise through which Southey wields authoritative and semiotic power, serves as a condemnation of “the playful ambiguity of written signs” (Coffman 61). The poem, in fictionally fulfilling and problematizing the historical Coleridge and Southey’s “pantisocracy” project, can thus be read as a Habermasian “reflective appropriation of tradition,” a method of engaging with the past as a means of denaturalizing tradition in the present (Coffman 62).⁹ And if Muldoon’s recuperative “appropriation of tradition” is made through his emphasis on the “playful ambiguity” of language, Coffman’s reading of *Fathers and Crows* (1992)—the second installment of William T. Vollmann’s intimidating seven-volume project, *Seven Dreams*—emphasizes the instability of temporal barriers. While *Rewriting Early America* takes note of the emblematically postmodern critical stance taken by Vollman in the novel’s refusal to grant a single, authoritative voice to the narration of history,¹⁰ Coffman emphasizes the reparative aspects of the author’s sympathetic identification with the sixteenth-century “Mohawk Saint,” Kateri Tekakwitha, a young Mohawk woman known for her rigorous dedication to her faith and ascetic, even self-mutilating, renunciation of sin. In contrast with his reading of Berryman’s historical identification, Coffman’s analysis of Vollmann emphasizes “place”—in a shared, inhabited sense—

⁸ Coffman’s point is well taken, but his emphasis on Burlingame’s obfuscated identity in relation to the character’s *individual* history overlooks some of the novel’s most radical aspects. In particular, *The Sot-weed Factor* concerns itself with the inversion of historical narrative tropes—the “Pocahontas” myth, for one, as Leslie Fiedler has pointed out in *The Return of the Vanishing American*—as a means of foregrounding of the violence of *settler* colonialism. In this sense, the novel unsettles exceptional historical narratives in a general sense, to be sure, but also, at a more granular level, the specific tropes of exceptionalism made possible through the spectral figure of the “Indian” as the mirror of civilization. Barth’s suggestion seems to be that any recuperative project must begin with the dismantling of these entrenched literary-historical tropes.

⁹ Toward the end of the eighteenth century, the young poets Samuel Taylor Coleridge and Robert Southey proposed a settlement in the newly formed state of Pennsylvania intended to serve as a “pantisocratic” utopia—the term referring to the egalitarian form of governance the poets hoped to establish. Coleridge and Southey, both politically involved in their young adulthood, were likely disenchanted with political life in England and inspired by the outbreak of the French Revolution. The project was never fulfilled.

¹⁰ Vollmann’s novel is a highly mediated text, both in terms of its source material—the *Jesuit Relations* comprising an immense body of texts composed and edited by innumerable hands—and in terms of the abundance of source notes and paratextual material contained within the novel. *Fathers and Crows*’s formal qualities, for Coffman, thus embody an ethical stance against the authority of historical dogmatism.

as a means of not only destabilizing progressive conceptions of time but also forging critical connections through which the past can be re-inhabited. The deliberate pairing in *Fathers and Crows* of Kateri's walk in the woods of Montreal, guided by her Jesuit tutor, Pere Cholenec, with Vollman's own walk in Quebec, collapses the temporal distance separating past from present, Kateri from Vollmann, and offers instead an alternative logic of historical interconnectivity:

Catherine's journey, the passage suggests, has led her not only out of the wilderness to the steps of the church that will contain her own shrine, but also out of the past and into the present. The autobiographical episode and the historical episode ... appear to occur in the same space at the same time. What connects them is not the causal sequence of events that defines the movement of conventional narrative time ... but place and action. (Coffman 85)

For Coffman, the shared, active inhabitation of particular places that we see in Vollmann suggests an investment in postmodern and contemporary literature with history that does not merely negate or destabilize linear visions of history but in fact conceptualizes a flexible temporality through which the past remains accessible.

Coffman's reparative place-based analysis, the text's most significant methodological contribution to studies of postmodern fiction, is maintained in his deft readings of Thomas Pynchon's *Against the Day* and *Mason & Dixon*, as well as Susan Howe's "Secret History of the Dividing Line" and "Souls of the Labadie Tract." While the spatiality of Howe's poetry, and moreover the expansiveness of her poetic lines, enables an "unsettling" of hegemonic national histories through its conversation with (in contrast to the "speaking for" of Berryman and Barth) the lost, silent figures of the Labadists, Pynchon's novels, according to Coffman, foreground a conception of place as overrun with mediating systems and distinct histories. Borrowing from ethnographic work on the Nahua and Tarahumara, Coffman reads Frank Traverse's hallucinatory flashback, engendered by his presence in Mexico, as a means of negotiating seemingly incommensurable modes of historical and literary representation—namely, the logocentered textuality of Western (written) history and the pictorial and ideographical medium of Nahua representation. Thus, while *Fathers and Crows* conceptualizes a recuperation of the past through the temporal flexibility of shared spaces and places, *Against the Day* evinces an understanding of history that demands for its interpretation a variegated set of signifying systems employed in *collaborative* praxis. In the same vein, the continual obstacles encountered by the surveyors of *Mason & Dixon*, along with the inscrutability of the Delaware triangle and the abundance of supernatural events, point to the oft-noted limits of Enlightenment-informed conceptions of Cartesian

space and linear, progressive time. But in Coffman's recuperative reading, these limits are not boundaries but thresholds, "points of productive play, offering admissions to and transmissions from alternative spaces" (96). In Coffman's own words, Pynchon's novel "thus demonstrates the resiliency of narrative and serves as a demonstration of the ways in which narrative overcomes restriction ... by its tendency toward the construction of alternative spaces" (103). The presence of other worlds, other histories, encountered by the protagonists of Pynchon's novel thus render the "declarative plot" of the novel—the laying of the Line itself—as only one plot among many (100).

Although Coffman's use of ethnographic work on the Nahua was methodologically illuminating, the text notably neglects consideration of the degree to which early colonial exchanges between settlers and Indigenous peoples constituted not pre-national but *trans*-national relations. The "reparative" reading central to *Rewriting Early America*, while offering a much-needed reframing of the colonial and early national period, thus leaves room for further projects that engage more closely with the field of Indigenous Studies, particularly in terms of the distinctions made in this field between, on the one hand, "classical" colonialism and *settler* colonialism, and on the other the various forms of nationalism operative *within* the context of settler colonialism. We should certainly take stock of the limitations of recuperative histories made through identifications with Indigenous figures like Vollmann's Kateri.¹¹ As Leonard Cohen's enigmatic novel *Beautiful Losers* (1966) demonstrates, the desire of non-Indigenous ethnographers to identify with Indigenous figures like Kateri Tekakwitha cannot easily be disentangled from the violent and rapacious manifestations of settler colonialism. Even further, Coffman's analysis of Muldoon's recuperative "play" of identity in *Madoc*, which he threads through Omaar Hena's earlier work on the poem, fails to account for the specificities of and asymmetric power relations inherent within the ambiguity of identity in a settler-colonial context. To be sure, Coffman's use of Hena helpfully expands our critical purview by creating space for comparative analyses of Irish and Indigenous authors.¹² But Coffman and Hena's argument, that Muldoon's depiction of the use of "false face" masks by the poem's Cayuga figure is evidentiary of the very forms of identity "play" through which the past might be viewed as recuperative, itself seems to rest upon the abstracted notion of "Indian" that has been so thoroughly

¹¹ We might also problematize the collapsing of "Jesuit and Iroquois" alike into the broader category of "Canadians" in the novel's dedication, conflating the historical and geographic space of what is now "Canada" with the political entity of the Canadian nation-state.

¹² Indigenous novelists and scholars have also noted this as a critical site of interconnectivity. See, for example, LeAnne Howe's (Choctaw) *Shell Shaker*.

interrogated by a number of Indigenous scholars.¹³ Notably, in observing that the masks in Muldoon's poem have been assembled with increasingly non-traditional materials, Hena perceptively argues, "Muldoon here shows the constitutive modernity and hybridity of the most spiritual of Indian healing practices. In addition, the route to cultural authenticity, Muldoon suggests, comes not through a retroactive imagining of an originary, pure past but by accepting how the local and indigenous are themselves a composite mixture, perpetually in process and repeatedly 'put on'" (82). The point is well taken, as many Haudenosaunee scholars have emphasized that the continued survivance, to borrow Gerald Vizenor's term, of the Cayuga and other nations of the Haudenosaunee Confederacy is attributable directly to their ability to adapt in the face of territorial and cultural dispossession. But Hena's claim—that "[e]ven the Indian, then, plays Indian"—and Coffman's adoption of this claim as a potentially recuperative moment conflates identity play and performance in a general sense with the specific phenomenon of "playing Indian" that has proven to be so integral to the formation of settler identity in the United States, a phenomenon that, as many scholars have pointed out, relies upon an abstracted "Indianness" whose primary function is the evacuation of living Indigenous subjectivity.¹⁴ Such a reading of identity "play" overlooks the myriad ways in which performances of "Indianness" have contributed to the production and policing of Indigenous identity by institutions outside of Indigenous control.

Of course, such criticism should not take away from the significance of Coffman's recuperative project. Indeed, we can read Coffman's "reparative" reading as a response to Pedro García-Caro's earlier, less optimistic, overtly non-recuperative study, *After the Nation*. Though maintaining its affiliation with well-established arguments regarding the critically destabilizing aspects of postmodern fiction, *After the Nation* significantly expands this argumentative thread in two directions: it locates as critical sites of interrogation the spatiality and temporality of postmodern literature, which undermines the temporal and spatial logic of standard national narratives; and it expands our conception of "American" postmodern literature by situating its analysis in a hemispheric framework. Through a study of the fiction of Pynchon and Carlos Fuentes, *After the Nation* takes as its primary literary-critical impetus the development of what the author terms "postnational satire," a sub-genre within

¹³ False Face Societies in Haudenosaunee (Iroquois) traditionalism are specialized healing societies, although in this context the masks have less to do with masking identities than with enabling the wearer to engage the entities embedded within the mask.

¹⁴ See, for example, Gerald Vizenor's (Chippewa) *Manifest Manners: Postindian Warriors of Survivance*, Jodi Byrd's (Chickasaw) *The Transit of Empire: Indigenous Critiques of Colonialism*, and, appropriately, Philip Deloria's (Standing Rock Sioux) *Playing Indian*.

which stable narratives of national pasts, presents and futures are staged, exaggerated and subverted. In developing the critical thrust of postnational satire, García-Caro borrows from scholars central to the discourses of nationalism and nation-building—Gellner, Hobsbawm, Anderson and Balibar—attending in particular to the paradoxical temporality of nationalist sentiment: a uniquely and contingently modern phenomenon that, nonetheless, naturalizes itself by imputing to its narrative stability a primordial, mythic past and a deterministically unfolding future. García-Caro quite deftly organizes the tripartite temporality of nationalist narratives, consisting of “foundational pasts, consensual presents, and manifest destinies” (xv), pulled together in a teleological arc in which “the past almost always prefigures the present as it shoots out into a shared futurity” (7). Yet if in Anderson’s *Imagined Communities* the printed word in general and the novel form in particular serve as the vehicle for the “homogeneous, empty time” through which the imagined community of a nation might move (26), the primary function of postnational satire, as a sub-genre of the postmodern novel, is to destabilize, puncture, and subvert the temporality of nationalist narratives. Adopting a Bakhtinian approach to satire, García-Caro interprets the satirical novels of Pynchon and Fuentes as “zone[s] of crude contact,” collapsing the historical distance demarcating the boundaries separating origins from the present and future which provides national narratives with their temporal logic (15). García-Caro’s literary analysis thus critically complicates the role of the novel in the cultural and historical discourses of nationalism, emphasizing the degree to which postnational satire, in its promotion of “narrative breakup” over “linearity and progress,” does not “allow for Anderson’s projection into that future ‘homogenous empty time’ necessitated by the narratives of national fulfillment” (15).

Although we can apply pressure to García-Caro’s theorization of the relation between nationalism and postnational satire, specifically insofar as it rests on a somewhat generalized conceptualization of nationalism (interrogated quite brilliantly by David Lloyd in “Nationalisms Against the State”) that seems to conflate the object of “nationalist” desire with “the State,” *After the Nation* offers a compelling analysis of the ways in which the postnational satires of Pynchon and Fuentes disrupt the spatiality and temporality of “official” national histories. For García-Caro, the core contradiction laid bare by these authors is that between the homogenizing teleology of American and Mexican nationalist narratives and the violent production of marginalized and excluded figures endemic to the very process of nation-building. The first section of *After the Nation* offers a comparative analysis of the Mexico City of Fuentes’s *La región más transparente* (1958) and the New York City of Pynchon’s *V.* (1963), in terms of the ways in which these fictionalized metropolises, containing both the promises and

the failures of national progress, disrupt “modernity and its projection of a national shared futurity” (García-Caro 25). The emphasis on the spatiality of cities in *After the Nation* surely anticipates Coffman’s place-centered analysis; yet while the recuperative connection between past and present is made possible, for Coffman, through the shared inhabitation of places, for García-Caro, the spatiality of New York and Mexico City, repudiating the possibility of recuperation through shared emplacement, is defined instead by a logic of progress through exclusion, whereby certain portions of the population are excluded from participation in national futures. The urban spaces of these megacities are thus emblematic, for García-Caro, of modernity *and* its negation: “the composite location of the global modern, with its bourgeois cultural hegemonic trends, its enlightened rationalization of space and everyday life, its implied futuristic promises,” but also the “darkness represent[ative of] the protracted peripheral geography of the excluded” (31). Borrowing from Mircea Eliade’s conception of the sacralization of spaces, García-Caro points to the “constant incursion” of Mexico City’s Aztec predecessor, Tenochtitlan, “into the homogenous and undifferentiated place of profane everydayness” as emblematic of this dual character (42), serving the ends of mythic, originary narratives of *mestizo* national identity in postrevolutionary Mexico while simultaneously conjuring the violent history of Spanish settlement. And if the spatiality of *La región*’s Mexico City is punctuated by both the “sacred space” of Tenochtitlan and the space containing “the historical bloody ghosts of internal chaos and foreign intervention” (García-Caro 51), the New York City of Pynchon’s *V.*, as we see it through the eyes of the “schlemihl,” Benny Profane, is at once the hub of American hyperconsumerism and wealth production and the underground home to all that the city casts off as waste-products—alligators, rats, and the peculiar Father Fairing. Read as postnational satires, *La región* and *V.* both highlight the failure of modernity, whose symbol is surely the modern metropolis, to make good on its promise of ceaseless progress for all of its citizens.

If Coffman’s spatial-temporal logic enables a recuperative reading of the past in postmodern literature, a reading in which the past is held open as a site of possibility and alterity, García-Caro’s relation of space to temporality, as demonstrated in the previous paragraph, operates primarily through the familiarly postmodern strategies of negation, fragmentation and “narrative breakup” (15). Indeed, in his compelling analyses of Pynchon’s *The Crying of Lot 49* (1965) and Fuentes’s *La muerte de Artemio Cruz* (1962) and *Cambio de piel* (1967), García-Caro evinces a decidedly anti-recuperative “critique of technocratic discourses of containment and affluence precisely around the characters’ inability to develop an alternative perspective on reality to the ones offered by the consensual discourses of the modern nation-state” (85). In an allegorical

reading of *Artemio Cruz*, García-Caro conceives of Artemio, ostensibly the embodiment of Mexican *mestizo* nationalism, as a representative of Fanon's "national bourgeoisie," who, in the context of postcolonial national independence, wield class power through the maintenance of colonial structures.¹⁵ Similarly, García-Caro significantly updates an array of literary criticism in which Oedipa Maas's journey into the world of the Trystero is celebrated as a means of uncovering and coming to terms with America's hidden histories by convincingly arguing that it is precisely Oedipa's *inability* to see, and to comprehend what she sees (recalling indeed her literary namesake), that is central to Pynchon's satirical critique. In an analysis that openly "contradicts both hopeful recuperative or Americanist critics, and those projecting openly 'postmodern,' inconclusive renderings of the character," García-Caro claims,

it is not then that all Oedipa finds is simulacra, but that she is not able to see beyond the simulacra, partly because its connection with reality appears to have collapsed into 'unreality,' partly because her own perception is culturally jammed... [Pynchon's postnational satire] is not so much 'a parable of the failure of the humanist desire for "meaningful communication" and for inter-subjective communion through symbols,' as Ganter suggests, but rather as a caricature of the new era of information. (121)

To be sure, Coffman would take issue with García-Caro's use of "inconclusivity" as the defining feature of the postmodern, but *After the Nation's* explicitly non-recuperative reading of *Lot 49*, recalling the subversive but ultimately doomed "Operation Spartacus" of Pynchon's short story, "The Secret Integration," crucially updates postmodern framings of the novel in which its uncertainty and ambiguity are celebrated as generative, open-ended investigations of national history. Furthermore, much as *Artemio* and *Lot 49* inscribe the failure of the nationalist project in the present, Fuentes's and Pynchon's novels of national origins—*La campaña* (1992) and *Mason & Dixon* (1997)—demonstrate the failures of Enlightenment rationality in the context of the colonization of the Americas. Much as the Enlightenment-loving, Rousseau-consuming Baltasar Bustos, described in *La campaña* as the "Quixote of Reason," is eventually forced to acknowledge the limitations of the liberatory capacity of Enlightenment rationality in the context of settler colonialism—becoming "aware of the ever-widening gap between the

¹⁵ For Fanon, the nationalization of industries in a postcolonial context does not equate with "organizing the state on the basis of a new program of social relations" but "signifies very precisely the transfer into indigenous hands the privileges inherited from the colonial period" (100). Yet it's worth pointing out here that the use of "postcolonial" in the context of the Americas is itself a contested framework. See Jodi Byrd's introduction to *The Transit of Empire* for a thorough elucidation of this tension.

enlightened declarations and written laws of the lettered city and the real societies whose freedom they claim to administer” (García-Caro 171)—so too do Pynchon’s Charles Mason and Jeremiah Dixon encounter the incommensurability between the geometric and geographic principles central to the practice of surveying (and by extension to the project of settler colonialism) and the living, inhabited, almost supernatural space of North America. Yet while his assessment of the novels as diagnoses of the failures of Enlightenment rationality places García-Caro within a broad body of postmodernist scholarship on postmodern literature, the originality of *After the Nation* is visible in its framing of this critique in a broader consideration of the development of nationalisms in the Western hemisphere. In such a framework, the emergence of “revolutionary” settler and creole nationalisms in the Americas are reconceptualized not as fundamental ruptures in political and intellectual history but as “another iteration in the long series of acts of conquest, pillage, and interethnic violence that constitute the alternate narrative of hemispheric history” (García-Caro 149).

While *After the Nation* investigates the ways in which postmodern literature exposes and problematizes the violence underwriting nationalist historiography, Scott McClintock’s *Topologies of Fear* attends to the unique form taken by political violence in the twentieth century. In his invigorating and sprawling book—in terms of both its geographic reach and its methodological foundations—McClintock takes as his critical object the discourses of terrorism and counter-terrorism, adopting a variety of methodological frames in order to develop what he terms an “anti-terror discourse critique” (1). The primary contributions of McClintock’s critique are twofold: it provides a robust comparative framework for parsing the discourses surrounding “terrorist” political violence, noting in particular the shared logic underwriting terrorist acts and counter-terrorist responses alike; and it offers a much-needed historicization of political violence in the twentieth century, reframing contemporary official discourses of terrorism in which the events of September 11th, 2001 stand as an exceptional “master signifier” (146). In laying the groundwork for his anti-terror discourse critique, McClintock spends the first two chapters investigating the means by which the hyper-mediated figure of the terrorist is produced as an “exceptional” body, outside the strictures of legal systems and political representation. McClintock’s formulation of the exceptional terrorist body, rooted in well-established discourses on the embodied aspects of detainment—namely Elaine Scarry’s meditation on the dissolution of subjective consciousness through the pain of torture in *The Body in Pain* and Giorgio Agamben’s conception of “bare life” in *Homo Sacer*—is threaded through an analysis of Dorothea Dieckmann’s novel, *Guantánamo* (2007), in relation

to the writings of living current and former Guantánamo detainees contained in texts like Mozzam Begg's *Enemy Combatant* (2006) and Marc Falkoff's collection, *Poems from Guantánamo* (2007). The second chapter usefully clarifies the discussion of the production of the disembodied terrorist body through a comparative reading of Kafka's "In the Penal Colony" and the "weird extraterritoriality" of Guantánamo Bay's naval detention apparatus at Camp X-Ray (McClintock 44). Here, McClintock hones in on the relation between, on the one hand, the hyper-visibility of the digital images of Guantánamo's detainees—lacking identifiable features, visible only as ambiguous, abstract representatives of terrorist violence—and, on the other, the presentation of a particular form of power established through the relegation of these figures to the image's background: an invisibility produced by hyper-visibility, which "renders the true subject of the images not the bodies of the detainees but the material and symbolic apparatus of power" (45–6). Just as the "harrowing" of Kafka's prisoner is at once the inscription of symbolic power and the evacuation of subjectivity, so too are the images of Guantánamo detainees depictions of the exceptionality of terrorist bodies and the exceptional power of the institutions that produce them as such.

It is through its theorization of the production of exceptional terrorist bodies that *Topologies of Fear* makes its critical intervention in contemporary discourses of terrorism and counter-terrorism, as it interrogates the discursive applicability of the figure of the subaltern. In his reading of the work of Amitav Ghosh, McClintock takes note of the discrepancies between depictions of the subaltern in Ghosh's work and articulations of subalternity in the various texts produced by the *Subaltern Studies* group. McClintock's claim here is that Ghosh's *The Circle of Reason* (1986) and *The Glass Palace* (2000), in which elite and subaltern figures constantly form and dissolve various kinds of relationships, inscribes a conception of subalternity characterized not by an absolute powerlessness, as in the critical work of the *Subaltern Studies* group, but by a "complex weave of ambivalence, threaded by the warp of consent to regimes of control, and the woof of resistance to and subversion of control" (81). Given the "ambivalent" forms of autonomy expressed by subaltern figures in Ghosh's work, McClintock proposes a distinction between the subaltern and the "enemy combatant": "the status of subalternity may be differentiated from that of the detainee, in that subalternity in post-colonial theory is a condition of being within the law without necessarily consenting to it. As enemy combatants, the detainees are in the position of the inhuman, of exclusion from the law through the legal production of terrorist bodies as politically irrelevant life" (McClintock 63). At the foundation of McClintock's "anti-terror discourse critique" is thus a proposal to move beyond the paradigm of the subaltern in the context of terrorism and counter-terrorism.

As a means of exposing the shared, or mirrored, logic of terrorism and counter-terrorism, McClintock points to the psychoanalytic distinction between anxiety and fear—fear as a response to a real object of threat and anxiety as the response to a *perceived* threat, one that is “free floating” and thus may attach itself to any object. Working through Arjun Appadurai’s analysis of political violence in *Fear of Small Numbers*, McClintock explains:

If the goal of terror is, as Appadurai suggested, to replace peace with violence as the regulative principle of everyday life, the policies of the Bush administration after the 9/11 attacks, it is almost inescapable to conclude, seemed calculated almost to exploit and sustain the fear of the population in the immediate aftermath of the attacks, to convert the real fear of terrorist attack into a more diffuse, free-floating state of anxiety that could make the population more pliant and accepting of the extraordinary powers claimed for the executive branch under an all-but-declared state of emergency. (39)

The shared logic of terror and counter-terror, their shared emphasis on producing sustained anxiety, is made apparent in McClintock’s analysis of the “mimetic doubling” in communiqués from both terrorist organizations and anti-terror institutions. In the American context, he develops this analysis through a comparison of statements made by members of Al-Qa’ida and right-wing evangelical figures in the United States, both of whom read the events of 9/11 in “eschatological terms,” wherein the attacks are reframed as divine punishment for the excesses of hyperconsumerism (114). One of the benefits of McClintock’s methodology is that we are able to unpack the continuities between the discourses shaping the geopolitical conversation around terror and counterterror and the representations of these discourses in literature. Indeed, the shared logic underwriting terrorism and counter-terrorism is central to McClintock’s reading of Thomas Pynchon’s *Bleeding Edge* (2013), in which both the attacks of September 11th and the shaping of the “official narrative” of the attacks by governmental agencies demonstrate “how both terrorist groups and the counter-terrorism state exploit the affective distress of fear and anxiety to advance their goals” (134). The transnational dimensions of these discourses, however, are most fully engaged in his fourth chapter, in which McClintock uses René Girard’s anthropological concept of “mimetic rivalry” as a theoretical framework for his examination of the circularity of political violence in Kashmir, the subject matter of Vikram Chandra’s *Sacred Games* (2006) and Salman Rushdie’s *Shalimar the Clown* (2005). Beyond the abundance of mirroring and doubles in *Shalimar*—in which Indian and Pakistani intelligence agencies, to be sure, but also

law enforcement agents and political/religious radicals are presented as mirrors of one another—McClintock reads these novels' depictions of political and religious violence in Kashmir in terms of Girard's conception of the secularization of mimetic violence, in which eschatological, apocalyptic violence is understood as a response to the disintegration of the sacrality of sacrifice. More specifically, the social function of sacrifice as a form of release, preventing the outbreak of mimetic violence, is made null in Girard's interpretation of the Gospel of John and other texts in the Judeo-Christian tradition, as they "demystified sacrifice by exposing that its violence did not have a divine origin (the demand of God or the gods for victims), but a human one. The cost of this insight, however, was the declining efficacy of sacrifice to inhibit the potential eternal recurrence of reciprocal violence and revenge" (McClintock 98–99). Critically, then, in addition to exposing the shared logic of terrorism and counter-terrorism, McClintock's multidisciplinary reading of Rushdie and Chandra refreshingly recasts our historical understanding of the phenomenon of terrorism, framed here in terms of eschatological violence, as a form of violence whose origins extend far beyond the twenty-first century.

Yet the critical payoff of the historicization of terrorist and counter-terrorist violence, laid open in the fourth chapter, is most apparent in McClintock's study of Pynchon's *Bleeding Edge* and *Against the Day*. McClintock quite brilliantly sets these two novels—their contextual frames separated by roughly a century—in conversation with one another in terms of their depiction of political violence and the efforts made by governmental institutions to suppress it. In his polemic re-reading of *Bleeding Edge*, McClintock emphasizes the analytical shortcomings of the novel's reviewers, many of whom accuse Pynchon of either dangerously entertaining and legitimating "9/11 truther" conspiracy theories or, as the only other alternative, satirically condemning such lunacy. Pointing in particular to reviews by Michael Chabon, who reads Pynchon's inclusion of alternative narratives of the attacks as "scorn for all this weak sauce" (qtd. in McClintock 129), and Johnathan Lethem, who generalizes these narratives as concern over a "wide and abiding complicity" (qtd. in McClintock 131), McClintock argues that such readings take for granted the very myth of American exceptionalism at the core of Pynchon's critique by either enshrining the "official" narratives of the events as absolute truths through the labeling of all unofficial narratives as "conspiracies" (Chabon) or neutralizing the subversive power of unofficial narratives by rendering them "nebulous and unthreatening to the myth of American innocence" (Lethem) (131). McClintock's critique thus frames the specter of terrorism, manifested in the attacks of September 11, as a "sublime object" in Slavoj Žižek's formulation, drawing on the narrative parallel between the setting of *Bleeding Edge* and the episode

explaining the destruction of the “great city” in part two of *Against the Day*, set over a century in the past. The supernatural “Figure” responsible for that destruction, read by McClintock as a “Lovecraftian ‘Thing,’” is indeed suggestive of an unrepresentable, incomprehensible sublime, but the critical import of this parallel found in *Against the Day*, whose plot depicts a long history of political violence in the United States, is that, by historicizing the phenomenon of political violence, Pynchon recasts the “sublime object” of terror into the very human figure of Scarsdale Vibe and the antagonists of the Colorado labor wars in the early 20th century. For McClintock, then, *Against the Day* and *Bleeding Edge*, taken together, “propose ... that a narrative that set in after 9/11, which made of it the master signifier for terrorism, must be resisted and complicated by a more complex view of a longer history of terrorism that has impacted American culture, but has been largely suppressed, only most recently, and massively, by the looming presence of the 9/11 attacks that overshadow it” (146).

While American literature in the second half of the twentieth century has not infrequently narrated national histories in transnational contexts, the past three decades have witnessed the development of more rigorous transnational, hemispheric, and postnational methodologies in literary and cultural criticism. Christopher Coffman’s reparative reading of the shared national ambiguities of postmodern literature the colonial-early national period, Pedro García-Caro’s hemispheric conceptualization of the anti-recuperative postnational satire, and Scott McClintock’s transnational historicization of twentieth-century political violence all enrich our critical conversations about American literature. García-Caro’s *After the Nation* and Coffman’s *Rewriting Early America* indeed open up new directions in literary scholarship, attending respectively to the hemispheric dimensions of postmodernism’s disruption of historical narratives and the potentiality of postmodern and contemporary literature’s recuperative historiography. McClintock’s *Topologies of Fear*, then, critically refines cultural discourses of terrorism and counter-terrorism through a careful analysis of representations of political violence in contemporary American and Indian literature. Together these texts invigorate the study of American fiction precisely by unsettling easy definitions of “American:” working against conceptions of globalization as either the intrusion of the world into the bounded, domestic space of the United States or the simple transnationalization of American culture, politics and economics abroad, Coffman, García-Caro and McClintock position “national” postmodern and contemporary literature, as in Homi Bhabha’s “Narrating the Nation,” in space that is continuously positing and deconstructing the distinction between “outside/inside,” domestic and foreign, national and international (4).

Competing Interests

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

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