

Blowback: The Rewriting of American Imperialism

After the Cold War

By

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INTRODUCTION

The Afterlife of the End

A wall was coming down. It was something to do with history. It was an historic occasion.

—Zadie Smith, *White Teeth*

Blowback examines representations of contemporary U.S. imperialism in literature from the last decade of the twentieth century into the twenty-first century. I argue that the forces that gathered in the waning days of the cold war—in particular, globalization, the diffusion of neoliberal rhetoric into everyday life, and triumphalist accounts of the end of the cold war—shaped the historical imaginations of contemporary American fiction. The writers considered here, Joan Didion, Jessica Hagedorn, Junot Díaz, and Maxine Hong Kingston, critique post-cold war narratives that disavow the imperial nature of American power, the legacies of violence extended by the cold war, and the immiserating effects of global capitalism in its neoliberal form. These authors develop what I call an archival imagination to revise these mainstream narratives in order to rewrite the history of contemporary imperialism.

Odd Arne Westad, in his recent book *The Global Cold War*, argues that it is not especially useful to talk about cold war interventions in terms of empire because U.S. and Soviet interventions in Third World countries grew out of different motivations and had different ends than the European and American empire-building forays of the high imperial period. The literary texts studied here declare the opposite: they look back on U.S. proxy wars and cold war interventions in the Pacific and Latin America, connecting those wars to a long history of U.S.

imperialism and its blowback. They show that the reverberations of these wars continue to be felt long past 1989. In doing so, these texts offer an enlarged understanding of the operations of imperial power, as well as alternative modes of global connectivity to the imperialism embodied by the “war on terror” and the pacifying rhetoric of neoliberalism.

“Post–cold war” has yet to become an established analytical frame in literary scholarship; this project seeks to change that. Amy Hungerford argues that, as far as literary studies is concerned, the end of the cold war made little impact: “Political watersheds are one thing, but cultural or aesthetic ones quite another, and it was not immediately clear—nor is it clear now—that, to borrow a turn of phrase from Virginia Woolf, literature changed, even if the world did, on or about 9 November 1989” (410). Literature and literary criticism, lagging behind and not particularly interested in the watershed moments of politics, Hungerford suggests, have registered no serious response to the end of the cold war.¹ Changing literature is a high bar to set for any event; the end of the cold war admittedly did not upend literary schools or genres. But it did register in literature, indirectly and directly. As I detail below, some of the cultural and political developments as well as analytical frames that preoccupy Americanists find expression in, and are formed by, the social imaginaries emerging from the latter years and aftermath of the cold war. These years saw the rise of narratives of a triumphal American exceptionalism that tried to shake off what William Spanos calls the “specter of Vietnam” and the acceleration of global neoliberalism with its rhetoric of individualism and “Third Way” politics. Contemporary

¹ Hungerford’s argument is implicitly informed by the sense that periods of time or style may overlap with each other, may provide different emphases for analyzing the same texts, and need not cede to or usurp each other. She does allow that the end of the cold war may have cultural resonance since it “launched us into the age of multiculturalism, or, more negatively, sectarianism” with the culture wars that gathered speed in the 1990s. Yet Hungerford seems less interested in an anti-periodization argument than in defending her own periodizing frameworks for contemporary literature—post-1945 and “long modernism.” Long modernism, post-1945, post WWII, cold war, post-cold war—it seems possible for these to all exist synchronously. My project assumes that the developments surrounding the end of the cold war can still be felt in the contemporary moment, alongside other historical markers that developed heteronomously to the cold war and its end.

literature responds to these narratives by exploring U.S. global entanglements and global networks of power and disempowerment.² The texts studied here form a subset of this literature in that they respond directly to the aftermath of the cold war by producing counter-narratives to the triumphal, elisional views of U.S. and global power that emerged in the late 1980s and continue into the twenty-first century.³ Thus this dissertation takes a very different tack from Hungerford's by examining literary works produced in the last decade of the twentieth century and first decade of the twenty-first century within the context of a post-cold war culture.

I use the term “post cold war” not just to designate a historical period but to describe an array of cultural and political coordinates that constitute contemporary imperialism. What I have identified here as the key post–cold war narratives align with these coordinates: national exception (even as nation-states become, as Levinson argues, more “relational” and less sovereign [1]), economic interest, and military force. The cold war's end both exposed and shored up the disjunctions in how U.S. policy and popular narratives imagined the global, remained committed to its own exceptionality, accelerated the spread of neoliberalism as a practice and a discursive formation, and rebooted cold war definitions of war and peace. These three set of coordinates overlap and constitute one another: after the cold war, a vindicated U.S. began entrenching its power across a newly-open world in the form of a free-market democracy that promised a “democratic peace” to all who got on board. Analyzed separately, each of these sets of coordinates reveals how the contradictions inherent in cold-war narratives are reconstituted in the post cold war.

² For example, Edwidge Danticat, Don DeLillo, Ben Fountain, William Gibson, Mohsin Hamid, Robert Stone, Karen Tei Yamashita, and others write about contemporary U.S. imperialism or global entanglement, often from a vantage point outside the U.S.

³ Perhaps a fairly small subset: Irr Caren argues, somewhat hastily, that “global novels” in the twenty-first century have, more often than not, avoided explicit discussion of state politics.

First, the priority often given to the East-West conflict in accounts of the cold war and triumphal accounts of its end masks its global and imperial nature. The cold war's end, as I discuss later in this introduction, is more accurately seen as an attenuation that occurred unevenly across the globe rather than as a clean break. When historian John Lewis Gaddis named the cold war era "the long peace," he did so despite the fact that the cold war was, to echo Robert Lowell, composed of "small war on the heels of small war." These small wars were fought in and over other countries, largely in the Third World and out of view of most Westerners. That Americans could and did think of the cold war as cold, even as a mechanism for stability, can be attributed in part to the hot wars being either small and distant or waged by funding and arming groups who would fight communism in the U.S.'s stead. Proxy wars thus helped to maintain the U.S. state of exception in its imperial relations with much of the rest of the world. When the cold war ended, those in favor of a unipolar world governed by the U.S. pushed to extend this state of exception by constructing new enemies to replace the "Reds" and demonstrating U.S. military might in the wars in the Persian Gulf. The texts assembled in this dissertation, in contextualizing U.S. proxy wars within a longer history of imperialism, contest this state of exception. Junot Díaz, in particular, takes on American exceptionalism, drawing a line of descent from Christopher Columbus's claiming the Dominican Republic for Spain to U.S. interventions during the twentieth century.

Second, although free-market ideologues claimed the end of the cold war as a victory for their ideas, the U.S. economy during the cold war hardly realized a neoliberal utopia. During the cold war, the U.S. built up a regulatory state of "embedded liberalism" and compacts between business and labor; on the international stage, the U.S. ran trade deficits to strengthen alliances and contain the temptation of socialist reform (Harvey, *Brief History* 11). As Nelson Lichtenstein

recounts, capitalism was reined in enough that those in the center-left could imagine that eventually the U.S. would come to look almost as statist as the Soviet Union.⁴ Within this environment, the founders of what came to be called neoliberalism saw themselves as reformers and revolutionaries who aimed to redirect and reshape the regulatory state in support of business interests. When they had an opportunity to do so in various countries, including the U.S., beginning in the 1970s, the resulting economic crises and shocks looked less like a triumph and more like a losing policy. Yet neoliberalism has become, in David Harvey's words, "hegemonic" and the global entrenchment of economic liberalization has laid the foundation for a retooled form of imperialism (9). Joan Didion and Jessica Hagedorn explore this empire from different angles: Didion by looking at the anti-historical pull of finance and Hagedorn through the inequities of global labor markets.

Third, the narrative of neoliberal triumphalism that held out the promise of global peace through freer markets and the end of the cold war signaled to some that the peace supposedly enjoyed by the West could be extended globally.⁵ But that peace is a distorted peace. Accepting his party's nomination for president in 1992, George H.W. Bush revealed what the post-cold war peace meant: "The defining challenge of the 90s is to win the economic competition, to win the peace. We must be a military superpower, an economic superpower and an export superpower" ("Remarks"). Peace in this context is actually an economic and military conflict that can be "won" through superior arms and international trade. This notion of peace is both more and less than a negative peace (defined as merely the absence of open armed conflict) as it requires the

⁴ Also see Bernstein on the "deformation" of the U.S. economy by cold war military spending and widening economic inequality during the 1980s and 1990s.

⁵ Even in the U.S., there was a sense that the post-cold war peace would be more stable than the cold war's "long peace," a belief embodied in the phrase "peace dividend," which referred to the surplus treasure that the U.S. government could now invest in something other than the arms race and containment.

use of different types of violence: the threat of military action and the instability of world markets that protect the interests of the most powerful. Maxine Hong Kingston takes up this thread of post-cold war discourse and envisions alternative ways of understanding peace as anti-imperial, against what Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri describe as empire's dedication to "a perpetual and universal peace outside of history" (xv).

In the following pages, I outline the post-cold war—its temporal and geographical limits and its key narratives of the triumph of market liberalization, American exceptionalism, and the shape of empire under globalization. At the end of this chapter, I develop a concept of an archival style that Didion, Hagedorn, Díaz, and Kingston use to criticize and develop alternatives to these narratives.

The Global Post-Cold War

The growing field of global cold war studies has, over the past decade, begun shifting the focus of analyses of the cold war away from the U.S. and Europe and towards other regions, particularly the Third World.⁶ This dissertation contributes to this body of work by showing how narratives about the end of the cold war are key to a transnational analysis of contemporary literature. More specifically, my readings of Didion's, Hagedorn's, Díaz's, and Kingston's treatments of the wars and interventions in Central American, Southeast Asia, the Caribbean, and

⁶ For quite some time, Walter LeFeber has argued that there was more than one cold war, waged unevenly across the world (see "An End to *Which* Cold War?"). For a similar view, see Johnson, "The Three Cold Wars." Noam Chomsky has also long been making the case that the cold war was a global conflict with colonial parameters (see "A View from Below"). More recently, Odd Arne Westad's *The Global Cold War: Third World Interventions and the Making of Our Times* (2005) and the New Cold War History series published by the University of North Carolina Press have sought to decenter the East-West conflict, and particularly the U.S., from cold war history.

Cold war literary studies have tended to focus on the icons of cold war culture within the U.S., such as the atomic bomb, McCarthyism, and structures of paranoia. For example, see Daniel Grausam's *On Endings* (2011), Peter Knights's edited collection *Conspiracy Nation* (2002), Timothy Melley's *Empire of Conspiracy* (2000), Alan Nadel's *Containment Culture* (1995), and Patrick O'Donnell's *Latent Destinies* (2000). Recent works, such as Leerom Medovoi's *Rebels: Youth and the Cold War Origins of Identity* (2005) and the edited collection *Global Cold War Literature: Western, Eastern and Postcolonial Perspectives* (2012), have contextualized cold war-era U.S. cultural and identity formations within an international frame.

the Middle East call attention to the unfinished business of the global cold war as an extension of U.S. imperialism. Looking at how the U.S.'s actions affected these regions and generated blowback complicates U.S.-centered narratives of cold war triumphalism, celebrations of a globalized “flat-world,” and jingoistic calls for empire-building in the post-cold war.⁷

The geographic limits of the cold war are intricately bound up with its temporal limits, and I expand those temporal limits as well. As anthropologist Heonik Kwon observes, although there is a great deal of debate about the origins of the cold war, a consensus quickly formed about when it ended—for most commenters, the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 marks the endpoint (although for some 1989 is only the beginning of the end, which arrives in 1991 with the dissolution of the Soviet Union). My definition of the post-cold war period is looser, given that key developments, such as the mainstreaming of neoliberal economics, began decades before 1989. However, 1989 is a key date in this project because it is an iconic image within cold-war triumphalist narratives. This dissertation conceives of the post-cold war as extending into, although not exclusively defining, the contemporary moment. Ending with 1989 or 1991 privileges national—usually American—interests and experiences as definitive, even though the cold war's end was unevenly felt in different regions. For instance, while for many in the U.S., the cold war may seem to have ended quite abruptly and bloodlessly, Elizabeth Schmidt describes how, in many African states, when the superpower rivalry and the governments propped up by them collapsed, warlords “awash in weapons” from the cold war took advantage of the unstable situation (193).⁸

⁷ In *The World Is Flat: A Brief History of the Twenty-First Century* (2005), the journalist Thomas Friedman popularized the image of a flat world as a symbol for how globalization and the internet connect the world and supposedly make the global market place a level playing field.

⁸ Richard Saull also points out that the cold war ended before 1989 for some regions, such as Egypt and Saudi Arabia, where cold war conflicts between capitalist governments and Arab-nationalist socialist groups shifted to a conflict between “pro-Western authoritarian states” and “reactionary Islam” (“Reactionary” 76). Yet Saull also does

Blowback also departs from timelines that posit the end of the post-cold war period on September 11, 2001. Philip Wegner's and Samuel Cohen's studies of American literature during the 1990s delineate a period that begins in 1989 and ends in 2001, a time that Cohen calls an "interwar period . . . between the fall of the wall and the fall of the towers" (4). Wegner names this period "life between two deaths," where the two deaths refer to the original Event (using Alain Badiou's terminology)—the toppling of the Berlin Wall—and the repetition of this event on September 11, 2001, when "the destruction of the symbolic universe of the Cold War is finally accomplished and a true new world order put into place" (9). Although Wegner sees September 11 as a true end to the cold war and Cohen sees it as an end to the interwar period that reanimates cold war attitudes and rhetoric, for both the time between the two falls is interstitial, a waiting period. In these views, the developments of the period are limited in their importance and scope. Moreover, identifying September 11 as an endpoint explicitly reinstates the U.S. as a focal point for the time period—framed by the U.S.'s triumph and its tragedy—and thus works against a globalized understanding of the cold war and its aftermath. As Junot Díaz's and Maxine Hong Kingston's works demonstrate, the legacies of imperial violence that haunt the end of the cold war are still present in 2001 and after.

In outlining the post-cold war, this project instead relies on Heonik Kwon's description of the cold war as "decomposing." A global cold war scholar, Kwon argues that the end of the cold war was perceived as a clean, bloodless historical break only in the U.S. and certain European countries. In other areas, particularly in the Third World, cold-war structures, violence, and instability continue long past 1989. Understanding the end of the cold war as a long process of

an excellent job of tracing how this shift was occasioned, at least in part, by U.S.-backed administrations that encouraged the growth of radical Islam as a counterweight to communist atheism. Even after the superpower rivalry moved out of the region and local conflicts came to the fore, the effects of both cold-war military alliances and neoliberal globalization continued to form the crucible in which these local conflicts were waged.

decomposition reorients our focus to these other regions and expands our understanding of the cold war as a global war. “Decomposition” is thus an apt term for the processes that the texts studied here represent: the wars and repressive regimes in Latin America and the Pacific whose effects continued and continue to be felt. As Kwon defines it, decomposition is a metaphor for the “suspended, liminal period of twilight” during which people and states disengage/disengaged from the cold war:

Just as the decomposition of a dead body is considered across cultures a critical and perilous time when the physical death of a person coexists with the symbolic vitality of the person’s animus, the “decomposition” of the cold war is the unsettling situation in which the lived reality is not really free from the immediate past and has not reintegrated the past into the time present as a past history—that is, it has a kind of spectral existence.

(33)

Translating the term “decomposition” from organic matter to historical matter as Kwon does shifts both the temporal and spatial boundaries of the end of the cold war. Just as the microscopic processes that constitute decomposition of a dead body make it difficult to accurately pinpoint the beginning and end of the decomposing process, local experiences of the cold war and the disjunction between those experiences and the dominant narratives emerging from the West (“the war is over and we won”) scatter any clear sense of what it means for *the* cold war to definitively end. Both the period of time that can be considered “the end” and the events and processes that can be legitimately understood as related to the end must be rethought if the end of the cold war is seen as an extended period that was experienced differently across the globe instead of as a singular event with universal meaning. The texts studied here suggest that the end of the cold war is indeed an ongoing period of decomposition, as they return to the raw events of the cold

war in its immediate aftermath or years later. It is not simply that the cold war has not ended in the regions these texts focus on, but that the reverberations from the U.S. proxy wars and interventions are still being felt in those regions and in the U.S., at the same time as they are being denied, declared dead. Seeing them as part of a decomposing process undermines the finality of this death sentence and widens the aperture of analysis to show how blowback from the regions accumulates, how the routes of empire run in more than one direction.

Cold War Triumphalism

Cold war triumphalism is a particularly ahistorical pose, one that suggests that the cold war and its end need little historical analysis. As Ellen Schrecker points out, the narrative that the U.S. had “won” the cold war meant that there was no accounting for or assessment beyond the celebration of its end (Introduction 2). Quite the contrary: because the U.S. demonstrated its ideological and moral superiority in winning what was essentially an ideological contest, its policies during and after the cold war became incontestable. William Spanos suggests that triumphalism is not just ahistorical but hostile to history. He attributes cold war triumphalism to an aggressive desire to disavow U.S. imperial history by burying “the specter of Vietnam”—the reminder of the atrocities the U.S. committed during Vietnam and its ultimately losing the war, both of which undermined the foundations of America exceptionalism (ix). The U.S. seemed to have exorcised this specter through the renewed sense of American rightness that followed the end of the cold war and the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. But as the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq wore on, their similarities to Vietnam resuscitated the specter of Vietnam. Tom Engelhardt likewise suggests that the war in Vietnam ended “victory culture” in the U.S.; to the extent that cold war triumphalism brought back victory culture, we might see cold war triumphalism as Spanos does: a reaction not to a triumph but to an opportunity to shed history.

The impulse to shed history is discernible in two of the most influential strands of cold war triumphalism, which came from essays published in foreign policy journals: Francis Fukuyama's 1989 "The End of History?," and Samuel Huntington's 1993 response to Fukuyama, "The Clash of Civilization?"⁹ Although Fukuyama and Huntington forecast different views of the post cold war world, with Fukuyama predicting the ascendancy of a pacified, homogenous, market-driven order and Huntington predicting a world riven by cultural conflict, both began with the assumption that the U.S. had undeniably won the cold war, and that the U.S. triumph was the triumph of market liberalization (Fukuyama) and Western civilization (Huntington). The similarities and differences between Fukuyama's and Huntington's arguments characterize the main narratives that grew out of the end of the cold war: these narratives tend to collapse "democracy" with "open markets," cheerlead for a global order while bemoaning the "backwardness" of "non Western" cultures, and make claims to American exceptionalism, by simultaneously justifying and denying U.S. imperial actions. The texts studied in this dissertation challenge these narratives' resistance to analyzing the recent past; in reassessing and recontextualizing U.S. actions during the cold war, Didion, Díaz, Hagedorn, and Kingston chart the myopic foreclosure demanded by narratives of an exceptional U.S. bringing communism and ideology itself to an end.

The Triumph of the Market. Fukuyama's 1989 essay is in many ways the urtext for cold war triumphalism. Fukuyama's essay became instantly (in)famous: copies of the issue of *The National Interest* that it ran in reportedly sold out and it was quickly translated into a number

⁹ Both Fukuyama and Huntington published book-length version of these essays, removing the question marks from their titles: *The End of History and the Last Man* (1992) and *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (1996).

of languages.¹⁰ Despite receiving criticism from across the political spectrum for its overstatement and tendency to dismiss global developments that did not square with his vision of an unchallenged “universal homogenous state,”¹¹ Fukuyama’s main assumptions—that the breakdown of the USSR spelled a win for American free-market ideology and that free markets were the only system compatible with democracy—were largely accepted and repeated by the media and actively championed by the first Bush administration.¹²

In “The End of History?,” Fukuyama argues that the USSR was not simply collapsing but had been defeated by the ideology of the free market: the cold war was “an unabashed victory of economic and political liberalism” (3). For Fukuyama, the triumph of the free market is the triumph of the West, which is epitomized by the U.S. With the coming end of communism in the Soviet Union, neoliberalism, left without any ideological opponents who could develop their ideology into a system of governance, was unassailable and would become the norm throughout the world. This final and universal form of government, “the end point of mankind’s ideological evolution” is thoroughly informed by free-market fundamentalism and defined by consumerism: “liberal democracy in the political sphere combined with easy access to VCRs and stereos in the economic” (4, 8). Fukuyama works hard to present this VCR democracy as ethically enlightened and shorn of any racial or class bias. Indeed, one of his basic points is that wars are largely the result of ideological struggle; if everyone acquiesces to the final form of government, as they must, war will become a thing of the past. And since free-market democracy is structurally

¹⁰ Scholars, pundits, and policymakers began weighing in on Fukuyama’s essay almost immediately, beginning with the collection of responses that were published with the essay in *The National Interest*. *The Washington Post* and *The New York Times* reprinted parts of the essay, and major newspapers ran multiple articles and opinion pieces explaining, summarizing, and contesting its claims.

¹¹ As Fukuyama described the criticism in an article addressed to his detractors, his essay produced “a uniquely universal consensus, not on the current status of liberalism, but on the fact that I was wrong” (“Beyond”).

¹² For example, in a speech to the Chamber of Commerce in 1990, Bush stated that “As the world turns to freer markets. . . [t]he jury is no longer out. Markets work. Government controls do not work” (qtd. in Bose and Perotti).

egalitarian, according to Fukuyama, economic inequality will eventually dissolve—once minorities move beyond the legacy of “premodern” inequities such as slavery (10). In resorting to this conservative bromide that removes racial discrimination to the past and places the responsibility for it squarely on its victims, Fukuyama reveals his new world order to be very much like the old world order, built along the racial and class lines of classic imperialism. For example, he assures his readers that free-market democracy will prevail even if alternatives are proposed because “[i]t matters very little what strange thoughts occur to people in Albania or Burkina Faso”; what matters is the “common ideological heritage of mankind,” which flows out of the West (9). Much like colonialists in earlier eras, Fukuyama imagines groups of people occupying the same globe but existing at different points in a teleological history of development: while the first world moves out of history, “the vast bulk of the Third World remains very much mired in history, and will be a terrain of conflict for many years to come” (15).

Even apart from these irruptions of colonial discourse, the system of free-market fundamentalism that Fukuyama celebrates is inherently unequal. In *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, David Harvey charts how the theory that unregulated but highly protected markets were the only path to stability and prosperity became, by the end of the cold war, hegemonic. Neoliberalism was conceived as a means of opposing communism and socialism. The initial theory uneasily yoked neoclassical economic principles to the rhetoric of individual freedom, arguing that government intervention in business was a direct threat to “that most precious possession of Western Man, freedom of thought and expression” (Friedrich von Hayek, qtd. in Harvey, 20). Yet in the countries subjected to neoliberal “shocks” and policies, such as Mexico and Chile, the result was a greatly weakened state, disappearing social services, high

unemployment, and wide wealth gaps that, it might be argued, paved the way for the now seemingly intransigent presence of organized crime in Mexico. In other countries, which were able to maintain something of a social safety net or defer somewhat the effects of neoliberal practices, the cultural changes were nonetheless dramatic: a general hostility to organized labor; the vilification of public services and trade regulation; a glorification of business culture, particularly the rogue outer regions of finance; and a general acceptance that freedom starts (and sometimes ends) with free trade.

Cold Warriors in Search of a New War. Where Fukuyama dismisses the possibility that ethnic conflicts and religious fundamentalism might play an important part in a post-cold war world order, Huntington argues that religious and ethnic identities will define the period. The end of the bipolar era means that ideological differences may no longer trump cultural similarities and alliances will shift along the lines of “civilizations.” Globalization, far from flattening culture, will, Huntington predicts, make the world seem a smaller place and trigger feelings of nationalism and a retreat to traditional identities. Huntington predicts that the main clash will occur between “Western Christianity” and Islam, as the “Velvet Curtain of culture” replaces “the Iron Curtain of ideology” (31). As critics were quick to point out, Huntington’s civilizations—“Western, Confucian, Japanese, Islamic, Hindu, Slavic-Orthodox, Latin American and possibly African”—were entrenched in racial and ethnic stereotypes and took no notice of differences within or, importantly, crossovers among these cultural blocks. (That even in this system of broad generalization, “African” might not qualify as a civilization is telling: non-Muslims from anywhere in Africa would not fit into any of Huntington’s other categories and thus would exist outside of civilization, indeed outside of the known world.) Huntington blames cultural clashes on difference itself instead of on xenophobia. For instance, he claims some

Americans might fear Japanese investment in U.S. industries more than investment by Western European countries not because of racism but because “the differences between American culture and European culture are so much less than those between American civilization and Japanese civilization” (34). This slippage, in which the burden of intolerance is shifted onto difference instead of the hostility towards difference, is, of course, not unique to Huntington; it functions in his essay as it always does—to naturalize both difference and racism. Edward Said’s thoughtful critique of Huntington’s essay makes just this point: that Huntington deploys long-held stereotypes of Arabs and Muslims to create and inflame conflicts he purports to describe. Huntington’s main aim, Said suggests, is not to map a post-cold war world but to return to a cold war world, one prepared at any moment for war with a categorically other enemy: Huntington “extend[s] the mindset of the Cold War into a different time and for a new audience (“Clash” 86). Replacing the Iron Curtain with the “Velvet Curtain,” Huntington is merely reconfiguring the lines of the cold war to pinpoint a new enemy for Western civilization.

In this way, Huntington’s post-cold war narrative is more in line with those of some neoconservatives who, with end of the cold war, went in search of a new war. The story these cold warriors told about the end of the cold war reveals fissures between their belief that the U.S. should be happily using its military power to create a world compatible with their views, and the market-obsessed neoliberals, whom William F. Buckley castigates as “boring” (Robin 275). The ex-liberal and archconservative Irving Kristol responded to Fukuyama’s declaration that conflict would eventually come to an end by proclaiming that he did not “believe a word of it” and that the end of the cold war meant that “now the enemy is us, not them” (“Responses to Fukuyama” 27, 28). By “us” he does not mean himself; he refers to, among others, the leftist intellectuals “who are determined to exile the great thinkers of Western civilization from their curriculum”

(“Responses to Fukuyama” 26). Kristol clarifies who the real enemy is in a 1993 essay in which he distinguishes the cold war against Communism from his own long cold war against liberalism and declares that “[t]here is no ‘after the Cold War’ for me. So far from having ended, my cold war has only increased in intensity as sector after sector of American life has been corrupted by the liberal ethos” (“My Cold War” 144).¹³

While Kristol fought the enemy within, other cold warriors prepared for the next external enemy. Charles Krauthammer argued that after the cold war, although the “triumph of the Western Idea is total,” no one could assume that “the world will ultimately come to be like us” because “evil” would manifest itself in anti-capitalist political and economic systems. For these cold warriors, the period between the end of the cold war and the invasion of Afghanistan in 2001 was a “tepid” time that called for a renewed international assertiveness (Kagan and Kristol). In their view, which was shared by pundits from across the political spectrum, the events of September 11, 2001, awakened the American people from the torpor of post-cold war peace and prosperity (Robin 3). As Chalmers Johnson demonstrates, though, the U.S. continued, in many ways, to fight the cold war battles and increase its global military strength—in the drug wars in Columbia and the permanent American military bases in South Korea, Japan, and the Philippines (“The Three Cold Wars”). Yet the story that the U.S. had largely retreated from the international scene served to reinforce both of the competing conservative visions of the post

¹³ Kristol’s well-known line encapsulates one of the narratives of the post-cold war U.S. cultural landscape that this dissertation does not engage: the culture wars. Although Kristol idiosyncratically portrays the cold war as a secondary concern to, almost an offshoot of, the moral struggle against the left’s “rot and decadence,” the culture wars that picked up steam during the 1980s and became explosive during the 1990s were entwined with cold war attitudes (“My Cold War” 144). Tony Kushner’s *Angels in America* (1993) makes this point by connecting conservative attitudes towards AIDS and homosexuality in the 1980s to cold-war cultural panics through the figure of Roy Cohn, the lawyer who helped prosecute the Rosenbergs and assisted Joe McCarthy.

cold war world, one in which neoliberalism creates a desired state of peace and prosperity and one in which the United States fulfills its destiny as a hawkish but paternal empire builder.¹⁴

The Shape of Empire at the Millennium

In arguing for the importance of empire to the literature of the post-cold war period (and, by extension, to the cold war), this dissertation enters in current debates about the shape of contemporary U.S. imperialism. These debates center on the role of American military power in propping up an aggressive U.S. imperialism and the role of de-territorialized corporations and business transactions in creating an empire¹⁵ that is not located in any state. Here also, I am aided by Kwon's notion of decomposition. Taking the position that historical events can decompose allows for a view that is longer than the cold war; the texts this dissertation analyzes suggest that the cold war and contemporary era might be seen as part of the even longer decomposition of empire. Undermining any teleological notion of history, the metaphor of the decomposing body suggests an unending process of rotting and recomposing, as organic matter is endlessly recycled through different forms (food, dirt, dust). Indeed, the key questions within current debates about U.S. imperialism reflect on imperialism as a process that both decomposes and recomposes: Is the U.S. an imperial power? If so, when did it become one? And what shape has U.S. imperial power assumed at different points in history? The literature studied here offer different answers to these questions, but all insist on understanding the contemporary moment as part of a history of empire that extends as far back as the arrival of Europeans in the New World.

Support for empire building found a new outlet after the U.S. launched the "War on Terror" in 2001. The rhetoric of empire began to appear more frequently in neoconservative

¹⁴ Wendy Brown suggests that although neoliberalism and neoconservatism function quite differently, their interests overlap since neoliberalism is a governmentality that demands foreign interventions.

¹⁵ I use "empire" throughout this dissertation interchangeably with "imperialism" and "imperium." My usage does not follow the very specific way that Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt use the term.

corners, where U.S. imperialism was portrayed as a delivery system for democracy and a boon to the rest of the world. At the start of the wars in Iraq, commentators defended American empire as inherently liberating. According to Max Boot, a fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations, U.S. imperialism becomes oppressive to those on the receiving end only when it is not assertive enough, citing the U.S. disengagement from Afghanistan in 1989 as a key moment in the Taliban's rise to power there. Even in these proud avowals of U.S. empire, though, one can read the disavowals of imperial power that have always characterized U.S. imperialism. In *The New York Times Magazine*, Michael Ignatieff defended the U.S.'s twenty-first century imperialism as an enlightened, democratic "empire lite, a global hegemony whose grace notes are free markets, human rights and democracy, enforced by the most awesome military power the world has ever known." Ignatieff depicts the U.S. as a reluctant imperial power weighed down by this democratic and lightweight empire: empire is a "burden" the nation reluctantly takes up, having "inherited a world scarred . . . by the failures of empires past," from whose numbers the U.S. can be safely excluded (Ignatieff). Thus U.S. military incursions into Afghanistan and Iraq both display and depart from the U.S.'s inherent and natural place as democratic exemplar and leader. This role gave the post-cold war neoconservative narrative a new chapter and perhaps an endpoint. For these defenders of U.S. imperialism, the post-cold war era was over, and a new American Century could begin. Where the neoliberal narrative could incorporate the wars as hiccups—or even opportunities—in an eternal present of borderless consumerism, the neoconservative narrative understood these wars as a turning point that turned backwards towards a world of clearly-defined nations and great powers.

At the same time as the triumphalists were working out their vision of a new world order, scholars in different fields were developing new analyses of U.S. imperialism that worked

against this triumphal notion of empire. These analyses have been supplemented lately by discussions of U.S. imperialism that, while resisting the exceptional empire thesis, take notice of how neoliberal forms of economic globalization are shaping empire. 1993 marked the publication of Amy Kaplan and Donald E. Pease's immensely influential collection *Cultures of U.S. Imperialism* and Edward Said's *Culture and Imperialism*, both of which emphasize the role of American exceptionalism in the shape of and the scholarly work on U.S. imperialism.¹⁶ *Cultures of U.S. Imperialism*, building on the work of historians such as William Appleman Williams and Walter LeFeber, posited that American Studies, like the larger U.S., operated on what Pease would later term "structures of disavowal" around questions of imperialism. These structures of disavowal, in which the U.S. creates "states of exception" that exempt it from the rules it applies to other states, can be clearly seen in Ignatieff's defense of American empire. Through structures of disavowal, the U.S. can both pursue imperial aims and condemn empire-building. And it is precisely these structures of disavowal that the works studied in this dissertation seek to undo, by linking, as Jessica Hagedorn and Junot Díaz do, U.S. interventions in the Philippines and Dominican Republic with the imperial ambitions of Spain and Japan and colonial models of racial classification.

The acceleration of globalization that accompanied the cold war's end paved the way for changes in geopolitical conditions and the thinking of those conditions. One of the most widely-discussed examples is Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri's *Empire*, published in 2000, which offered seemingly new answers to these questions by proclaiming the death of nations as imperial powers and charting the rise of a new type of imperialism they call "empire." This new

¹⁶ In his introduction to *Cultures of U.S. Imperialism*, Pease foregrounds the historical moment in which the book was published, contextualizing the new perspectives being brought to the history of U.S. imperialism within the triangulation of the end of the cold war, the Persian Gulf war, and debates over the quincentennial celebration of Christopher Columbus's arrival in the New World ("New Perspectives" 22).

empire is a juridical and economic configuration in which the laws of empire are no longer derived from political formations such as national governments but from the desires of capitalist expansion. Traditional imperialism, defined by Hardt and Negri as largely a European endeavor in which nations competed to claim and rule over peripheral territories, is now over, the power of nation-states withered: “no nation-state can today form the center of an imperialist project” (xiv). What they call “empire” is a “global order” that regulates “the global market and global circuits of production” (xi). Within this system, the U.S. holds a privileged position, but cannot be said to control empire. Indeed, empire governs nations as well as people and national and transnational political and economic processes. In a world made “smooth” by the disappearing—in importance, if not in fact—of borders, there is no being inside or outside of a specific empire, only the borderless empire that governs people, transactions, and nations. Hardt and Negri’s vision of empire is borne out, at least in part, by the ever-mounting ascendancy of the market after the cold war. A decade after *Empire*’s publication, global capital’s emancipation from the nation-state can be seen in the way multinational companies such as Google and Apple manipulate tax laws in different countries to avoid paying taxes in any country. Free-market fundamentalists have long envisioned an independent order of production and consumption; in 1998, a Silicon Valley executive confessed to *The New York Times* that “[p]eople here are not involved in Washington policy because they think the future will be set by technology and market forces alone and eventually there will be a new world order based on electrons and information” (Friedman, “Foreign Affairs”).

However, *Empire*’s argument came under attack on several points: defining imperialism as a European endeavor accorded to the U.S. the sort of exceptionalism that the U.S., in full imperial mode, claims for itself; conceiving empire as Hardt and Negri do masks the crucial

racial aspects of imperialism;¹⁷ and, after the U.S. invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, claiming that the U.S. was not acting imperially was inaccurate.¹⁸ Donald Pease's concerns about Americanists turning away from imperialism and towards globalization could be applied to Hardt and Negri's thesis:

Does not the representation of the US as altogether embedded in economic and global processes turn a blind eye to the exceptions to market regulations that US policy makers have constructed to give the US an economic edge in the global economy? Does not post-exceptionalist American studies also simply ignore the ways in which two of the core tenets of the discourse of American exceptionalism—the rule of law and neoliberal market ideology—have saturated the global processes in which America is embedded? (“Rethinking” 22)

The smooth global order that appears to incorporate the U.S. may, Pease suggests, be a particularly successful manifestation of American exceptionalism. In shifting attention to the grid of global processes, critics still need to examine how global and U.S. processes might be mutually constitutive and reinforcing. John Carlos Rowe suggests that the question is not how contemporary empire might differ from or conform to traditional notions of empire. Instead, he observes that a “dialectical relationship between cultural or free-trade imperialism and military imperialism” has existed throughout the history of European colonial ventures into the New

¹⁷ Malini Johar Schueller, who criticizes the Western-centric orientation of Hardt and Negri's work, argues that “globalization, in its economic, political, and cultural manifestations, is a *different continuation* of an established, raced U.S. imperialism” (*Locating Race* 3). David Harvey suggests that it was a mistake for scholars to allow globalization to eclipse the “more politically-charged” categories of imperialism and neocolonialism as sites of critique (*Spaces* 13). Michael Rustin criticizes Hardt and Negri's inattention to the “darker possibilities of Empire.” The instability, fear, and anxiety that Rustin sees as capitalism's byproduct is just as likely, or perhaps more likely, to lead to increased warfare and repression than to global proletarian resistance (16).

¹⁸ For example, Donald Pease observes that with the start of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, the belief that after the cold war the U.S. saw itself as embedded within and connected to the rest of the world seemed “delusory” (“Rethinking” 22). Gopal Balakrishnan suggests that some of what might be seen as *Empire's* blind spots can be attributed to its historical moment, when transnational institutions such as the UN appeared to gain power after the cold war, but were later undermined by the U.S. when it unilaterally launched a “preemptive” war against Iraq (xii).

World and American imperialism (“Culture” 582). For Rowe, what is called traditional or high imperialism always shared the new imperialism’s market bent, and an exclusive focus on technologies and markets may obscure continuities in the shape of empire.

A more interesting approach to U.S. imperialism has arisen around the economics of imperialism, particularly the relationship between economics and race, bridging exploitative practices within and outside the U.S. A recent issue of *American Quarterly*, dedicated to understanding the ongoing subprime crisis through the “dual lens of race and empire,” is a good example of this (Banet-Weiser vi). What Hardt and Negri’s formulation and the responses it elicited suggest is the critical but difficult to conceptualize nature of global neoliberalism that defines, although it does not wholly constitute, contemporary imperialism. Its processes and effects often travel the traditional routes of colonialism, but its actors are largely global elites and transnational institutions that appear to not be rooted in any nation-state, though the U.S. often plays an outsized role in these institutions.

Other critics see the shape of contemporary empire as entirely consistent with older forms of imperialism.¹⁹ David Harvey argues that the neoliberal economic order that forms the basis of empire develops along the lines of center and periphery, citing the experiments with privatization and flat taxes by the Coalition Provisional Authority in Iraq as contemporary examples of “a brutal experiment carried out in the periphery [becoming] a model for the formulation of policies in the centre” (*Brief History* 9).²⁰ Bucking the claim that the end of the cold war freed previously undeveloped countries to enter the global marketplace on an equal footing, Noam Chomsky argues that, although the end of the cold war realigned international relationships, it did little to change the major division of power, the North-South split. Relationships between the global

¹⁹ Not that the “older forms” have entirely disappeared. For example, the U.S. still holds the Mariana Islands.

²⁰ Bernstein also cites the U.S.’s actions in Iraq, where the U.S. wrote contracts giving U.S. companies the exclusive rights to build phone networks, as a form of imperial protectionism.

south and the global north “have deep roots in the colonial era,” and their contours and transactions remained essentially colonial throughout and after the cold war (Chomsky 137). Panitich and Gindin identify U.S. imperialism as the primary driving force behind global markets. They agree with Hardt and Negri that the theory of imperialism based on competition between empires is outdated, but they take issue with the contention that no nation state controls an empire any longer: this idea is “bizarrely out of sync with the times”; what is needed is an explanation of how “the American empire incorporated its capitalist rivals and how this was related to the establishment of a truly global capitalism” (24).

Military force also still undergirds U.S. imperialism in the post–cold war. Chalmers Johnson describes the “archipelago” of U.S. military bases around the world, and their accompanying zones of exception to the laws of the countries in which they are based, as an imperial “juggernaut” (*Sorrows* 4). Where some critics see U.S. military imperialism as having receded after the cold war only to be reasserted after 9/11, Johnson documents how this military force was maintained throughout the post–cold war period. Similarly, Bernstein argues that the U.S.’s post 9/11 war machine “contributes to the completion of a multi-decade process by which the Cold War and its aftermath have transformed, indeed deformed, the American political economy itself” through military spending (126). Richard Saull offers an important caveat to theories of empire, particularly of military empire, by considering that empire not only acts but is acted upon. He suggests that the “mediated nature of the US imperium,” that is, its need to rely on local actors with often very different goals than the U.S., means that any discussion of U.S. imperialism must take into account the effects of these local actors on U.S. policy and outcomes (84). As an example, he cites the U.S. arming and supporting throughout the 1980s the Afghani mujahidin that eventually became a recruiting pool for al-Qaeda—the prime contemporary

example of blowback from U.S. imperialism. The notion of blowback depends on a view of empire similar to Saull's, in which the ideologies, motivations, and historical impact of colonial subjects are not erased.

Archival Imagination

In the following chapters, I develop an idea of the archival imagination that bridges history and fiction. Against cold war triumphalism's ahistorical attitude and outright hostility to reassessing the recent past, the works under consideration here share an interest in narrating history, particularly the histories of individual or personal traumas and losses that are inextricably tied to the larger processes of U.S. imperialism. These works continually return to the objects and tropes of historiography—archives, documents, research, footnotes, citation. Archives in particular feature prominently: fictional ones that play a role in the story, such as the collection of Oscar's writing and books that the narrator of *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* assembles and the dead-end newspaper archives that the narrator of *The Last Thing He Wanted* consults; fictional and nonfictional material that make up the structure of the text, such as the newspaper clippings and snippets of speech that appear throughout *Dogeaters*; and the archive that is the text, the way *The Fifth Book of Peace* serves as a repository for documents about peace.

The archival imagination that I identify in these texts draws upon theoretical expositions of archival knowledge that suggest the archive's dual function as a site of authority and of incomplete knowledge that disrupts authority. The power of archives to make history is perhaps most forcefully expressed by Michel Foucault, who identified the archive as the "law of what can be said," the systems that organize statements within and between fields of knowledge (129). Foucault's archive is neither a set of historical artifacts nor a storeroom for artifacts, but a system

that makes possible and organizes the differences between and unities within each set of artifacts and storerooms. Theorists, custodians, and users of more concrete archives also see archives as instituting a certain law by including and excluding objects and yet holding out the promise that the archive can deliver the past in its wholeness. Carolyn Hamilton, Verne Harris, and Graeme Reid remind their readers that “archives are often both documents of exclusion and monuments to particular configurations of power” (9). This is the case whether the archive is bound up in further systems of authority, such as a national archive, or whether its aims are more revolutionary, for example, the archives compiled by Truth and Reconciliation Commissions or, more recently, WikiLeaks. Others emphasize the promise that the archive holds out of being able to know the past in an authentic or embodied way, perhaps to master it (Wallen and Ferguson). This promise of certainty about a past that seems ambiguous, fragmentary, and unknowable draws scholars and non-scholars alike to archives (Dorney). For Foucault, the mistake would be to read a document as a translation “in visible characters [of] thoughts that were formed in some other time and place” instead of as and for the “density of discursive practices, systems that establish statements as events and things” (128). For other theorists of the archive, the mistake is in seeing those thoughts from another time and place as representative of that time and place, a portal into the authentic past. In both cases, the archive acts as an authority whose basis for authority needs to be scrutinized and perhaps challenged.

The archive’s authority derives, as the concerns about inclusion and exclusion suggest, from its organizing function. For the archive “determines that all these things said do not accumulate in an amorphous mass” but are organized on principles of similarity and difference (Foucault 129). Derrida likewise argues that the archive “shelters” (2) within itself its etymological link to authority and organization: “*Arkhe*, we recall, names at once the

commencement and the *commandment*. This name apparently coordinates two principles in one: the principle according to nature or history, *there* where things *commence* . . . but also the principle according to the law . . . *there* where authority, social order are exercised” (1). The commencement and the commandment are similar to Foucault’s law of what can be said, representing the gatekeeping function of the archive. But the commencement also represents an organizing function: in declaring a commencement, the archive institutes some order to history, to what can be said. That the archive functions to set historical borders, origins and endpoints, causes and effects is suggested by Derrida’s posing “the question of the archive”: “But where does the outside commence? This question is the question of the archive. There are undoubtedly no others” (8). On its own, this question does indeed suggest the archive’s enunciative and organizing power: What is outside a particular history or field? How, the archive muses, to sort out and differentiate discourses? Where, more prosaically, does an event begin and end?

However, this is not the only, or *the*, question of the archive. Later on, Derrida proposes several more questions of the archive: “The question of the archive remains the same: What comes first? Even better: Who comes first? And second?” (37). Here, I suggest, Derrida performs, and asks the reader to perform, the archival sorting function. He insists there is one “question of the archive” and then proposes several questions of the archive. The reader can, like the archive, ensure that these questions do not “accumulate endlessly in an amorphous mass . . . but are grouped together in distinct figures” by pointing out that these all could be variations of a question about order and sequence and therefore could be considered the same question (Foucault *Archeology* 129). In order to do so, though, the reader has to decide that questions about space (the outside) and questions about time (first, second) can cohere around a similar principle or under an umbrella term such as “border” or “order.” In short, the reader must

produce a discursive field about the archive, one that must be subject to the law of the archive, in order to assert that the archive makes discursive fields possible. Thus it is that the question of the archive is “an archivable concept of the archive” (Derrida *Archive Fever* 36). Even in analyzing the archive, we are subject (although Foucault argues only partially and unevenly depending on our distance from the archive) to its law.

This demonstration of the law of the archive is important to this dissertation because the texts studied here all evince what could be called a characteristically postmodern suspicion of history and historiography, a suspicion that the law of the archive is working so efficiently that charting a history of U.S. imperialism inevitably replicates structures of domination. They desire to use archives (or the archive) for a purpose that the archive has not determined, a desire articulated by Carolyn Steedman as a different type of archive fever, the anxiety caused by “the myriads of the dead, who all day long . . . pres[s] their concerns upon you” and to whom one can never do justice (17). This description of the necessarily unsatisfiable claims that an archive makes reflects on the projects of recovery and reconstruction that Didion’s, Díaz’s, Hagedorn’s, and Kingston’s texts take up. The narrators of *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* and *The Last Thing He Wanted* attempt to do justice to people who are killed and all but erased by imperial violence by reassessing official archives and the traces of their lives. *Dogeaters* tries to witness an accumulating history of U.S. imperialism in the Philippines by lifting from and rearranging archives of that history. Kingston’s archival book tries to reconstruct a history of peace writing that may never have existed. These projects of reconstruction figure and sometimes work through their distrust of the archive, oddly enough, in their use and creation of archives.²¹ Díaz’s and Didion’s characters find something like a resolution (or as close to a

²¹ In this way, these texts imagine the archive as a site of ambiguity, similar to the colonial archives Laura Ann Stoler describes, where authority can be shown to be incomplete.

resolution as these novels allow) within the archives. Hagedorn and Kingston borrow the style of the archive to tell a story that has no archive, collected history, or genealogy—for Hagedorn, a story of the ways imperialism lodges and reproduces itself in individual’s lives and memories, for Kingston, a story of remaking war culture into a culture of peace.

The following chapters are organized around each text’s use of the archive to launch an analysis of contemporary imperialism and the blowback that shadows imperialism. “Blowback,” as Chalmers Johnson explains, was first used by the CIA to describe the unforeseen effects of their covert operations. Johnson applies the term more broadly, to cover the types of blowback that are manifested in more subtle ways, for example in economic competition, or remain invisible and unfold over longer periods of time. The “essence of blowback,” Johnson notes, is that “[e]ven an empire cannot control the long-term effects of its policies” (13). Given how connected the world is, “we are all, in a sense, living in a blowback world,” a point with which Junot Díaz would agree (17). Blowback appears in different forms in the texts considered here, from the plot against the heroine of *The Last Thing He Wanted* to the curse in *Oscar Wao*, to the American officer subjected to the empire’s racial logic in *Dogeaters*, to the fires that ravage Northern California in *The Fifth Book of Peace*. These forms of blowback are not what Johnson calls “straightforward manifestations of blowback” (17). In *The Fifth Book of Peace*, the blowback is imagined; in *The Last Thing He Wanted*, the blowback that kills the heroine is staged by the agents of empire themselves; and in *Dogeaters*, blowback comes in the form of a subtle role reversal whose irony goes unnoticed. Nor is blowback always a straight line between the U.S. and another country: in *Oscar Wao*, the curse circulates endlessly, stinging anyone, and in

The first chapter examines Joan Didion's *The Last Thing He Wanted* as a critique of the ways empire interrupts the very practices of reading and writing that might challenge it. Didion revisits the events that became known as Iran-Contra, and the contemporary U.S. empire they represent, intent on correcting a massive archive of misinterpretations and diversions. These archives represent, Didion suggests, the dreamwork that maintains empire by allowing it to hide in plain sight, a dreamwork perpetuated in post-cold war narratives of the New Economy and American exceptionalism and triumphalism. Dramatizing geopolitical events on an individual level, Didion shows how these narratives invite blowback; here, though, blowback comes from inside the borders of the U.S., as individuals unable to read the signs of empire are destroyed by the U.S.'s imperial ambitions.

The second chapter focuses on Junot Díaz's *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, which proposes that we live in a world made by empire. Drawing a line of descent from the first Europeans arriving in the Americas to the war in Iraq, Díaz suggests that contemporary imperialism is very old indeed. Díaz rewrites cold war and post-cold war narratives of the fall to tell the history of contemporary imperialism. The legacies of imperialism can be found in Díaz's novel in the cycles of violence and exclusion that his characters live; the consequences of imperialism circulate continuously, damaging lives at random. Díaz stages these cycles of violence and exclusion at the level of narrative: writing a history of empire, his narrator negotiates replicating these cycles or finding an alternative way of being with others. For Díaz, that alternative, never completely achieved in the novel, is a notion of relationality that recognizes the ways empire binds us together and allows for a different type of connectivity.

Like Díaz, Jessica Hagedorn is concerned with the effects of a long history of imperialism and the ways that post-cold war globalization narratives deny the reality of

imperialism. In the third chapter, I consider Hagedorn's analysis in *Dogeaters* of the way imperialism routes memory through either a paralyzing nostalgia or conformity to the sunny optimism of globalization. Hagedorn's characters and narrators navigate Marcos-era Manila, with varying levels of connection to politics but surrounded by the evidence of empire in the sex industry that supports the U.S. naval base, the strict racial and class codes, and the military who torture and kill with impunity. The face of contemporary imperialism, Hagedorn suggests, can be found in the collusions among these institutions.

The final chapter moves the dissertation into somewhat different territory. Where the other texts critique imperial wars and violence, Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Fifth Book of Peace* demands that we think peace in order to rework the violent history of imperialism. For Kingston, empire is war culture; her theory of peace seeks an alternative to that culture. Making peace in *The Fifth Book of Peace* is a radically open and encompassing process that stretches across geologic spans of time with a global scope. The book performs this expansiveness by gathering together documents of peace until it is near to bursting, arguing along the way that peace is a state we can work towards inhabiting. This chapter argues that peace is a too rare subject in literary studies and that our field would benefit from heeding Kingston's call to think peace.

These texts turn to the archives to study the intersections of histories of imperialism with individual lives that people would like to imagine are "personal." In an interview, Díaz articulates this particular nexus as an issue of narrative: "Imagine that you have your personal life running across one spectrum, then you suddenly see where history interrupts it or maybe you see a confluence of the two. . . . They form narratives which we deploy, you know, and they deploy us also" ("Fiction Is the Poor Man's Cinema" 905). These intersections can be

harmonious confluences, Díaz suggests, or abrupt interruptions. But these meetings always involve a mutual deployment; we may use history, but history uses us as well. How these authors picture history using us and how they suggest we can make better use of history is the subject of the rest of this dissertation.

CHAPTER ONE

Dreamworks of U.S. Imperialism: Writing the History of Covert Wars in Joan Didion's *The Last Thing He Wanted*

Joan Didion's 1996 novel *The Last Thing He Wanted* investigates the stories that empire tells, as Didion writes in another context, in order to live. *The Last Thing He Wanted* takes on two narratives that authorize and are authorized by contemporary U.S. imperial power: that the U.S. is an exceptional nation, justified in trying to violently shape other nations to its liking, and that the late twentieth-century burgeoning power of the market is liberating. These narratives, Didion, suggests, are more like anti-narratives, reality effects that dissociate the present from the recent past and dissolve responsibility. Of all the writers studied here, Didion is the most explicitly interested in the forms of writing about empire, the narrative techniques that can be used to respond to empire's stories. Her narrative's self-consciousness about its access, or lack thereof, to knowledge acts as an aesthetic device that replicates the obscurity in which the events she describes take place for most U.S. citizens. A deliberately retrospective narrative, *The Last Thing He Wanted* comments on the ways that empire in the post-cold war constitutes how we read (or misread) and write (or fail to write) history.

Written in the post-cold war, the novel looks back on the Iran-Contra scandal, during which the U.S.'s military and economic ambitions met, wrecking havoc under the auspices of spreading democracy. *The Last Thing He Wanted* tells two stories: in 1984, Elena McMahon, a former socialite, becomes involved in one of her father's arms deals and is killed as part of a plot

to influence U.S. policy in Nicaragua.¹ In 1996, the unnamed narrator, a journalist who was acquainted with Elena, struggles to piece together Elena's story, her mysterious decisions and motivations, and the larger geopolitical context of her death. The novel covers two overlapping periods during the cold war's decomposition: the period during the 1980s when the Reagan administration intensified the cold war (particularly in Central America, where the U.S. played a role in coups and wars in Guatemala, El Salvador, Nicaragua, Panama, and Honduras) and the post-cold war period during which the novel was written, when a deliberate amnesia about these coups and wars is taking hold.

Didion's reassessment of Iran-Contra and the Reagan administration's "imperial yearnings" is worked out in the novel through the narrator's desire to do justice to Elena, who is caught up in historical circumstances beyond her control and subsequently forgotten and misconstrued.² One of Didion's targets here is the narrative of American innocence attached to ideas of America exceptionalism, the assumption that Americans are immune to their own empire—that there is no blowback from how the U.S. acts in the world. The plot of *The Last Thing He Wanted*, which revolves around an ordinary American becoming a casualty of U.S. machinations during Iran-Contra, suggests the opposite: that Americans' false sense of innocence and security is not only purchased at the expense of people in other countries but at their own expense as well.

¹ This story may seem improbable, but it does have a basis in history: in 1985, Jesus Garcia claimed to have delivered an airplane loaded with weapons to contra forces in Nicaragua. He told investigators that he had also met with a paramilitary group who wanted to stage an assassination attempt on the U.S. ambassador to Costa Rica and blame the Nicaraguan government (Hamilton and Inouye 106). Didion refers to this incident in *Miami*, her 1987 book of political analysis.

² In *Miami*, Didion describes U.S. interventions in Central and South America and the Caribbean, including Iran-Contra, as the result of various U.S. presidential administrations' "imperial yearnings."

History for an Age of Fracture

Didion locates Iran-Contra within a longer history of U.S. imperialism, “on the far frontiers of the Monroe Doctrine” (10). Positioned within the purview of the Monroe Doctrine, Iran-Contra is not simply part of a broad history of U.S. imperialism (which, of course, predates the Monroe Doctrine) but partakes of the peculiar paradoxes of the Monroe Doctrine, which declared all of the Americas “free and independent,” even as slavery and the genocide of Native Americans continued in the U.S. and even as it reserved to the U.S. the right to impinge on the sovereignty of these “free” states. Gretchen Murphy argues that the Monroe Doctrine represents a set of ideas with “extraordinary flexibility” that can justify any number of actions on the part of the U.S. with a “simple narrative” that “suppresse[s] perceived contradictions between anticolonial revolution and imperialist domination” (2–3). The “simple narratives” in *The Last Thing He Wanted* are exemplified by the post-cold war triumphalism discussed in the introduction to this dissertation and grow out of the juncture of neoliberal policy and U.S. military and imperial actions.³

Historian Daniel Rodgers offers a helpful way to read these narratives, framing them as part of what he calls an “age of fracture.” In the last quarter of the twentieth century, Rodgers argues, the concept of society was “disaggregated”; where intellectuals in the first half of the century analyzed systems of power and social institutions, beginning in the 1970s, discussions of “individuals, contingency, choice” and “fluid and elective” identities dominated in fields from sociology to economics (5). Social networks and institutions did not disappear, but attention and language shifted from “the aggregate aspects of human life” to the individual aspects (6).

Rodgers does not attribute this shift solely to the rise of conservatism (as he observes, those on

³ This confluence is, according to Ashley Dawson and Malini Johar Schueller, the very definition of contemporary imperialism: “It is out of . . . the doctrines of neoliberalism and the U.S. hegemony that implemented it that contemporary imperialism has developed” (11).

the left made use of the language of individual choice and fluid identity in feminist and cultural theory) or the move away from Fordism and towards flexible labor markets. But these ideas “moved first in the arena of economic debate,” inspired by free-market rhetoric and theories that projected individuals, detached from any context, making choices within a self-governing and impersonal market (11). Rodgers attributes the shift to the “process by which the flux and tensions of experience are shaped into mental frames and pictures that, in the end, come to seem themselves natural and inevitable: ingrained in the very logic of things” (9–10). Although Rodgers does not use the term, he is talking about narratives—of society, politics, economy, human life—that reflect and refract phenomena in the language of individual choice rather than the rhetoric of networks of power.⁴ These narratives dominate as the cold war decomposes and provide a key context for understanding Didion’s critique of contemporary U.S. imperialism.

The Last Thing He Wanted analyzes the state of imperialism and history in an age of fracture. Iran-Contra is a geopolitical manifestation of the age of fracture, with its proliferating cast of state and non-state figures, small-time criminals, and anti-Communist crusaders, many of whom were, given the covert and illegal nature of the project, working in an unorganized fashion. History in this era is made, according to the narrator, “exclusively and at random by people like Dick McMahon” (33). Dick McMahon is Elena’s father, an elderly, down-on-his-luck arms dealer who has played a bit role in a string of illicit cold war events. He and his associates, other small-time operators who trade weapons, services, and information on the fringes of political situations, write history—wittingly or not. The large-scale actions of sovereign governments provide the context for history—the National Security Agency and CIA

⁴ It is important to note that Rodgers’ use of the term “fracture” is analytical, not judgmental. Rodgers uses “fracture” to refer to a mode of social analysis, a way of thinking and imagining the world and one’s place in it, not to societal degeneration. It should not be confused, for example, with the “atomization” that Didion decries in her 1968 collection of essays *Slouching Towards Bethlehem*, where “atomization” refers to the fracturing of society by generational and cultural rifts (xiii).

give nonstate actors like Dick McMahon the funding and backing to arm the contras—but it is the Dick McMahons of the world, looking to score a “million dollar payday” or “do a move” that determine the consequences for people like Elena. Echoing Rodgers, Didion shows history being imagined entirely on the micro level, within fluid networks of people who consider themselves private and independent actors: “There are still more people like Dick McMahon around than you might think . . . still doing some business. They remember many situations in which certain fellows show up in the middle of the night asking for something and a couple or three days later these same identical fellows turn up in San Pedro Sula or Santo Domingo or Panama right in the goddamn thick of it” (33). This list of Central American and Caribbean locations, though, reminds us that if U.S. imperial ventures in the 1980s are imagined as diffuse, they are no less imperial for their diffusion; these private operators may write history, but that history is still being written in the language of U.S. imperialism, in places that the U.S. considers under its sway.

Didion first begins to theorize making history this way in *Democracy*, her 1984 novel about the fraying of U.S. imperial ambitions in the Pacific. In *Democracy*, hypocritical politicians imagine they are deploying narratives of democracy, even as those narratives are written and rewritten by war profiteers. Yet between 1984 and 1996—between, that is, the cold war and its declared end—there is also a shift in how Didion’s reader is positioned to see those with the authority to create narratives and hence history. *Democracy*’s main war profiteer, Jack Lovett, is a shadowy figure who works with government agencies and independently to build a “phantom business” out of the war in Vietnam; for Jack, war is “a specifically commercial enterprise” (159). Yet Didion presents Jack as an admirably deft manipulator of history and even something of a romantic hero. As Timothy Parrish argues, Jack acts as Didion’s foil in

Democracy precisely because he rewrites the narrative of democracy so effectively towards his own ends (181–82). Jack always seems to be one step ahead of the other characters and his phantom business remains a phantom, a mysterious enterprise in which he is aligned with powerful military and state figures. He is likewise skillful and adept as a romantic figure, sweeping the heroine, Inez, away and rescuing her daughter. In *The Last Thing He Wanted*, Jack Lovett has been replaced by Treat Morrison and the Dick McMahons of the world. Treat, a State Department diplomat and representative of a traditional center of power, is less than efficient and less than heroic: he misinterprets the situation Elena is involved in and becomes another victim of the plot, unable to help Elena in the end. Although narrative control rests with people like Treat and Dick, for the most part they do not consciously manipulate history; instead, they pursue individual aims that incidentally make history. Dick's associates, Barry Sedlow and Max Epperson, conduct their own phantom businesses, but they are disengaged from the systems of which Jack Lovett is still a part, entering and leaving traditional centers of power at will. Barry explains how he obtains fake invoices for clothing (a non-lethal or humanitarian expense that the U.S. Congress will fund), which he then presents for reimbursement and obtains cash to buy weapons. Deals like this one, Didion implies, are repeated again and again, accumulating into history.

By the time she writes *The Last Thing He Wanted*, Didion has revised the aura of romantic mystery surrounding her bit players, presenting the mechanism of contemporary history as a set of shabby individuals. What happened between the two novels was the end of the cold war: Americans' view of the U.S. as one of the two "poles" supporting numerous other nations began to give way to a vision of a globalized, networked world. With national boundaries seeming to recede in importance and global markets seeming to swell, narratives of a future

detached from any past, a “new economy” that promised a future of infinite technological innovation and global connection, come to the fore. Yet the triumphalist view that the U.S. had won the cold war claims this future for the U.S. These narratives contain an echo of manifest destiny, an image of the U.S. spreading across the globe to countries and regions that have been remade by American technology—this time, the frontier will come already “pacified” and Americanized. In this context, ugly events like Iran-Contra, the narrator tells us, embody “a time and a place... about which, ultimately, most people preferred not to know” (13).

Didion suggests that it is not just how historical narratives are generated but how they are read that makes history. Reading history in an age of fracture is hampered by the residue of triumphalism—the sense that when the U.S. declared itself victorious in the cold war, all of the previous decades’ events and damage crumbled and blew away—and a type of imperialism increasingly shaped by the ideology of neoliberalism. Didion’s characters are, for the most part, poor readers of history and of the present—either deliberately amnesiac, insisting that the past has no place in the present, or unable to make sense of the connections between events that might yield some understanding of their place in the world or their role in geopolitical developments. The former, the amnesiacs, are largely those whose job depends on their refusing to look too deeply into the past. Mark Berquist, the senatorial aide who helps set up Elena, is suspicious of any attempt to revisit the past. When questioned about the circumstances of her death, he evades the question because “[t]o bring up 1984 implied that the past had consequences, which *in situ* was not seen as a useful approach” (211). Treat Morrison likewise believes that “events, for better or for worse, speak for themselves, work as it were towards their own ends.” (45) Elena’s ex-husband proffers a slightly different version of this resistance to revisiting the recent past when he suggests that because he was not able to witness events first hand, he cannot entertain

any interpretation of them (122). These cold war-era power players who are committed to not revisiting the past or questioning their actions represent a strand of post-cold war thinking that the narrator has to work against in her attempt to “reconstruct” what happened to Elena and “correct” and “revise” the historical record (13).

The latter group, those who fail to read connections, are, Didion suggests, poor students of history but good students of empire. If contemporary U.S. imperialism is increasingly defined by neoliberal ideology, in *The Last Thing He Wanted*, neoliberalism’s favored sector, finance, plays a key role in how people read, or fail to read, the past and present. As Rodgers suggests, in an age of fracture, narrative—or anti-narrative—takes shape in the economic sphere. *The Last Thing He Wanted* begins not with a scene of political intrigue, as might be expected, but with a description of an economy in collapse, presumably during the Savings and Loan crisis that came to a head in the late 1980s. Didion frames her story of late-cold war global maneuvering with a glimpse into the financial sector that rose to prominence as the cold war decomposed, what Saskia Sassen calls “one of the most brutal economic phases of the modern era” (53):⁵

Some real things have happened lately. For a while, we felt rich and then we didn’t. For a while we thought time was money, find the time and the money comes with it. Make money for example by flying the Concorde.... Somewhere ... we were dropping cargo.... losing infrastructure.... Weightlessness seemed at the time the safer mode.... the mode in which we could beat both the clock and affect itself, but.... I see now that the clock was ticking. I see now that we were experiencing not weightlessness but what is interestingly described on page 1513 of the Merck Manual (Fifteenth Edition) as a sustained reactive depression, a

⁵ This brutality derives, Sassen argues, from the “older histories of economic violence [that] re-emerged with renewed vigor” in the 1980s and 1990s in the form of “the most complex financial system the world has ever seen and a vast expansion of primitive accumulation” (52).

bereavement reaction to the leaving of familiar environments.... the environment we were leaving was that of feeling rich. I see now that there will be no Resolution Trust to do the workout on this particular default, but I did not see it then.

Not that I shouldn't have.

There were hints all along, clues we should have registered, processed, sifted for their application to the general condition. (12)

The references to “weightlessness” here allude to the weightless economy (also called the “new economy” or “information economy”) based on organizing and distributing information and information system that, during the 1990s, was hailed as the next stage of global capitalism. This economy is, in some essential ways, a textual one: it involves, as one economist described it, “locat[ing] and juxtapos[ing] critical pieces of information . . . organis[ing] understanding into forms that others will demand” (Quah). But if this is a textual economy, it is not a narrative economy. The weightless economy described in *The Last Thing He Wanted* is in fact profoundly anti-narrative; instead of producing understanding, it “organizes understanding”—manipulates and reshapes it—to create a new, in-demand product. Weightlessness, the ideal state of technocapitalism, presents itself as a form of security against loss, all the while obscuring the processes of loss that bridge “feeling rich” and suddenly not feeling rich.⁶

This is an economy characterized by misreading, in which details never add up to a recognizable story. Didion suggests that contemporary empire operates by uncoupling detail and story: it disrupts narrative and produces subjects who cannot recognize its signs. People within

⁶ This might remind us of the main character in Don DeLillo’s *Cosmopolis*, who is waiting for money to “lose its narrative quality” and wants to believe that he buys the exact same car that every other financier owns because it is “a platonic replica, weightless for all its size, less an object than an idea,” but who knows that what he really likes about the car is its weight: “it is a “tremendous mutant thing that stood astride every argument against it” (10).

this economy are unable to read its signals, believing despite the visible evidence of collapse that they are wealthy and becoming wealthier, that limitless wealth is being created out of thin air by spending money on luxury items. Clues are available, but they are uncoupled from the “general condition”; instead of acting as clues to, or details of, a larger story, they act as discrete phenomena. Thus even as the participants experience the psychological effects of loss, they remain unconvinced that they are losing anything.⁷ Didion’s interest in reading for connections has led some critics to claim she has a “conspiratorial view of history” (Kakutani).⁸ But as I discuss later, Didion is actually critical of the conspiratorial view of history, in which history only ever adds up to the same thing. Indeed, that way of reading seems as flawed as reading details outside of any context or network of meaning.

The participants in this economy are given a sense of agency that the narrator only later realizes they never had. The enabling fantasy of this economy is that loss is gain: what is being lost appears to have been willingly thrown away, “cargo” dropped in anticipation of some payoff. They imagine they can “beat the clock,” only later realizing that time was passing despite their efforts. This fantasy, though, is also a “real thing,” an infrastructure that allows its inhabitants to imagine they are part of a vast, weightless network but able to act effectively as individuals. In effect, they can believe they are like the Dick McMahons of the world, writing history. Didion draws a connection between the blinkered participants in this economy and Elena, who does not realize at first that she is being pulled into a geopolitical conflict. One of the key clues to the economic collapse is the “unfinished but already bankrupt Gateway Airport Tower” in St. Louis, “its boutiques boarded up, its oyster bar shuttered” (2). When Elena is

⁷ John Xiros Cooper contends that this is the way the modern market works, organizing “the fundamental forms of our existence” (11).

⁸ Samuel Cohen makes a similar argument, reading *The Last Thing He Wanted* as a more conspiratorially-minded novel than *Democracy*.

transported to the unnamed island where she is killed, the airport is described in similar terms: “Gate after gate was unlit. The moving sidewalks were not moving, the baggage carousels were silent. Metal grilles had been lowered over the doors to the coffee bars and concessions” (110). The echo between the two boarded-up airports suggests that the political situation that Elena walks into and the state of U.S. empire both obscure and sever narrative patterns; the subjects being formed by empire are ideally positioned to not recognize its workings.

Didion here engages theorists of neoliberalism, such as Wendy Brown, who argues that neoliberalism is not just an economic theory or set of policies but an ideology that shapes subjects and social relations. Brown refers to the “rationality” of neoliberalism as “not only or even primarily focused on the economy; rather it involves extending and disseminating market values to all institutions and social action” (7). Aiming deeper and broader than the creation of a market-focused economy, neoliberalism consolidates itself by constructing ideas of the self and society that support a market economy. For Brown and David Harvey, the key tenet of this construction is the individual as a self-managing entrepreneur, one who freely chooses (wisely for the successful and unwisely for the less successful) among options to realize their ambitions.⁹ As Brown argues, this gives people a sense of agency even as it mandates a political passivity—protesting or trying to change these options is not itself an option, since being unable to work within the choices presented is a failure of self-management. The political passivity Brown describes manifests itself in this scene as an inability to read history; focused on their individual choices, these denizens of Reaganomics cannot put the “clues” together. Didion shows that the self-managed individual making the right choices (buying stock in this or that company, flying

⁹ Harvey argues that neoliberalism was able to entrench itself so thoroughly in the U.S. in part by aligning itself with the language of individual freedom, which has broad cultural resonance. Lisa Duggan argues more specifically that “[d]uring every phase, the construction of neoliberal politics and policy in the U.S. has relied on identity and cultural politics” (xii). The cultural agenda of neoliberalism, its ability to make and remake its subjects, is foundational to its success.

on the Concorde) is a dreamwork—a story that allows the system to work, that allows someone somewhere to make money without disturbing the dream that everyone is making money.

Narrative and Anti-Narrative

In this context, Didion insists on narrative as the art of making connections. For Didion, narrative “illuminates”—or it should—and it illuminates by proliferating potential interpretations and answers.¹⁰ Thus the narrator’s task is to provide the “logical connections [that] seemed to be missing” in Elena’s decision to get involved in illegally selling weapons and then remain on the island knowing that she is likely in danger (12). The narrator wants, she says, “the connections to materialize for you as they eventually did for me,” to understand “what ‘changed’ her, what ‘motivated’ her, what made her do it” (6, 75). However, the novel never arrives at a definitive answer, instead generating multiple explanations: perhaps she was committed to carrying out her father’s last wishes, a late attempt to right her relationship with her parents; perhaps what she did in 1984 was similar to what she had always done in past crises—adapt to her environment; perhaps it was, instead, uncharacteristic for a “survivor” like Elena, a sign of a trauma or a deep change in her personality; perhaps Elena simply “went feral” when she realized that she was being targeted and believed she was protecting her family (121). The narrator spends roughly the first third of the novel trying to find a starting point for her story, knowing that wherever she chooses to start will implicitly suggest a motivation for Elena:

If I could believe (as convention tells us) that character is destiny and the past prologue et cetera, I might begin the story of what happened to Elena McMahon during the summer of 1984 at some earlier point . . . in, say, 1964, the year during

¹⁰ I use “illuminating” here because Didion uses that word in both *The Last Thing He Wanted* and *Salvador* to describe stories that produce knowledge. As I discuss later, in *Salvador* Didion faces what she calls a “true *noche obscura*” (dark night), a situation that she thinks cannot be narrated, and she opposes that true darkness to stories that can be “illuminated,” that is, stories that can produce some knowledge about events (36).

which Elena McMahon lost her scholarship to the University of Nevada and within a week invented herself as a reporter for the Los Angeles *Herald Examiner*. . . . [or] in 1968, the year during which . . . Elena McMahon met Wynn Janklow . . . and... reinvented herself as his wife.

Crucible events. . . .

The character they reveal is that of a survivor.

Since what happened to Elena McMahon during the summer of 1984 had notably little to do with surviving, let me begin where she would begin.

The night she walked off the 1984 campaign.

You will notice that participants in disasters typically locate the “beginning” of the disaster at a point suggesting their own control over events. A plane crash retold will begin not with the pressure system over the Central Pacific that caused the instability over the Gulf that caused the wind shear at DFW but at some manageable human intersect, with for example the “funny feeling” ignored at breakfast. . . .

We all prefer the magical explanation. (14-15)

The starting points could, presumably, continue accumulating, since any moment in Elena’s life or even her parents’ lives (the narrator later suggests Dick McMahon’s involvement with a plot to assassinate Fidel Castro as another starting point) might provide a clue to her later behavior. The narrator’s favored beginning would be a contingent event entirely outside Elena’s control, something comparable to wind shears, which widens the possible explanations almost infinitely. The potential stories keep multiplying when the narrator later builds a theory about Elena around the “survivor” moments that she rejects here as irrelevant. The narrator posits that “[a]ll that

reinvention ...cost her something”—namely, memory (154). To reinvent herself, Elena had to keep what she knew about her father’s work “just outside the frame of what she remembered,” so when she needs that knowledge, she is unable to recall it (155). The ever-narrowing frame of Elena’s life, the narrator suggests, eventually might have hollowed her out and made her vulnerable to situations like this one. What looks in 1964 and 1968 like a survivor mentality has, by 1984, come to be a possible vulnerability. Any one of these moments, it seems, could tell multiple stories about Elena.

These infinitely multiplying possibilities stand in contrast to the narrator’s desire for a clear starting point. Didion, though, suggests that this desire is a trap and dismantles the notion of approaching history in a “straight” fashion. Didion advances this argument by introducing a fissure between the novel and the narrator; the narrator’s investment (or partial investment) in realist modes of writing make her uncomfortable with the novel’s style. This fissure is all the more striking because the narrators of Didion’s novels are often assumed to be simply versions of Joan Didion. Reviews of *The Last Thing He Wanted*, for the most part, tend to make this assumption, and it is easy to see why: the narrator of *The Last Thing He Wanted* sounds and seems to think a great deal like the narrators of *Democracy* and *A Book of Common Prayer* as well as the voice of Didion’s nonfiction.¹¹ However, the narrator of *The Last Thing He Wanted* is somewhat different, as is her relationship to the novel. The self-consciousness that characterizes both the narrators of *The Last Thing He Wanted* and *Democracy* has, I think, a different goal: when *Democracy*’s narrator (“Joan Didion”) interrupts her story to reflect on how she is shaping it, she is demonstrating her postmodern *bona fides*, acknowledging the extent to which all stories

¹¹ For example, James Wood writes that “Didion’s narrator tells her story not like a person...but like Joan Didion” (46). Michiko Kakutani notes that the narrator “sounds a lot like Ms. Didion herself,” John Leonard refers to the narrator as “Didion or a ‘not quite omniscient author’ so much like her as to make no difference” (23), and Vivian Gornick simply states that “this narrator is...Joan Didion” (7).

are shaped by writers and narrative structures. When the unnamed narrator of *The Last Thing He Wanted* reflects on her own process of writing and reconstructing history, she tends to signal the opposite: her ambivalence about the textual nature of history and her desire for realist modes of thinking.

The narrator, despite her nonlinear storytelling technique, believes that events can be represented in their true, singular form. Introducing herself, she describes the alias that she considered assuming and then rejected in order to “come at this straight” and “bring my own baggage and unpack it in front of you” (5). Faced with Treat’s equivocations, she decides that he is “fundamentally dishonest,” despite being “scrupulous to a fault about reporting exactly what he believed to be true,” because he is “incapable of seeing the thing straight” (135–36).

Straightness, for the narrator, is the most truthful means of representation, but it is also revealed to be a form of distortion. If the narrator had assumed an alias, she points out, she would also have had to invent a story about how she obtained her information; yet as an unnamed, semi-omniscient narrator, she need not explain herself at all, hardly a more revelatory approach.

Treat’s paradoxical scrupulousness about truth and fundamental dishonesty actually derive from a similar commitment to straightness: he seems scrupulous because he answers all the narrator’s questions objectively, eschewing any hint of personal bias even when describing his family. This very pose of objectivity, though, makes him fundamentally dishonest: he does not distort what he believes to be true, but his certainty that he can see straight and recognize the truth in any situation is itself a type of dishonesty.

The narrator’s commitment to a realist or realistic mode of narrative is likewise shown to be an impossibility. In the long quotation above in which the narrator scrolls through her options for a beginning, she initially rejects the starting points that seem too pat, expressing her desire for

an opening that captures the unmediated contingencies of life. The conventional narratives demand some unattainable consistency in character, and the magical explanation is merely a consoling fantasy. The third option, which locates the origins of a plane crash in the weather, seems by comparison the most realistic, the least indebted to convention or overlaid with wishful thinking. Yet for Elena, caught up in a situation she does not understand, stories about the weather are comforting. Reading the newspaper, she skips stories about the presidential campaign she had been working on, preferring “stories having to do with natural forces, stories about new reef erosion in the Maldives, say, or...unusual movements of wind charted off the coast of Africa” (112). She watches the weather report every day while on the unnamed island: “showers over Romania, a front over Chile, the United States reduced to a system of thunderstorms, the marine layer shallowing out over California, the world beyond this island turning not slowly but at an inexorable meteorological clip, an overview she found soothing” (186). The weather seems soothing precisely because it is out of Elena’s control, a reminder that forces other than the ones she is involved with are moving the earth. In all of these weather stories, however, there is also a “manageable human intersect”: without meteorological technology, no one could chart unusual wind movements or have recourse to explaining that wind shears caused a plane crash. The most realist, straight version of a story is still mediated and can still perform magical thinking.

Moreover, the “straight” version of a story is relatively powerless in this context. Because the dreamwork of imperialism makes empire so difficult to read, it can hide in plain sight, disabling the writer’s seemingly most powerful weapon—exposing falsehood and revealing truth. Imperialism can hide in plain sight, in part, because it produces its own reality that aims to

make events like Iran-Contra seem inevitable. Recalling the “rhetoric of the time,” the narrator recounts some of the stock phrases used to justify Elena’s murder:

In a perfect world we might have perfect choices, in the real world we had real choices, and we made them, and we measured the losses against what might have been the gains.

Real world. . . .

Consider the alternatives: trying to create a context for democracy and maybe getting your hands a little dirty in the process or just opting out, letting the other guy call it. (13)

This rhetoric is saturated with cold-war constructs of “the other guy” and “democracy,” phrases that need no further definition because they are buoyed by the simple narratives of bipolar struggle and the exceptional nature of American democracy. The dreamwork of U.S. exceptionalism does not simply cover up an ugly reality; it constructs a “real world” that only those in the know understand and that stymies any alternatives. Even when the losses and dirty hands are exposed, these simple narratives continue to function as justifications. Didion’s representation of the agents of empire astutely captures their belief that they can make an unchallengeable reality, one to which everyone else is an outsider. Journalist Ron Suskind recounts having a very similar conversation with Karl Rove in which Rove claims that “[w]e’re an empire now, and when we act, we create our own reality. . . . We’re history’s actors . . . all of you, will be left to just study what we do” (qtd. in Ventura, 45). Rove’s interrelated claims to represent an empire and create a reality that only works for insiders is a fantasy of having absolute control over history, but the second Bush administration attempted to enact this fantasy, much as the cold warriors in *The Last Thing He Wanted* do. Because events like Iran-Contra did,

to a certain extent, create their own world, they cannot be usefully approached as though it were a matter of pulling back the curtains to expose the truth.¹²

The narrator's belief in straight telling leads her to the other side of this fantasy of contemporary empire: that one can escape the vicissitudes of history through a certain straightness of perception and representation. When her daughter, working on an eighth-grade essay assignment about "the event, individual, or experience that 'most changed' your life", complains that the expected answer—her best friend's death—did not actually change her life, the narrator responds that all writing tends towards misrepresentation:

I recall explaining that change was merely the convention at hand: I said that while it was true that the telling of a life tended to falsify it, gave it a form it did not intrinsically possess, this was just a fact of writing things down, something we all accepted.

I realized as I was saying this that I no longer did.

I realized that I was increasingly interested only in the technical, in how to lay down the AM-2 aluminum matting for the runway....In the absence of high-capacity wells, can water be effectively treated with tactical erdlators? I give you Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche, 1844-1900: "When man does not have firm, calm lines on the horizon of his life—mountain and forest lines, as it were—then man's most inner will becomes agitated, preoccupied and wistful."

Tactical erdlators have been my mountain and forest lines. (73–74)

¹² Brown suggests that under neoliberalism, "revealed deception, hypocrisies, interlocking directorates, featherbedding, or corruption" have a diminished shock value because neoliberal culture does not define these instances of corruption as inherently wrong. Instead, deception and corruption, once revealed, indicate only a public figure's miscalculation in allowing the wrongdoing to be made public.

Rejecting “writing things down” in favor of “laying down” a runway, the narrator presents the technical as a soothing alternative to narrative, a calming horizon line that contains the ambiguity and open-endedness of stories, a concrete reality that resists the “falsifying” pull of narrative convention. Where the inherent “form” of Elena’s life is frustrating and inaccessible, the technical is non-narrative and can therefore present itself transparently in writing. Yet runways and tactical erdlators are already narrative elements: a few pages earlier, the narrator has presented the technical as the foundation of Elena’s story, the reason that she is pulled into the plot that ends with her death. Elena is taken to the unnamed island “because an alternative infrastructure was already in place: the...runways laid by the 46th Combat Engineers...were already in place. . . .The water purification and delivery systems [tactical erdlators] were already in place. . . .What was also in place was the deal” (69–70). Tactical erdlators and runways comprise the deal that traps Elena: they support base camps for School of the Americas-trained militants who are trying to overthrow the government in Nicaragua.¹³ Runways also provide the narrator’s first clue to what is happening on the unnamed island; she reads a corporate report about a runway being built on the island and surmises that there is a story developing there. Even in this passage, the technical cannot maintain its distance from narrative: as the narrator apotheosizes the technical for its concreteness and immutability, it dissolves into metaphor, into “mountain and forest lines.”

Several of Didion’s other narrators, from both her fiction and her nonfiction, tend to experience similar paralyzing suspicions that narrative is an inadequate historiographic tool, and it is worth exploring those instances here. Near the beginning of *Democracy*, for example, the narrator lists the “things” she “has” on hand to begin her story: a dream about a banana grove

¹³ An interesting side note: during the actual events of Iran-Contra, a runway on Costa Rica, built by a shell company set up by members of a U.S. military advisory group, became a central controversy. The town where it was built is called St. Elena (Hamilton and Inuoye 61–63).

where she “watch[es] the spectrum separate into pure color”; “colors, moisture, heat, enough blue in the air”; and “those pink dawns of which Jack Lovett spoke.” Yet these are phenomenon that “tend to deny the relevance of narrative, which makes them less than ideal images with which to begin a novel” (17). *Salvador*, Didion’s long essay on the civil war in El Salvador, offers an example even closer to home, one taken from another front in U.S. cold-war interventions in Central America. Walking along a main street one night, Didion describes witnessing a group of soldiers forcing a young man into the back of a van and decides that “this was a story that would perhaps not be illuminated at all, that this was perhaps less a ‘story’ than a true *noche obscura* [dark night]” (36).¹⁴ In both of these instances, what resists narrative and therefore resists becoming part of history is something elemental: “pure” color and “true” darkness. Color and darkness are inexplicable and ahistorical; their purity and truth seem derived from their ahistoricity.

Yet darkness in *Salvador* and color in *Democracy* are eventually situated within the history of American imperialism. What appears to be elemental is, in fact, political: the electricity goes off frequently in San Salvador, and, in the evening, “sabotage or habit . . . black[s] out the city” (26). Darkness is, then, a sign of the power wielded by the death squads and their supporters in the government (sabotage), as well as the extent to which daily violence and neglect have caused the city’s infrastructure to crumble (habit). Likewise, the spectrum of colors in the narrator’s dream in *Democracy* links the atomic bomb tests, described by Jack Lovett through the sublime light and pink color that they produce, and Inez’s cryptic explanation for why she stays on in Kuala Lumpur, working with refugees from the Vietnam War: “colors, moisture, heat, enough blue in the air.” To the political strategist Billy Dillon, who cannot

¹⁴ Didion’s reaction is to walk “straight ahead, not wanting to see anything at all,” linking the language of straightness to looking away and not seeing the story.

understand Inez's retreat from public life, these are not reasons, but reasonless description, antinarrative matter. Yet Inez's list, the pink dawns Jack romanticizes, and the spectrum of pure color that appears to be a senseless feature of a dreamscape are very much part of a story.¹⁵ That story ranges from the U.S.'s developing and using an atomic bomb during the second World War to the aftermath of the Vietnam War and the refugees whom the Billy Dillons of the world would prefer to forget but who will be, as the narrator points out, suffering the consequences of the U.S.'s ambitions in Southeast Asia for years to come (232). Color in *Democracy* is shorthand for the violence of U.S. imperialism in the twentieth-century; in this sense, it is an ideal image with which to begin a story of that imperialism.

In presenting these elements and moments as anti-narrative and allowing their historicity to emerge only gradually, Didion focuses attention on the ways that empire can resist being recognized as such. In *Democracy*, where U.S. imperial ambitions are both embodied and masked by the haze of "innocent" exceptionalism and romance surrounding the Christian family and Jack Lovett, those ambitions appear as dreamy, aesthetically-tuned details. In *Salvador*, where the war and the U.S. role in it is an impenetrable morass of horror, of mass graves and daily terror, those ambitions are represented by darkness. In *The Last Thing He Wanted*, Didion's choice of "technical" is telling, for it directs our attention to the contexts in and about which Didion is writing. What could be a more apt metaphor for an age of fracture than technologies that serve a function and have a history, but which appear to be unconnected and contextless, as elemental as color or darkness?¹⁶

¹⁵ In an interview with *Paris Review*, Didion states that she sees these events as part of an unbroken narrative line: "When the book [*Democracy*] came out, some people wondered why it began with the bomb tests in the Pacific, but I think those bomb tests formed a straight line to pushing the helicopters off the aircraft carriers when we were abandoning Saigon" ("The Art of Nonfiction" 79).

In *The Last Thing He Wanted*, the technical facilitates the dreamwork of U.S. imperialism by holding out the promise of being able to escape history and the responsibilities it entails, evade blowback, and instead anticipate a future disconnected from and unresponsive to the claims of the past. This promise is based on the technical's negotiation of two meanings: the technical is, in the narrator's view, the concrete stuff of which history is made—the water purifiers and runways, as opposed to squishy narratives. But “technical” also denotes that which is only by a certain convention allowed to occupy the realm of the real, that which is only “technically” correct or true. In the first sense (concrete stuff), as I demonstrate above, the technical figures the escape from history as and through an escape from narrative—the very thing that draws the narrator to the technical. It is precisely history that the characters in Didion's novel want to and believe that they can escape: those in power, like Mark Berquist, believe that the past has no consequences because he can “file and forget” with the close of each legislative session (211). Elena tries to dissociate herself from her family history, “reinventing” herself, only to be swallowed up by the very life she tries to leave behind. Appearing to be unconnected and contextless, the technical facilitates the sort of disconnected reading that allows an economy to collapse without people noticing. The runways and water purification systems that can be used to develop a war, plot a murder, and influence public policy are fragmentary clues that might be put together to discern a larger narrative, but they need not be put together. Indeed, this technical equipment can appear to be an alternative to putting clues together.¹⁷

¹⁶ The technical here, although it describes military technology, is not the same as technology. See Christian Parenti for more on the imperial fantasies founded on military technology, what he calls “capitalist culture's perennial technology fetish” (89).

¹⁷ During the 1990s, “technical” developed another meaning, referring to the small trucks fitted out with machine guns that were used in the civil war in Somalia. The name supposedly derives from the technical assistance grants that were used to purchase them (Somaiya).

In the second sense (“technically” correct or true), the technical is a means of denying responsibility, one of the objects of Didion’s critique. The people who make history, Didion suggests, are often insulated from its consequences. This valence of the technical encompasses plausible deniability, the iconic quasi-legal loophole that allowed Ronald Reagan to deny any knowledge of Iran-Contra (for a time, at least). Didion’s history-makers, who move from Angola to El Salvador to Nicaragua creating and profiting from instability and violence, continue to do so after Elena is dead, continue feeding on the U.S. cold-war plans for containing and restructuring other countries and the reserves of cash that come along with those plans. The senators and State Department and military officials who distribute the cash are unaffected by the outcome of this one plan and move on to other projects. They are unscathed in part because they exercise the technical aspects of language: while some people deny outright that weapons are being sent from the U.S. to the contras, “other people in Washington...more careful people ... people ... who did not intend to perjure themselves when the hearings rolled in...said that the flights *could not be* occurring, or *could only be* occurring, *if indeed they were* occurring, outside the range of possible knowledge” (68). The technical, far from being the concrete realm of transparency the narrator hopes, is a fuzzy language that evades responsibility.

However, the technical also evades responsibility by, interestingly enough, appearing to be more narrative than it is and therefore more accountable than it is. In *Salvador*, Didion evokes the technical’s amnesiac dimensions when describing lists of cars and weapons that may have been involved in murders: “These are the details—the models and color of armored vehicles, the makes and calibers of weapons, the particular methods of dismemberment and decapitation used in particular instances—on which the visitor to Salvador learns immediately to concentrate, to the exclusion of past or future concerns, as in a prolonged amnesiac fugue” (14). These technical

details, like the construction equipment in *The Last Thing He Wanted*, are concrete, something among the evasions, silences, and misleading language of the war that can be grasped. Unlike the technical in *The Last Thing He Wanted*, however, these details suggest a story about who committed the crime and how they will be brought to justice. Yet focusing on the technical in *Salvador* is still a form of willed oblivion: these details, although they might seem important for identifying the murderers, will never be used to identify or prosecute anyone. In fact, an exclusive focus on these technical details only shores up the illusion that the Salvadorian military is not committing or supporting these atrocities: “These counts are presented in a kind of tortured code that fails to obscure what is taken for granted in El Salvador, that government forces do most of the killing” (15). The story that the technical tells is that there is no story; or, more precisely, that there is a story to which no one need to attend. Both the perpetrators and those tasked with investigating and documenting the crimes are let off the hook. Even in its narrative mode, the technical works to produce a “fugue,” a state outside memory, much like the “nod” the narrator describes having been in at the beginning of *The Last Thing He Wanted* as the finance markets soured.

The similarity Didion suggests between the “nod” induced by finance capital and the fugue induced by the technical is telling: the technical is a synecdoche of imperialism in the neoliberal age. In *Salvador*, Didion observes the imbrications of these twin pillars of contemporary imperialism, military force and business. The murky official discourse and delusory descriptions of violence and corruption in El Salvador, Didion writes, “signal the presence of the ineffable” (64). But this “ineffable” is not the “unspeakable” of trauma theory; horrors, including dismembered and tortured bodies are a daily, public sight. What is ineffable here is the relentless network of power behind the horrors, the banal business of war, particularly

a war being waged in part from afar, by countries that support the Salvadorian military. The political jargon that strikes Didion most, and that she recognizes from other cold war hot spots—“that favorite from other fronts, ‘pacification’”—is not just the standard obfuscation and lying of corrupt officials but the slick technobabble of the business world: “‘improvement’ and ‘perfection’ and ‘pacification’ derive from another tradition. Language as it is now used in El Salvador is the language of advertising, of persuasion, the product of one or another of the *soluciones* crafted in Washington or Panama or Mexico, which is part of the place’s pervasive obscenity” (64–65). The war is a consumer product, crafted and advertised.

Through the technical, Didion demonstrates one way we become poor readers of imperialism—by turning to the “real world” created by the culture of neoliberalism, where not only is history an unimportant detail but the present is a state of anticipation. The technical functions much like Dick McMahan and his associates: a set of isolated objects that are amenable to and awaiting any number of uses. Those who know what to do with this equipment can insert it into a storyline. To everyone else, it appears as a storyless, inert object. Thus the narrator’s reaction to the technical is to project into the future: “If the AM-2 is laid directly over laterite instead of over plastic membrane seal, how long would we have before base failure results? (How long would we *need* before base failure results was another question, one I left to the Treat Morrisons of this world)” (74). In focusing on the technical, the narrator excludes any questions that might involve retrospection or the projection of complicating factors, such as how much time specific people in specific circumstances might need (note her use of “we,” as though the technical has brought her into complicity with the people who built the runway). The technical simplifies anticipation, allowing her to make calculations—to project a future—without reference to context, to the present, or to the past. Not by accident does the narrator single out

tactical erdlators as her “mountain and forest lines”—tactical erdlators are portable water purification systems. Here, tactical erdlators purify time, by creating a horizon or limit around each moment.

This purified time is the time of finance, which distills both the present, ridding it of the past, and the future, ridding it of any sediment that will make it unlike the present. The investors described at the beginning of the novel are in a “nod” in which they imagine that the future will resemble the present and therefore are completely surprised by the market crash. Randy Martin argues that finance depends on this purified sense of time: because financial investments are a risk, the concept of risk must be stabilized to a certain extent. The financial sector achieves this apparent stability by projecting the future as a predictable, manageable domain: “Drawing people into this logic of investment requires a new belief in the future: not that it will be unpredictably different, but that it will be calculably the same. The time of investment is now, the future must be lived in the present.” (17) Christopher Nealon identifies this view of time as a development in late twentieth-century economics, which is distinctly “messianic,” focused on “theorizing the future, until the present comes to look insignificant except as its prefiguration” (102). Here, we might be reminded of the way bubbles—the technology bubble of the 1990s, the real estate bubble of the 2000s—recur seemingly without reference to each other; as a new market accelerates, the last crash is already forgotten. We might also think of Jamie Dimon, CEO of J.P. Morgan, testifying in 2010 that he did not realize home prices would not “go up forever,” as though the future could, in defiance of all laws of growth, endlessly replicate the present (Sundby).

Didion’s critique is not aimed at the way finance works to befuddle investors, but at the larger reading and representational practices shaped by imperial culture, in its neoliberal mode.

As the narrator demonstrates, in focusing on the technical, one can look straight at the stuff of empire and not see it as such. The technical, as a representative of neoliberal culture and therefore of the current state of U.S. empire, is a particular type of fetish object. Like Freud's or Marx's fetish object, the technical is imbued with the almost magical ability to escape the past, its historicity is displaced, and it offers itself up as an alternative to the intricacies of Elena's story (in glancing away from Elena's complicated human motivations, the narrator can rest her eyes on the technical). But unlike Freud's fetish, which is a substitute for and eventually replaces the real object of desire, the technical is fetishized precisely because it seems to be the "real" thing, more real than nebulous questions about change and personality. And indeed it is the real thing—the runways and water purification systems are the building blocks of the deal that kills Elena. Yet in looking at it, the narrator loses sight of the connections between the runways and water purification systems and Elena's death; in fact, she looks at it *in order to* lose sight of those connections. This is how contemporary imperialism hides in plain sight, and any attempt to read and represent it, Didion suggests, must take this into account.

The narrator does not actually dwell very long in the realm of the technical, immediately returning to the questions of what changed and motivated Elena. In one of Didion's essays, though, she points out what writing that is trapped in the technical looks like: a history that buttresses power. Taking Bob Woodward's 1987 account of Iran-Contra, *Veil: The Secret Wars of the CIA 1981-1987*, as her example, Didion details how the "preferred Washington view" of Iran-Contra is that it "reflected not a structural problem but a . . . tale of how one man's hubris could have shaken the basically solid foundations of the established order" ("Political Pornography" 212). Journalists like Bob Woodward, Didion argues, contribute to this comforting fiction that divorces political decisions from any system they might support by a focus on the

technical. Woodward's book suggests that "questionable matters will be resolved by the discovery, or by the demonstration that there can be no discovery, of the 'smoking gun,' 'the 'evidence.' Should such narrowly defined 'evidence' be found, he can then be relied upon to demonstrate, 'fairly,' that the only fingerprints on the smoking gun are those of the one bad apple" (214). As an example of narrowly defined evidence in *Veil*, Didion points to Woodward's report that William Casey admitted, from his hospital bed, that he knew about Iran-Contra. Although this revelation created something of a mini-scandal at the time, Didion argues that it hardly mattered since by that time everyone knew that Casey was part of the affair. The type of narrative that Woodward writes, in which he promises a straight look at a piece of "narrowly-defined" evidence, is a type of technical writing—looking straight at the technical and thereby missing or refusing to see the possibilities suggested by the technical.

In the Archives

This narrowing is the logic of the neoliberal imperium, a logic displayed in the archives that the narrator "revises," where possibilities are foreclosed and Elena's death is slotted into stale storylines. None of the archived documents—transcripts of Congressional hearings and FBI interviews, Congressional reports, the archived papers of people involved, newspaper stories, and a Rand Corporation study—are "illuminating," the narrator concludes (10). Some of the archived documents, such as Treat Morrison's papers, are deliberately unrevealing; others rely on explanatory models that are designed to arrive at pre-determined outcomes. The Rand study does not try to understand Elena's actions because of the difficult and indeterminate nature of any possible answer: "because they sensed the possibility of reaching an answer better left on the horizon, [they] allowed this question to remain open, one of several 'still vexing areas left to be further explored by future students of this period'"(162). Stopping short of addressing "vexing

issues” is, in *The Last Thing He Wanted*, one of the Rand Corporation’s specialties; the narrator refers to a forecasting technique developing by Rand called the Delphi Method, in which experts reach consensus on an issue within predefined parameters. This type of thinking reduces dissensus and avoids thinking about vexing issues; indeed, as the narrator points out, although the Delphi Method is intended to predict events, it failed to predict what happened to Elena. The congressional investigators answer the question of why Elena did what she did “like the prosecutors many of them had been, resorting to one of those doubtful scenarios that tend to bypass recognizable human behavior in the rush to prove ‘motive.’ The motive on which the congressional investigators would settle in this instance was ‘greed’” (162–63). Both the Rand study and the congressional report slot Elena’s story into a pre-conceived set of possibilities, the Rand study by foreclosing the question altogether and the congressional report by assimilating it to standard courtroom explanations.

The pockets of conspiracy inhabited by the Dick McMahons of the world operate on a similar logic; however artfully constructed, they lead to one predetermined conclusion. Reflecting on Barry Sedlow’s scheme to fraudulently obtain public funds for weapons, the narrator describes a spectacular but teleological art of storytelling:

Those who understand it are at heart storytellers, weavers of conspiracy just to make the day come alive, and they see it in a flash, comprehend all its turns, get all its possibilities. For anyone who could look at a storefront in Honduras or Costa Rica and see an opportunity to tap into the United States Treasury for \$25, 870, this was a period during which no information could be without interest. Every moment could be seen to connect to every other moment, every act to have

logical if obscure consequences, an unbroken narrative of vivid complexity.

(55–56)

This type of story makes connections (it is, in fact, paranoid in its connection making), but the end never varies—the unbroken and complex narrative is designed to get the money and serves no other purpose. There is no room to generate new interpretations or knowledge; all the turns can be seen in a flash, as though the story appears whole. This is both the structure of conspiracy and the structure of unilluminating narratives, sets of connections dragged down a certain path with no chance of taking on a different shape or arriving at a different end.

In contrast, the novel's proliferating stories and possible explanations for what happened to Elena exist alongside each other, unfolding a narrative that is connective yet indirect. Didion's narrative bears a strong resemblance to another archive: Elena's journal, a historical record that contains within it an archive of evidence. The journal, kept while Elena is still living with her husband in California and covering the period of time when she is being treated for cancer, is a hodge-podge of recipes, scraps of overheard conversations, lists, stray thoughts, quotations from Elena's doctors, and descriptions of Elena's dreams. The narrator is struck by Elena's "peculiar" mixing of "the personal and the reportorial, with no apparent distinction between the two" (148), a statement that could be applied to the novel itself, which archives *Who's Who* entries, newspaper articles and headlines, drafts of an article the narrator is writing, transcripts of Elena's letters, and quotations from official reports. The journal adds to the list of possible explanations for Elena's behavior, referring to her anxiety about her parents and her daughter, her dismal marriage, her sense of not belonging in the wealthy world she inhabits, her illness. As a figure for the novel, the journal suggests that *The Last Thing He Wanted* creates an archive and embodies an archival imagination that aims to generate historical narratives and attitudes that

give rise to multiple possibilities. But the journal's formlessness—its indiscriminate mixing of fragments of different genres— suggests that there is no specific form or technique that necessarily achieves this.

This lack of a necessary form, though, makes for an anxious narrative (and narrator) that cannot claim the authority or confidence of a straight narrative. This narrative anxiety becomes clear in the description of a dream Elena has recorded in her journal, which seems to reflect on the narrative techniques that hold all of this material together. In the dream, Elena has had an unsuccessful operation that she compares to an autopsy; she has been completely cut open and loosely stitched back together, carelessly because “it is agreed” that she will be euthanized in a few days. Her feet “are loosely sewn” and her face “is not on straight.” She obtains a reprieve from her doctor and is “euphoric, relieved but still concerned that [she] cannot be sewn back together properly,” that she will “fall apart while shopping, walking on [her] loose feet” (146–47). The doctor's slicing up and then stitching Elena back together is a figure for what the narrator does: picks over the available pieces of Elena's life and tries to sew them together into something that resembles Elena and mirrors the “intrinsic form” of her life. Like the parts of Elena's story that the narrator attempts to sort into cause and effect but that bleed into each other, Elena's sewn-together body is loosely connected in a number of irregular ways. As the image of a monstrous body that threatens to fall apart at any moment suggests, the narrator is anxious about this slicing and stitching, particularly the stitching. This loose stitching that does not attempt to replicate any original—the face lopsided, the feet held together with “basting”—is a marked contrast to the “unbroken narrative” that Barry Sedlow spins.

Indeed, the narrator reveals her anxiety about containing this multiplicity when she imposes a meaning on the dreams in the journal: “Of course....Elena's dreams were about dying.

Elena's dreams were about getting old. We all know that" (152). But this definitive meaning quickly turns into yet another story about Elena to add to the growing list: we may all know what Elena's dreams were about but "[t]he point is that Elena didn't...Elena remained remote most of all to herself, a clandestine agent who had so successfully compartmentalized her operation as to have lost access to her own cut-outs" (152). The narrator goes on to describe many of Elena's actions as unconscious ones, "decisions that had been made" as opposed to decisions she made (153). In attempting to stem indeterminacy, the narrator adds to it by suggesting that Elena's life, far from having an intrinsic form that can be falsified or captured by her narrative, might be either formless or overly formed. Elena may have acted as her own surgeon/narrator, cutting out parts of her life as she needed to. Instead of sewing them back together, though, Elena has kept them separate and lost track of them. This overly-formed life may only be partially accessible, even to Elena. But the overly-formed life may also be formless, a life that Elena lived unconsciously. The monstrous Elena of the dream, not quite herself and yet not an entirely alien creation, may be the most accurate figure of Elena. What Elena's dream suggests is that to write history or historiographical fiction beyond the nod or the fugue induced by empire is an anxious thing; anxiety may be the sign of a narrative that has not been reduced to technical writing.

The Technical and the War on Terror

I would like to end this chapter by looking at a novel that suggests how the technical is a problem in the age of the war on terror. Didion's trope of the technical turns up in a somewhat different form in Mohsin Hamid's 2007 novel *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, as part of an explicit criticism of the nexus of financial and military force that constitutes U.S. imperialism. In Hamid's novel, the employees at a prestigious valuation company are urged to "focus on the fundamentals" of finance, an echo of religious fundamentalism. Hamid's fundamentals function

much like Didion's technical: they lie at the core of the problem Hamid grapples with—imperialism—but they obscure that problem. Hamid suggests that the confluence of finance and U.S. imperialism is a type of fundamentalism that creates its own reality, narrows narrative and historical possibilities, and denies the importance of everyone who does not share those fundamentals. Changez, a star employee at the valuation company, comes to realize that “finance was a primary means by which American empire exercised its power” (156), a realization that distracts him from the fundamentals. In Manila and Argentina on business, Changez marvels at and is alienated by his colleagues’ “oblivious immersion in the minutiae of our work” (67), their ability to “functio[n] so completely immersed in the structures of [their] professional micro-universe” (145) and take no notice of the people around them or how their work affects those people. The fundamentals they are so absorbed in are the financial models and predictions that Changez realizes lie at the heart of empire, yet these very fundamentals allow Changez’s colleagues to pretend that empire does not exist. They are fundamentalists without knowing it.

The financial world that Hamid depicts believes itself to be the future, the only future, but it is not so much looking to the future as it is insulating itself from the present and from any nonfictional view of the past. Changez’s boss describes the financial sector’s birth from the death of the industrial sector and dismisses the people that Changez is about to put out of work as unnecessary vestiges of a dead world: “When I was in college, . . . the economy was in bad shape. But you could just smell the opportunity. . . . We’re blood brought from some part of the body the species doesn’t need anymore. The tailbone” (96–97). Finance’s existence demands the falling away of everything else: if the lifeblood of the world is being brought to finance, it is because everything else is irrelevant, a vestigial tail. History must also fall away to support empire. Observing the transformation of New York after September 11 into a rigidly patriotic,

flag-draped city, Changez realizes that “America . . . was giving itself over to a dangerous nostalgia,” for a “fictitious” era that contains no place for someone like him (115). Yet this fictional past of racially and culturally homogenous Americans righteously fighting their enemies was, in fact, proclaimed by the media and popular sentiment at the time as the future: the post September 11 world, which was supposedly irreversibly changed, a world defined by and reflecting the U.S.’s exceptional role. When Changez returns to Pakistan and begins to actively protest U.S. actions in the region, we see the blowback that this fundamentalism and its blinkered believers engender.

Hamid’s financial fundamentalists are similar to Elena and the other characters in *The Last Thing He Wanted*, who believe, either consciously or unconsciously, that they can control the course of their lives without having to notice what goes on around them. Elena is one of these American dreamers, recalibrating the frame of her awareness to ignore anything she finds troubling. When she comes into contact with people who not only notice what goes on around them but make a career of manipulating the rest of the world, she is destroyed. Elena’s story dramatizes the extent to which U.S. actions depend on a certain remove among its citizens, a self-imposed “innocence” with respect to the rest of the world that makes them complicit in but also vulnerable to the consequences of these actions. Contemporary imperialism, Didion and Hamid suggest, aims to make fundamentalists of us all.

Didion and Hamid are both critics of post-cold war imperialism, deconstructing the reality effects of neoliberal culture. As this chapter has shown, though, Didion is also concerned with the other side of the Fukuyamian end-of-history narrative I discuss in the introduction: the amnesia about recent history necessary to install the new world order of global capitalism.

Returning to the old world order in the form of Iran-Contra, Didion portrays this narrative as a dreamwork of U.S. imperialism, which is hardly done ordering the world; blowback from U.S. imperialism and cold-war intrigue is unfolding alongside neoliberal culture. Historical closure, and the amnesia and mantle of innocence it seems to make possible, does not protect anyone from this blowback, Didion suggests; indeed, this blinkered approach to history only makes Didion's characters more vulnerable to blowback. Didion's critique is also much more concerned with the role of historical narrative; she gives equal attention to reassessing the Reagan administration's imperial yearnings and reassessing the process of reassessment. Her novel's archival imagination, represented by Elena's journal, is less a model for revising recent history than it is a condemnation of the way that history has been assessed, of both the popular and official archives' intellectual lacunae and the inadequacy of writers' tools for revealing those lacunae.

The Last Thing He Wanted ends, appropriately for a novel wary of historical closure, journalists, and cold warriors, with a reference to an actual *New York Times* article describing a conference reassessing another cold-war turning point: the Cuban Missile Crisis. Hinting at the article's society-pages treatment of the conference, which featured Robert McNamara and Arthur Schlesinger, and its lack of any critical views, the narrator claims that she would have liked to have seen such a reassessment of Elena's death, only in her telling, Elena is still alive. This would, the narrator admits, mean the reassessment would never have been needed, a point that underscores that, for Didion, there is no happy ending or way out of the history of empire. Anything that suggests otherwise is a dreamwork. In the next chapter, I take up Junot Díaz's *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, which also returns to the U.S.'s cold war intrigues in Latin America and criticizes the post-cold war narratives that pass for assessments of those intrigues.

Díaz is likewise critical of happy endings, but unlike Didion, he imagines alternative modes of belonging for his characters, however utopian and incomplete.

CHAPTER TWO

The Long Wondrous Life of Empire: Rerouting the Legacies of Dictatorship in Junot Díaz's *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*

Junot Díaz's vision of contemporary imperialism begins with the claim that imperialism structures the world in which we live. The New World, a term Díaz uses frequently in *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* (hereafter *Oscar Wao*), is both “ground zero” for his story of empire and a metaphor for the new world created by slavery, genocide, war, and dictatorship—the constituent elements of empire. This new world mirrors in some ways Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt's “Empire,” to which there is no outside, yet for Díaz the structures of colonialism and the nation still flourish, and the legacies of centuries of imperialism permeate the present. We became global, Díaz suggests, not in the twentieth century but much earlier, with the first imperial voyages that violently remade the world. The shape of empire now is determined by the legacies of centuries of destruction.

Showing how these legacies function, how they bequeath a sense of not belonging and distance to the inhabitants of this world, is the task of the history Díaz unfolds. *Oscar Wao* tells the story of a Dominican family whose misfortunes begin in 1944, under a repressive, U.S.-backed dictatorship. The novel offers a view of the cold war from its periphery, where the cold war is not even mentioned but is fought and felt. Writing after the invasion of Iraq, Díaz criticizes the history written by people like Francis Fukuyama and Samuel Huntington—centered around imperial powers and only too willing to excise the long history of imperialism that leads up to the present. Writing the history of imperialism requires a broader frame of reference to recognize and represent transnational identity formations, the conflicts of languages as they

move across linguistic borders, and a world system that emerges from and maintains the inequalities of colonial geopolitical configurations. As Díaz points out in an interview, “[y]ou can’t tell the history of the U.S. without the history of the Dominican Republic, and yet people do so all the time” (“Questions”). Díaz tells U.S. and Dominican history through each other, a focus at once local—the historically colonial relationship between the Dominican Republic and the U.S.—and global—the new world born out of the imperial project.¹ The relationality of Díaz’s history, its aim to enmesh histories that appear (and that want to appear) independent, is central to his response to empire. This chapter traces how Díaz responds to the world made by empire with a theory of relational being with others. Díaz unfolds this idea of relation through the story of Yuniór’s narration, how Yuniór negotiates various relationships with Oscar.

Relation

Díaz’s theory of relational being can be productively understood in connection with Édouard Glissant’s theory of relation. Glissant’s relation, based on Giles Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s idea of the rhizome, is a way of being in the world with others in which “each and every identity is extended through a relationship with the Other” (11). Relation is an alternative to “the root,” the figure for a “monolingual,” intolerant, and totalitarian sense of self and other that was established with Western nations (15). Glissant uses images of openness—of the open ocean, of the open boat that he contrasts to a slave ship—to suggest that being in relation with others means being open to others, a “conscious and contradictory experience” of making contact (144). This is not an assimilative embrace, though: instead of sustaining one’s identity by “projecting” that identity outwards through colonial conquest, relation “gives-on-and-with”—it gives, yields along with, rather than “grasps” the other (143–144). Extending one’s identity

¹ This dual focus has helped define *Oscar Wao* as a transnational or world novel. See, for example, Carr, Jay, and Song. The many reviews of *Oscar Wao* and interviews with Díaz following its publication take up versions of this point, often focusing on the novel’s incorporation of English, Dominican Spanish, and Spanglish.

through a relationship with the other in Díaz involves a self-decentering or unrooting, a recalibrating that gives up or sets aside some part of one's sense of identity, leaving one open to contact.²

Glissant's influence on Díaz's work is clear: Díaz quotes Glissant in *Oscar Wao* and has referred to him in interviews. Apart from these explicit connections, Díaz and Glissant share a similar view of Caribbean history. Díaz sees the arrival of Europeans in the Americas as the turning point in Caribbean history; for Glissant, the turning point is specifically the Middle Passage and the many who were killed at sea. For both, the brutality of colonialism called forth a practice and poetics of relation that begins in the Caribbean. Glissant and Díaz refer to the Antilles and the Caribbean often, suggesting that their writing and ideas are not based in one nation but in a shared history. Indeed, for Glissant, the structure of relation echoes the structure of the Caribbean; the sea and the archipelago are key images, with islands confronting one another and the open sea. Díaz implicitly refers to this in an interview when he says that *Oscar Wao* was meant to take the form of the Caribbean and the form of the Caribbean is that of the archipelago:

I'm a product of a fragmented world. Take a brief look at Dominican or Caribbean history and you'll see that the structure of the book [*Oscar Wao*] is more in keeping with the reality of this history than with its most popular myth: that of unity and continuity. In my mind the book was supposed to take the shape of an archipelago; it was supposed to be a textual Caribbean. Shattered and yet somehow holding together, somehow incredibly vibrant and compelling.

(“Questions”)

² Christian Moraru argues that post-cold war American culture is characterized by relationality or “being-in-relation with an other” (3).

The unity of the archipelago is a “holding together,” a different order than the “unity and continuity” of rooted and exclusive formations. The archipelago holds together fragments but does not assimilate them or present them as continuous; it is a geographic rendering of relation. As a “textual Caribbean,” *Oscar Wao* develops a theory of being in the world that is based in the experience and history of the Caribbean, a center that is itself decentered and holding together.

Díaz’s relation is an empathetic pose that acknowledges the persistence of imperialism at every level of life. In *Oscar Wao*, relation is a potential state, necessarily incomplete, something to strive for rather than a fully-developed model that offers an escape from history. The only figure who fully embodies the cosmopolitan hospitality of relation is the mythic Anacaona, the Taino leader who initially attempts to befriend the Spanish conquistadors who kill her. In Díaz’s telling, she addresses the Spanish before she is hanged, asking them to reject violence and “build a bridge of love that our enemies may cross, leaving their footprints for all to see” (244 n29). This invitation to the enemy to cross into familiarity and to leave a trace—an important sign that their differences are not being erased and that their passage may be followed by others—is a manifesto of relation. It is both called out and destroyed by the violence of the imperial encounter: “The Spanish weren’t trying to build no bridges, though.” Anacaona’s death at the hands of those she attempted to introduce to relation is a shadow, a necessary corrective to any exuberant sense that everyone approaches the state of relation equally; at the end of this chapter, I take up how Díaz addresses this shadow.

The World Made by Empire

The story of imperialism that Díaz tells is a story of a fall, one whose reverberations—or blowback—continue to be felt as a curse, the fukú that drives the novel’s action. Curses and falls give Díaz a narrative structure and metaphor for representing five hundred years of imperialism,

particularly its more recent incarnations in the twentieth century. In doing so, Díaz politicizes the mythic, religious structure of falls and curses, giving them a critical edge. In *Oscar Wao*, the original fall and curse for the New World is the arrival of Europeans colonizers, along with African slavery and the genocide of the indigenous populations; this fall gives birth to an infinite number of others falls, especially, in Díaz's novel, for the Cabral family. The arrival of European colonizers in the New World is pictured as a radical break, a moment of destruction and violent creation, when “one world perished and another began” and “a demon [was] drawn into Creation through the nightmare door that was cracked open in the Antilles” (1). Here, Díaz clearly echoes the biblical notion of a fall—the rending of existence, people thrown into a world of pain and misery, and the presence of the demonic. Yet this is not quite a biblical fall since we do not have a picture of what went before, no paradise to which we can hope to return. Díaz presents us with a fall without a prelapsarian state, short-circuiting any longing for an ahistorical, purer, better world. What we have is a world of nightmares, in which our task is remaking, not returning.

This fall into the new world is echoed by the many events that are called falls or “the fall” in the novel. Díaz suggests that these other falls—Trujillo's vendetta against the Cabrals; the end of Oscar's “Golden Age,” the only period of his life during which he is not a social outcast; Oscar's suicide attempts, one of which involves a physical fall; even Beli's decision to drop out of school and become a waitress—must be read in the context of the fall into the new world. Rendering these moments as falls, Díaz asks us to read them as part of the infinite fallout of imperialism, its ability to shape even the most personal aspects of people's lives.

Díaz is at pains to create this long view of imperialism, pointing out the continuity among demonstrations of imperial force. In a parenthetical aside, Yunior characterizes the Iraq war as a

repetition of U.S. invasions of the Dominican Republic: “Santo Domingo was Iraq before Iraq was Iraq” (4). In another submerged note (within parentheses in a footnote), Yunion points out the extent to which this imperial history is effaced: “You didn’t know we were occupied twice in the twentieth century? Don’t worry, when you have kids they won’t know the U.S. occupied Iraq either” (19 n5).³ Díaz’s history makes these connections both implicitly and explicitly, placing U.S. interventions and the reign of Rafael Trujillo, the dictator who for 30 years ruled the Dominican Republic and who plays a large role in the novel, within the context of the “discovery” of the New World. From the Admiral (one of Díaz’s preferred names for Christopher Columbus), there is a line of descent to the Generalissimo (Trujillo) and to the two Capitáns, Ybón’s boyfriend, who kills Oscar, and the Gangster, who is also referred to as “Capitán.”⁴ In using military titles for the Gangster and Ybón’s boyfriend, Díaz suggests that even everyday violence and abuses of power must be read in this context – that the legacy of imperialism can be found not only in extreme instances of violence such as Trujillo’s long and brutal reign or the war in Iraq, but also in the brutality practiced by, and the power given to, people like the Capitáns, Solomon Grundy, and Gorilla Grod.

Díaz history is not fictional: the U.S., under the auspices of the Monroe Doctrine, did help put Trujillo in power during its first invasion of the Dominican Republic, and the U.S. supported his long reign as a bulwark against Communism during the cold war.⁵ The language of

³ Subordinating these references, of course, only draws greater attention to them, but it also replicates the subordination of the events themselves.

⁴ The title reflects Trujillo’s military fetish. Valentina Peguero discusses what she call the “militarization of culture” in the Dominican Republic, which she argues Trujillo expanded to all areas of cultural and personal life. We might compare these military titles to Lola’s nickname for Oscar, Mister, a decidedly civilian title.

⁵ The Dominican Republic spent the first decades of the twentieth century in a state of receivership, with the U.S. controlling its economic resources and backing up its power to do so with displays of military force that culminated in an eight-year military occupation. Trujillo got his start in one of the military academies the U.S. built during this occupation. Although the U.S. government withdrew its support for Trujillo shortly before he was assassinated in

the fall, then, also resonates with the “falls” that take place during the cold war and post-cold war time span of the novel: Saigon, the Berlin Wall, and the World Trade Center. These narratives of the fall enact the nostalgic fantasies that fuel the U.S. imperium, the same fantasies that Díaz rewrites in his story of the fall. With Saigon and the World Trade Center, there is a sense of a paradise lost; with the Berlin Wall, a paradise, or at least a territory, regained and thus a defining enemy lost. The events, imagined as falls, construct a figure that is imagined to be completely other—Communist, Vietnamese, Muslim, Arab—as the cause of the fall, a threat to U.S. triumphalism who must be eliminated. Yuniors makes this connection to cold war discourse explicit: “Now that Reagan and the Evil Empire had ridden off into never-never land, Oscar didn’t dream about the end no more. Only about the Fall” (198). Although the apocalyptic end is always in the future and the fall is always in the past, both tell a story of individual or national redemption that we can read in Oscar’s dreams about the end, which always involve him saving a beautiful woman amid the wreckage of the apocalypse and proving himself a comic-book style hero. These falls are examples of what Tom Engelhardt calls the U.S.’s “victory culture,” in which the U.S. is imagined as a nation of victors threatened by a monolithic other who can be overcome to redeem a glorious national past.

In rewriting these scripts of imperialism, Díaz proposes instead that we are all products of imperialism. Díaz uses the image of *fukú*, the curse of the New World, as a revised model for understanding blowback: where the standard model of blowback moves in one direction, harm goes out from the center and then harm blows back towards the center, Díaz’s version of blowback, represented by *fukú*, circulates endlessly in the world, sometimes working for and

1961, the American military invaded the Dominican Republic once again in 1964 to remove the elected leftist president and help install in office a long line of *Trujillistas* (Trujillo’s old cronies) whose neoliberal economic policies allowed U.S. corporations to benefit from tax-free factory zones. See Moya Pons, Roorda, and Cambeira for detailed histories of the U.S. role in the Dominican Republic.

sometimes working against imperial power.⁶ In Díaz's telling, fukú is the very source of the world we all live in and specifically the source of the "New World": "it is believed that the arrival of Europeans on Hispaniola unleashed the fukú on the world, and we've all been in the shit ever since. Santo Domingo might be fukú's Kilometer Zero, its port of entry, but we are all of us its children, whether we know it or not" (11). As its name, the Curse and Doom of the New World, suggests, fukú is a curse "of" the New World because it both belongs to the New World and is the instrument of the New World's doom. Ushered into being by the violence of the colonial encounter, it sentences the Tainos to death but also signals the resistance of the African slaves that the Spanish brought to Hispaniola. Those split allegiances continue through the long history of imperialism: Christopher Columbus is both fukú's "midwife" and "one of its great European victims" (2). It is never clear whether Trujillo is the curse's servant or its master—fukú gives him power, kills him, and then avenges his death. The quagmire of the Vietnam War is fukú's "small repayment" to the U.S. for invading the Dominican Republic in 1965. But this invasion is also brought about by fukú, Trujillo's posthumous "payback to the pueblo that betrayed him" (2–5). In the world created by empire, anyone may be the target of blowback.

The blowback we suffer, Díaz suggests, is what his characters inherit, what comprises the "shit" that we are all in: the curse of not being understood. The miscommunications, mistranslations, lost manuscripts, and blank pages that appear throughout the novel mark these

⁶ Bruce Robbins is therefore wrong to argue that *Oscar Wao* "paints the world outside America's borders as a place of atocity, subordinates that world to a more or less comforting story-line, and flatters the American destination" (1100). In *Oscar Wao*, there is no part of the world not affected by the atrocities of empire: the U.S. is a violent and racist place where Yunior is assaulted in a scene reminiscent of Oscar and Beli's beatings, Yunior cites historical examples of opponents of Trujillo who left the Dominican Republic only to be tracked down by Trujillo's henchmen, and the de Leon family curse is alive and well in New Jersey. Nor are the borders between nations as easily distinguished as Robbins suggests: the men who kill Oscar are American citizens.

gaps in understanding.⁷ Fukú is itself born out of a lack of understanding: “They say it came from Africa, carried in the screams of the enslaved; that it was the death bane of the Tainos” (1).⁸ Located in the ignored screams of the enslaved and the slaughtered,⁹ fukú is an expression of a complete lack of understanding, a cry that is not heard for what it is, a person whose humanity is not recognized. The world that begins with these cries is one of violent dispossession, the world colonialism created and, as Díaz makes clear, neoimperialism still maintains.

This lack of understanding or empathy aligns with Glissant’s monolingual root. Monolingualism, as Glissant argues, is the foundation of nations, the point around which a national community coheres and expels outsiders; exiles “suffer most” from not being able to communicate, rendered permanent outsiders by not sharing the nation’s “linguistic intransigence” (15). Díaz works with a similar idea here: miscommunication and misunderstanding are the consequence of imperialism’s violence, not only the violence of slavery and genocide, but the violence of consolidating identities along national and racial lines, which always produces exiles. Díaz takes monolingualism to task but defines monolingualism as more than linguistics to include rooted structures of thought and feeling that perpetuate colonialism, tyranny, exclusion, and racism. Oscar, despite speaking both Spanish and English, is

⁷ Díaz’s use of fantasy and science-fiction suggest the resistance of Dominican experience—or, to use the broader frame of reference Díaz does, the history of the Antilles and perhaps the whole of the Americas—to being translated into a non-wondrous narrative history. In an interview with Edwidge Danticat, Diaz argues that science-fiction, fantasy, and horror are a “language that will help you approach our nigh-unbearable historical experiences.”

⁸ The Russian poet Yevgeny Yevtushenko traces a similar history for the word “fukú” in his poem “Fukú” (1987), linking it to Columbus: “It was during the capture of people that the word was born, / that African word fukú. / Fukú is not naïve. / Fukú is a taboo / on a name that has brought misfortune.” (23) Yevtushenko also links the curse of Columbus with contemporary corrupt politicians: “And on a fence. . . / fluttered a torn poster: ‘Everything for the poor!’ / . . . ‘Who’s that guy?’ . . . She covered her lips with a finger . . . / and whispered a strange word: ‘Fukú!’ // . . . ‘Fukú is a name?’ / . . . ‘Just the opposite.’” (13) Alastair Reed offers similar definitions for “fukú” (or “fucú”) and “zafá.” Interestingly, the Japanese word for fortune, specifically good fortune, also translates in English as “fukú.”

⁹ Tainos were the indigenous inhabitants of Hispaniola, the island that is home to both the Dominican Republic and Haiti. Before Columbus’s arrival, there were between several hundred thousand and a million Tainos on the island (Deagan and Cruxent 24). By 1524, they were almost all dead (Rouse 169).

unable to speak in the language of either his Dominican or American peers; he is exiled to the land of science-fiction and fantasy, where he speaks in Elvish (a fictional language from J.R.R. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* novels) and even begins to develop his own language. The characters in *Oscar Wao* come up against these rooted structures of thought and feeling again and again, the curse not only of those scattered throughout the diaspora but of everyone living in the slipstream of empire.

The effects of fukú are continued in Oscar's (and the other characters') relationships to the nation, to the Dominican diaspora, and to the world, relationships characterized by miscommunication. José and Juan, the Chinese-Dominicans who own the restaurant Beli works at as a teenager, later move to the U.S., where their idiom is never understood. Juan, "[i]n later years when he was living in Skokie, Illinois, ... would yell at his Americanized grandchildren in his guttural Spanish, and they laughed at him, thinking it was Chinese" (105). José suffers a similar fate: "he would die in 1976 in Atlanta... crying out his wife's name, which the nurses confused for more Chinese gobbledygook—extra emphasis, in their minds, on the *gook*" (106). Juan and José's background as both Chinese and Dominican becomes, in the context of the U.S., a generalized and incomprehensible foreignness, one influenced by geopolitical events, such as the Vietnam War, that bring people into contact with others but lays no ground for understanding or relation. Beli's scar, which takes up her whole back and recall's Sethe's scar in *Beloved*, is a mark of the abuse and racism she suffers as a child when her adoptive father burns her with hot oil, but her daughter Lola misremembers her story, recounting how Beli was "set on fire" as a child, a very different type of burning. Even Oscar's death involves a near mistranslation. Solomon Grundy and Gorilla Grod offer Oscar a Catch-22: translate the word *fuego* into English, and they will let him go. Unable to help himself, Oscar replies with "fire" and they oblige.

Although translation is a signal part of establishing relation, here it is used against any sense of connection or empathy, forcing Oscar to participate in his own murder and making his death somewhat comical.¹⁰

Oscar's very name is the product of several cultural and linguistic mistranslations—Yunior's friend Melvin is not only unfamiliar with Doctor Who, the television character Oscar is dressed up as for Halloween, he is also unfamiliar with Oscar Wilde (to whom Yunior compares Oscar) and mispronounces his name as “Wao.” The story of Oscar's life is marked, in its very title, by these layers of misunderstanding; he is known forever after as Oscar Wao. Tellingly, when Oscar assures Yunior that he is “copacetic” after a falling out, Yunior mishears the word as “pathetic.” “Everyone,” says Oscar correcting him, “misapprehends me” (145). The exchange, of course, reveals what Yunior really thinks about Oscar. But Yunior fails to hear what Oscar says immediately before this exchange: that no one wants to “hear about” his problems, they only want to “stare” at him. He is misapprehended because instead of listening to him, others, like Yunior, treat him as a spectacle; they project their own perceptions onto him, seeing him as pathetic and insisting that he accept that version of himself, that he answer to that name.

Though Oscar is thus a permanent outsider, in the fukú world that empire built, nearly everyone is an outsider. Oscar's definitive identity as a *paragüiyo* suggests how Díaz sees this logic of nonbelonging working. *Paragüiyo* is an insult that, Yunior explains, comes from the term “party watcher,” used to describe the Marines who occupied the Dominican Republic from 1916 to 1924 and refused to dance or socialize at parties, choosing instead to stand back and watch. From that inauspicious beginning, *paragüiyo* (almost always applied to men) has come to describe a lack of assertiveness or aggressiveness, particularly in pursuing women; it can also

¹⁰ *Fuego* is not the most common word for “shoot,” which is more commonly translated as *dispare* (*fuego*, in most uses, refers to flames). Of course, the trick only works if Oscar thinks, if only momentarily, that he is being offered a way out, a trick that works because “shoot” is not the primary nor most obvious translation of “fuego.”

refer to a general foolishness or haplessness.¹¹ A *paragüiyo* is an outsider who watches from the sidelines but also an occupier always in the shadow of imperialism, in the penumbra cast by the violence, order, and disorder of an imperial machine. After all, the marines were in the Dominican Republic to enforce U.S. plans to create a protectorate state. Their reluctance to mingle at parties reinforces a cultural gulf that makes both the watchers and the people they watch outsiders in and to the same space. By Yunior's standards, Oscar is the ultimate *paragüiyo*: "If you looked in the Dictionary of Dominican Things, the entry for *paragüiyo* would include a wood carving of Oscar" (282). Oscar's status as permanent *paragüiyo* links his lack of belonging to this history of imperialism.

Dictators and Writers

In developing a theory of relation that would move beyond this endless resistance to others, Díaz suggests how writing history and writing fiction—particularly writing a blend of the two—can either serve or resist this legacy of domination. In one of the footnotes that pepper the first part of the novel, Yunior theorizes that the power to represent (and the desire for that power) is shared by writers and dictators alike: "Rushdie claims that tyrants and scribblers are natural antagonists, but I think that's too simple; it lets writers off pretty easy. Dictators, in my opinion, just know competition when they see it. Same with writers. *Like, after all, recognizes like*" (256).¹² Tyrants like Trujillo gain power and then write their own history while writers write their way to power, but both enjoy and wield the authority to represent events and people as they wish—the power, in short, to name. Díaz has echoed this point of view in several interviews,

¹¹ Antonio de Moya translates "paragüiyo" as "jerk, clumsy, slow," a term for "passive men" (84).

¹² An echo of Don DeLillo's comment in *Mao II* that terrorists have replaced writers as the shapers of consciousness.

warning readers that Yuniór is “Trujillo in a different mask,”¹³ and hinting that readers should ask, “Why is Yuniór telling this particular story? . . . Yuniór's telling of this story and his unspoken motivations for it are at the heart of the novel” (“Questions”). As the main (but not sole) narrator, if Yuniór is a dictator of sorts, trying to impose a certain viewpoint on the novel's readers, that viewpoint includes, oddly enough, this reflection on his own tyrannical agenda. That this theory is articulated in the footnotes might demonstrate the extent to which narrative authority attempts to obscure itself—as a footnote, outside the main text, this viewpoint seems like a friendly warning, a disruption of the main narrative to caution the reader. Of course, this is a deceptive performance since the footnotes belong to the fictional world of the main text and thus to the domain of the narrator and writer.

Yuniór's indeterminate relationship to authority is reflected in the critical discussion of *Oscar Wao*, in which he is seen as the conduit for either challenging or reinforcing the damaging identity formations and colonial history that he inherits. Juanita Heredia sees Yuniór's narration, particularly his use of footnotes, as “reconfigur[ing] the narrative of the nation, one often told by hegemonic forces” and “magnifying the traditionally silenced voices” (21). Similarly, Monica Hanna argues that Yuniór aims to “counteract a history of glorious nationalism . . . personified in the figure of a heroic, all-powerful, hyper-masculine dictator” (504). Elena Machado, on the other hand, reads Yuniór as a hyper-masculine dictator who enforces a regime of masculinity that denies both his own and Oscar's queerness. Anne Garland Mahler takes a position somewhere in the middle, arguing that although Yuniór is a dictator of sorts, his voice serves to reveal power. According to Mahler, Díaz “reserves a margin of moral virtue for the anti-colonial writing that attempts to expose, rather than mask, its own inherent violence” (Mahler 134). All of these readings of the novel, then, posit some distance between Yuniór and his narrative, even if it

¹³ Quoted in Machado, 522.

is only just enough distance to expose the mechanisms of Yuniór's power, his ability to represent himself and others as he likes. Whether Yuniór is another Trujillo or not, *Oscar Wao*, in these readings, is a corrective or counter to a history of imperial domination and erasure.

I argue, however, that Díaz's critique of imperialism is not lodged so firmly in Yuniór as narrator. Instead, this critique is developed through Yuniór's incomplete *bildung* as a historian, archivist, writer and narrator. In the epigraphs to the novel, Díaz lays out three different modes of being and belonging in a neocolonial world; the rest of the narrative, while it is about Oscar and Lola's development (or lack thereof) is also about Yuniór's vacillating among these modes. The epigraphs set up a tension between Galactus, a destructive, imperial dictator who writes his victims out of history and Shabine, a transnational subject who is caught between the model of rooted belonging offered by the nation and writing his own way to an unrooted sense of belonging. These three roles for the writer form the poles around which Yuniór's narrative take shape.

The two epigraphs, one from Derek Walcott's poem "The Schooner *Flight*" (1979) and the other from the 1960s comic book character Galactus, introduce the reader to the power of naming and its corollary, the threat of unnamings. The first epigraph represents the power of representation associated with dictators, who can name, but can also unname. The nameless creatures that Galactus devours and dismisses in *The Fantastic Four*—asking, "Of what import are brief, nameless lives . . . to Galactus?"—are quite literally trapped inside Galactus, who is a force of pure destruction, devouring whole planets and their inhabitants. Galactus is an immortal villain, although a relatively amoral and disinterested one; he is driven largely by hunger instead of greed or a desire for power. His dismissal of the lives he ends reflects his supreme ability to impose his point of view: these lives are brief only by comparison to his own (and because he

makes them so) and nameless only from his point of view. Identifying these lives as nameless is key to making them unimportant; the unnamed are vulnerable and unreal, unheard and unrecognized. Galactus can unname and thereby erase.

Like the other science-fiction and fantasy villains crowding the pages of *Oscar Wao*, Galactus is a figure for the Dominican dictator, Rafael Trujillo, for Díaz depicts Trujillo as having the Galactus-like ability to annihilate people and things (think of Abelard's handwriting, of which no examples remain). Trujillo is an author: he displays an excessive, obsessive authority to craft his own story and to impose his name and body on the nation. He both demonstrates and strengthens his authority by presenting himself as a supernatural being with outsized sexual appetites. Trujillo is “[f]amous for changing ALL THE NAMES of ALL THE LANDMARKS in the Dominican Republic to honor himself” (254). The numerous show trials and convictions for disloyalty to the regime bolster the sense that Trujillo has supernatural sensory abilities, able to see and hear thoughts and plots against him (172)¹⁴. “Even in educated circles,” Yunior informs the reader, Trujillo was believed to be “tight” with fukú, able to call down a deadly curse on anyone who even thought “a bad thing” about him (12). His most remarked-upon abilities, though, are sexual: “if the procurement of ass had been any more central to the Trujillato, the regime would have been the world’s first culocracy (and maybe, in fact, it was)” (165). The historical Trujillo did indeed exercise his power by demanding sex from women and demanding that his associates “offer up” their wives and daughters. In *Oscar Wao*, a masculinity defined by the aggressive pursuit of sex with “thousands and thousands” of women who are in no position to refuse, coupled with the image of Trujillo as a force beyond nature, becomes a symbol for the fantastical and grotesque aftermath of colonial rule.

¹⁴ See Derby for more on Trujillo's image as a supernatural being.

Díaz traces this power to write history in one's own image to the sixteenth-century genocide of the Tainos and the colonizer's naming power of the Spanish.¹⁵ Oscar and Lola's grandfather, Abelard, a wealthy doctor who falls out of favor with Trujillo, owns an estate named Hatüey. The estate's name refers not to Hatüey, the Taino chief who resisted and fought the Spanish, but to the descendants of the priest who tried to baptize Hatüey by force before he was killed (212). What appears to be, and indeed functions partially as, a memorial to those killed by the conquistadors mixes Hatüey's story with that of his tormentors, who, after establishing their own law of ownership, appropriate his name as a marker of their right to perpetuate that law. Abelard inherits this estate from his father, whose complicity with Trujillo Abelard mimics. During the 1937 massacre of Haitians along the Dominican border, Abelard's father lends Trujillo's army his horses. This house, marked by two genocides, is hardly named by or for Hatüey (who, in rejecting the priest's baptism, declares that he would rather go to hell if heaven is full of white people). Instead, it renames and dispossess him; "history," as Yunió concludes, "has not been kind to Hatüey," shackling him to "a country not his own," and forcing him to share an afterlife of sorts with Europeans (212).

The second epigraph, from Walcott's poem, suggests that while writers may use their power in the service of—or have their power co-opted by—dictators, they can also use it against the dictator. The dictator, represented here by colonial powers and slaveholders, is associated with rooted notions of belonging. Accepting these rooted notions means being complicit with dictatorial power. But the writer can also work out new forms of association and create escape routes away from the root. In the section of Walcott's poem quoted, Shabine, the poem's speaker, who is preparing to leave Trinidad as a sailor on a schooner named Flight, describes his

¹⁵ Christopher Columbus claimed the island with the name Hispaniola, a variant of the original name "Isla de Española," or Island of Spain.

mixed race ancestry, ending with the well-known line, “either I’m nobody or I’m a nation.” Nobody and a nation are two names with very different relationships to colonial history: the traditional formulations of the nation and the national subject, forged in the racial hierarchies of colonialism and around the intolerant root, exclude a “Chabine,” while “nobody” describes a possible escape from these hierarchies. “Nobody” might seem to indicate Shabine’s being erased, but Paul Breslin argues that naming himself “nobody” gives Shabine mobility; Breslin compares this declaration to Odysseus’s escaping the Cyclops by giving his name as “No Man” (2). And, indeed, Shabine is about to take flight (the *Flight*), leaving his home behind and traveling around the Antilles, suggesting that the alternative to the nation—nobody—is a liberating name, an escape from rootedness.¹⁶

In a later, unquoted portion of the poem, Shabine addresses the power of names, pointing out the distinct power of colonialism to destroy by naming: “we live like our names and you would have / to be colonial to know the difference, / to know the pain of history words contain” (353). We live our names, but a name that contains the history of colonial violence, slavery, and genocide is unlivable, a constant pain. To belong to the nation, to belong to the world made by empire on its terms is to live in pain, but it is precisely this that the colonized are asked or forced to do, with the promise held out that one day they may be in the position of the colonizer: “if we live like the names our masters please / by careful mimicry [we] might become men” (354). In rejecting this shabby promise, Shabine takes on a name that alludes to the pain of colonial history—the nobody, written out of history—and yet allows him to write his own way out of that history by refusing to replicate it. Writing is key here: Shabine claims he has “no nation now but the imagination” (350). In the imagination, in poetry and writing, he can enter the territory

¹⁶ The de Leóns all share this wanderlust, from Beli’s inchoate yearning to escape her dull life in Baní, to Lola’s desire to travel and have pen pals, to Oscar’s escape to a fantasy world.

and time of the nobody, where he writes his affiliations and names himself. (Of course, for some people, “nobody” is the pain they have to live, not an escape from that pain, a point to which I will return.)

Yunior is Díaz’s device for demonstrating the limits and difficulties of writing and being in relation. The writer’s options here are to act as a dictator, who writes at will, but does so destructively; to associate with rootedness (represented by the nation), which can be complicit with power; or to become a citizen of the imagination, which can produce a “poetics of relation.” Yunior is working between these options, associated with both Chabine and Galactus/Trujillo; indeed his very name is a sign that he has yet to form, either as a tyrant or something else. Yunior (Junior) is, like “nobody,” not quite a name; it suggests that he is the bearer of an inheritance, one that both names him and unnames him, since he has no name other than this marker of a legacy. But we do not know what he will inherit—Galactus/Trujillo’s mantle or Shabine’s. Yunior resembles Trujillo in some key ways: he is invested with the power of representing himself and those around him and he has an excessive sex life. Yunior is a self-described “ill sucio,” whose life, at least for a while, revolves around having as many sexual relationships as possible and who begrudges Oscar his one female friend. But Yunior views his sex life as something out of his control, claiming “I couldn’t not get ass, even when I tried” (150). When questioned by Oscar about why he sleeps with other women while dating Lola, he replies, “If I knew that, it wouldn’t be a problem” (234). Like his motivations for performing this particular version of masculinity, his motivations for telling this story seem compelled by an external force. When he decides to tell Oscar’s story, after being haunted by Oscar and his own sense of guilt, he experiences that decision as a triumph of Oscar’s will: “[F]inally I woke up ...

and I said, “OK, Wao, OK. You win” (242). Sexuality and writing are intertwined as the avenues through which authority reproduces itself in *Oscar Wao*, but Yunion does not wield them surely.

Yunion is also aligned with Shabine in some ways, most notably in his name. “Yunion” and “Nobody” are both names and unnames, designating not a specific person, but his or her indistinctness and relation to others. Thus “Yunion” and “Nobody” indicate the potential for identities formed through relation. In disavowing a distinct name in the moments before he voyages out into the world, Shabine becomes open to others; instead of self-centered observer, measuring all he sees against his own rooted sense of belonging, he is decentered and closer to a rhizomatic figure. Taking flight as nobody, Shabine can enter into relation with anybody. Yunion exhibits the same potential: an artist of the imagination who is still open to inheriting different legacies, he is not yet claimed by Trujillo, even if he is marked by Trujillo and the history that gave rise to Trujillo.

By the end of the novel, it is not clear which role will dominate in Yunion’s life, but we get a sense, largely through Yunion’s naming of himself and Oscar, of what writing from each of these positions looks like. Staging Yunion’s vacillation between writing as a dictator and writing as a relational subject, Díaz advances his argument for relation as a non-oppressive, non-violent mode of belonging in a world born out of empire. The dictator model of representation is signaled in the novel’s title, which refers to Ernest Hemingway’s short story, “The Short Happy Life of Francis Macomber.” Hemingway’s story recounts an African hunting trip taken by a wealthy American couple, accompanied by an English “white hunter” named Wilson; the story is told by an omniscient narrator, but often from Wilson’s point of view. Francis Macomber’s masculinity is tied to a violent colonial activity—big-game hunting—and he initially fails to perform this version of masculinity, running away in fear from a lion. After being mocked by his

wife and Wilson, Francis kills several large animals only to be shot and killed by his wife. From Wilson's point of view, Macomber's life is short because he has only begun to live and experience true happiness (or luck) when he kills his first big game. But Wilson represents a violent, patriarchal, colonial viewpoint and is a hypocrite as well: although he imagines that he lives by a noble and dignified code of manly conduct, he breaks the law by chasing buffalo in a vehicle, endangers the lives of the gun bearers, and sleeps with Mrs. Macomber. It is fairly easy to draw parallels between Oscar and Francis Macomber: they are both defined by their unsuccessful attempts to meet a certain standard of masculine behavior and eventually meet it, only to die soon afterwards. If Oscar is a double for Francis, though, Yuniór may be a double for Wilson, which would suggest that Yuniór's version of Oscar's life is suspect, shot through with patriarchal, colonial values.

If the allusion to Hemingway is meant to warn the reader about Yuniór's dictatorial impulses, Yuniór both undercuts and affirms that warning by identifying himself with the ambiguous title of "Your Watcher," a role that is split between the narrator as dictator and the narrator as open-minded thinker.¹⁷ Watcher has several connotations in *Oscar Wao*, most prominently referring to Uatu, a member of the race of Watchers, characters from *The Fantastic Four* comic-book series. Watchers are a race of ancient, technologically-advanced archivists, sworn to observe, but not intervene in, the course of events. Galactus's question, quoted in Diaz's epigraph, is addressed to the renegade Watcher Uatu, who periodically breaks his nonintervention oath in order to assist the Fantastic Four (a team of cold war-era American superheroes) fight various enemies, including Galactus. As the Uatu of *Oscar Wao*, Yuniór takes

¹⁷ Yuniór's role as watcher also echoes Oscar's role as watcher/*paraguiyo*, another point of resemblance between the two.

on the job of answering Galactus's question: What importance does a person's life have under imperialism?

In a narrative where watching is closely associated with Trujillo, the narrator as Watcher also resembles the narrator as dictator. Trujillo's regime was, as Lauren Derby notes, a "panoptical regime" that spread fear and eliminated opposition through widespread spying on individuals, families, and whole communities and by encouraging people to report on others (138). Abelard's fear of appearing in the newspaper's gossip column reflects the historical reality that those who were targeted by the regime would first see negative rumors about themselves in the "Foro Publico" (Public Forum) column (Derby 138). Díaz emphasizes this panoptical element by comparing Trujillo to Sauron, the power-hungry character from J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy who exists as a flaming eye that sees across vast distances and into people's thoughts. Trujillo is the "great Eye" (96) or simply "the Eye" (121); "[h]is Eye was everywhere; he had a secret police that out Stasi'd the Stasi, that kept watch on everyone, even those everyones who lived in *the States*" (171). There is a disconcerting echo of this language in Yuniór's promise to Lola that he will "keep an eye" on Oscar after his first suicide attempt, only to have, at the end of Yuniór's watch, Oscar attempt suicide a second time (131, 132).

Yet watching over is not always ominous and oppressive in *Oscar Wao*; watching can be a form of caretaking that does not slide into paternalistic rule. In the Acknowledgments page, Díaz gives thanks to "the pueblo dominicano. And to Those Who Watch Over Us." Yuniór's kinship with Uatu is not based on a shared sense of dominance, but rather on their shared subaltern status: "[I]t's hard as a Third Worlder not to feel a certain amount of affinity for Uatu the Watcher; he resides in the hidden Blue Area of the Moon and we DarkZoners reside (to quote Glissant) on '*la face cachée de Terre*' (Earth's hidden face)" (255). Connecting the Uatu's exile

with his own, Yunió suggests that those who watch are outsiders, colonial and postcolonial subjects who might be positioned, from their place of exile, to create structures of relation.

Yunió gives Oscar a similarly ambiguous name, both “Oscar” and “wondrous,” a descriptor that contains potential for both domination and relation. Echoing Galactus’ question in the epigraph, the novel’s title names Oscar, ensuring that his is not one of the nameless lives. Far from being nobody, Oscar Wao may indeed be a nation of sorts, a representative of the Dominican and Caribbean diaspora who figures forth its wondrous, sci-fi-like qualities. The naming of his life might suggest that Oscar’s story, and by extension his family’s and Yunió’s stories, the story of the New World, have been rescued from anonymity, from being devoured by their lack of importance. However, this naming works as a sort of unnamng, identifying Oscar by a joke made at his expense and marking his life as “wondrous,” a word that is inextricably linked to a deceptive imperial gaze. Oscar’s life is wondrous in several ways: it is an unresolved mystery that haunts Yunió; Oscar himself is a wonder, an outsize, grotesque figure whose body elicits insults from strangers on the street. His nickname, “Wao,” contains a doubled wondrousness: it is a homonym of the common exclamation of amazement, “wow,” and it stems from Oscar’s otherness.¹⁸ Like Oscar Wilde, Oscar breaks with normative ideas of gender and sexuality, in Oscar’s case by not living up to the hypersexual ideal of masculinity that Yunió embodies. Finally, as a word often associated with science-fiction and fantasy writing, “wonder” evokes the world that Oscar feels is most appropriate to Caribbean experience, since nothing is “more sci-fi than Santo Domingo” or “more fantasy than the Antilles” (12).¹⁹

¹⁸ Yunió’s other nickname for Oscar, “O,” also signifies surprise.

¹⁹ According to the *Encyclopedia of Science Fiction*, the point of science fiction is to inspire a “sense of wonder” (Nicholls and Robu).

Oscar's wondrousness, his otherness, is inflected by the initial acts of wonder that accompany the creation of fukú—the Europeans' arrival in the New World and their response to it. In this sense, wonder is the pose of the imperialist, gazing on the exotic other; in describing Oscar this way, Yuniors sets up a similar relationship between himself and Oscar. Stephen Greenblatt argues that wonder is “the central figure in the initial European response to the New World, the decisive emotional and intellectual experience in the presence of radical difference” (14). In early modern narratives about the New World, wonder is a capacious concept, signaling love and hate, desire, repulsion, and fear. Greenblatt compares the European experience of wonder in and at the New World to the startle reflex in infants: “eyes widened, arms outstretched, breathing stilled, the whole body momentarily convulsed” (14). This figure is paused in time, passive and seemingly beyond his own control yet still reaching. This apparent act of being overtaken also serves as a rhetorical device that justifies the explorers taking over anything and everything they see—they grasp but involuntarily. Christopher Columbus, argues Greenblatt, uses this sense of wonder to describe his reaction to the New World and signal his assumption of possession—he is overwhelmed by the providence that created these lands and handed them to him. We can even hear an echo of this wonder in Columbus's title, Admiral, which is related to the word “admire,” (to feel wonder, to marvel).

Imperial wonder finds its twentieth-century expression in the capitalist pursuit of accumulation. *The Great Gatsby's* Nick Carraway (another narrator who eulogizes a “great” man) describes Gatsby's longing—for social mobility, wealth, self-possession, belonging—as an infantile wondrous desire to “suck on the pap of life, gulp down the incomparable milk of wonder” (112). Here, wonder is both the longing gaze and the object of longing, the sign of ownership and consumption and that which is consumed, creating a never-ending cycle of desire.

The language of wonder links Gatsby's pursuit of the American dream to the expansionist capitalist enterprise of the first Europeans who arrived in the Americas. Contemplating how the eastern shore of what became North America must have looked to the first European arrivals, Nick depicts their reaction in much the same terms that Greenblatt does:

I became aware of the old island here that flowered once for Dutch sailors' eye—a fresh, green breast of the new world. Its vanished trees, the trees that had made way for Gatsby's house, had once pandered in whispers to the last and greatest of all human dreams; for a transitory enchanted moment man must have held his breath in the presence of this continent, compelled into an aesthetic contemplation he neither understood nor desired, face to face for the last time in history with something commensurate to his capacity for wonder. (180)

Like Greenblatt's startled voyagers, the Dutch sailor's breathing is stilled, he is "compelled" and "enchanted," as though he were possessed by what he saw. Of course, the new world Nick imagines is less a historical place than a fantasy imposed on the land by a colonizing gaze. Empty of its inhabitants, a new world that flowers for and calls to the Dutch sailors, this imagined place serves to justify and universalize that gaze. Wonder describes both the sailors' stunned reaction to the radically new and the mechanism of assimilating that newness and difference into a familiar system of exchange. The wondering gaze attributes wondrousness to what it sees and measures that wondrousness against its own desires, finding them commensurate. In so doing, it naturalizes itself: the Dutch sailor who holds his breath is transformed here into the universal "man" and his specific dreams (of riches, power, etc.) become "the last and greatest of all human dreams." As deployed here, the category of wonder

seems to be one of the first tools of colonialism, a way of claiming and justifying claims, a means of establishing a system of law. Nick, the historian at this moment, labels all of this as the last: the encounter that created the New World as the New World is also the last of its kind, the end of an imperial dream of endless empty space and newness. Having met something that would equal his wondering gaze, the sailor creates a category of nostalgia. In the future, this moment of satiety will be seen as a fall of sorts—the moment when the European merchants and sailors, safely ensconced on their ship, as yet untouched by the racial other who is invisible here, fulfill their destiny.

In his history of the concept of wonder, the cultural conservative Dennis Quinn demonstrates the extent to which wonder is a reaction to an other. Quinn quotes an eighteenth-century English dictionary's definition of "wonder" as "novelty" and newness, but then dismisses this connotation as "a vagary of the eighteenth century" (11). Yet Quinn goes on to amply demonstrate that this cultural meaning of wonder—that there are others who must be wondered at—is hardly an eighteenth-century vagary, but instead an entrenched viewpoint that he himself holds. Quinn's example of how wonder arises begins with the hypothetical scenario in which he must choose between moving to Akron, Ohio, and Namibia. He chooses to move to Namibia because it is exciting and unfamiliar, and then wonder sets in, as he begins to picture all the novelty of Namibia (23). Wonder is, it would appear, indeed connected to novelty, specifically the novelty of the exotic, the dark continent, the other, seen from the eyes of the ethnocentric explorer.

The link between wonder and an imperial gaze is strengthened when Quinn moves almost immediately into an example of misplaced wonder: Caliban's wonder, in *The Tempest*, at Stephano. According to Quinn, this is an "ignorant" wonder, born of Caliban's not knowing that

Stephano is a lowly butler. In Quinn's definition, wonder is the privilege of the Westerner exploring Africa. The colonial subject, represented by Caliban, can only experience false wonder, since he is unaware that what he sees as novelty is not at all novelty to the Europeans, that from their point of view he himself is the novelty—a "monster" (23). To Quinn, Caliban's wonder is false because the colonizer holds all the rights to wonder.

But wonder has another, quite different association with a sense of openness and relation to others. Seen in this way, Yuniors depiction of Oscar as wondrous is a call to relation. Socrates identified wonder (*thaumazien*) as the source of philosophy's endless questioning and meditating, a state of deep thought rather than narrow-minded possessiveness. As Mary Jane Rubenstein shows, Socrates' notion of wonder is a state of complete openness, "an insuperable gash that. . . . open[s] thought not only to the fantastic and amazing but also to the dreadful and the threatening" (11). Unlike the wonder of Fitzgerald's Dutch sailor, which is paralyzing yet grasping in the face of something new, Socratic wonder motivates reflection and invites the unknown to enter into and disrupt its viewpoint. In this sense, wonder is a defamiliarizing, uncanny gaze that translates "utterly ordinary concepts and things" into "aporias" (Rubenstein 3). Far from taking possession of what seems novel and attempting to domesticate and contain it, this type of wonder allows itself to be dispossessed and redefined.

Rubenstein traces the history of wonder in philosophy, showing how Socratic wonder is gradually eclipsed, at least in part, at the start of the modern age, by the curiosities from Africa, Asia, and the Americas that European adventurers and traders collected and catalogued. Wonder's power to destabilize is, over time, "repressed" and "domesticated" by an understanding of wonder that "connotes white bread, lunchbox superheroes, and fifties sitcoms"

(10).²⁰ The wonder that Oscar and Yuniór most associate with their lives as Antillean and diasporic subjects, that of lunchbox superheroes, is seen by Rubenstein as a diminishment of the uncanny wonder that allows thought to take flight. But this uncanny wonder seems most appropriate to thinking a transnational history and historiography; as Rubenstein describes it, wonder in its undomesticated form is a type of cosmopolitan hospitality that “welcom[es] the most troubling of houseguests” and allows one to “live with ghosts” (190). Wonder, then, is a site of conflict where openness to others wars with a possessive and exoticized view of the other. Oscar’s story might be seen as a site of similar conflict between the neocolonizing forces of the late twentieth century and the resistance of an anticolonial historiography. By the end of the novel, it is still not clear which side Yuniór is on; his narrative remains ambiguous.

Thus far I have argued *Oscar Wao* tells the story of imperialism in the New World, demonstrating along the way the difficulty of telling that story. In order to tell this story, Díaz suggests, we need to move away from the legacies of imperialism—racism, patriarchy, violence. The endless blowback of imperialism calls for a mode of being in the world and with others that is open and self-decentering, that finds an identity in and through relation with others. In the next section, I examine how Díaz works out the limitations of this relational mode of belonging, the ways that contemporary imperialism—and the fantasies of globalization that mask its misery—works against relation.

How to End a Fukú Story

The limit that writers run up against is not, in the end, simply the danger of taking on the imperial gaze but is instead the danger of becoming complicit with imperialism and the dictatorships it spawns. Díaz discusses this complicity in an interview in which he identifies the

²⁰ Interestingly, the object that symbolizes to Oscar both his early happiness and his fall from happiness is his superhero lunchbox, which is scratched at the moment his Golden Age come to an end.

danger for writers and readers as a desire for narratives that offer a sense of closure; *Oscar Wao*, Díaz says, is about how our “weird desire for authoritative narratives, for narratives of purity, consolation and cohesion – and our desire for much about dictatorship – feed authority” (“Exploding Planet”). Complicity can be a matter of telling the stories that buttress authority, stories that suggest that the legacies of imperialism can be easily overcome, that we have moved beyond the need for discussions of empire. In *Oscar Wao*, this danger is explored through Yunior’s apparent desire for but inability or refusal to tell a coherent and consoling story about Oscar and thus about the possibilities for moving beyond the legacies of imperialism. We see this desire in his failed attempts to end the story cleanly and, significantly, in his attempt to provide a happy ending of sorts for Oscar, a happy ending that is nonetheless undermined by the presence of Ybón, the figure who remains outside the networks of relation that have been established.

Although fukú seems to offer a neat and coherent explanation for events, it is actually an unstable, almost senseless narrative structure; as a metaphor for imperialism’s legacies, it suggests that there is no way of knowing the limits of—and thus eliminating—those legacies. Díaz’s fukú story denies coherence by embedding several different beginnings and endings, and finally offering the suggestion that “nothing ever ends.” Yunior worries over both the beginning and the end of his story, indicating how difficult it is to contain. The beginning of the story, we realize about halfway through the novel, is a contentious issue. Because fukú, like Trujillo, strikes seemingly at random and with little warning, it is difficult to say when the story starts, when the curse sets in. Although Yunior claims that he will begin where the de Leóns would, with the “Bad Thing” that Abelard, Oscar’s grandfather, was accused of saying about Trujillo, he does not. The footnotes argue that “[t]here are other beginnings certainly, better ones, to be sure—if you ask me I would have started when the Spaniards “discovered” the New World—or

when the U.S. invaded Santo Domingo in 1916” (211). Even Yuniór’s sureness that there is a better beginning winds up split between the “discovery” of the New World and the 1916 invasion and occupation. *Oscar Wao* does indeed start with the “discovery” of the new world, and Abelard’s story only appears more than halfway through the novel; thus we have several beginnings introduced at different moments. Even the story of the Bad Thing has contested beginnings: Yuniór cites some people who believe that Trujillo cursed the Cabrals over different issues and other who believe that Abelard was just another victim of Trujillo’s random fury or greed.

Ending a fukú story is just as difficult, perhaps more so. Fukú, whether it “works patiently” or “strike[s] like lightning,” introduces an irreparable break into events and lives (5). But its very unpredictability and its ability to attach itself to a place, a people, or family, and thus reproduce itself, means it may never end.²¹ Because fukú’s term is indefinite, every detail that follows the appearance of the curse might be seen as relevant, so a fukú story can never quite end. Thus the endings in *Oscar Wao* proliferate: the final (or penultimate) chapter, “The End of the Story,” briefly summarizes the aftermath of Oscar’s death, includes the section “A Super Final Note,” and is followed by an unnumbered chapter that begins, “It’s almost done. Almost over. Only some final things to show you” (245). But this chapter is followed by yet another one—a summary of Oscar’s last letter to Lola, titled “The Final Letter.”

Yet Yuniór desires to achieve some coherence, suggesting again his uncertainty about whether he will tell a story that is complicit with this history of imperialism. Despite Yuniór’s desire to begin where he would like, despite his extra, unnumbered, unnamed prologue that traces the origins of Oscar’s story to the arrival of the first Europeans in the Americas, his story

²¹ In an interview, Díaz describes curses as inherited family stories: “a curse is just a story that you may or may not inherit. I mean, you can believe your family is cursed or you can say it’s not, but it’s literally just a story that comes in the family the way, you know, certain characteristics and traits [do]” (Interview by Jeffrey Brown).

winds up snaking out in different directions, pulling in any number of smaller stories. Set against the narrator's (or narrative's) inability to end is his obsession with identifying and naming endings. *Oscar Wao* is full of the language of what we might call last things: the first chapter is named "GhettoNerd at the End of the World"; later chapters and sections bear the titles "The Final Voyage" and "The Last Days of Oscar Wao"; Beli is "the third and final daughter" and her relationship with Lola and Oscar's father is her "third and final heartbreak." Yunior's desire to mark clear ending points is continually upset by fukú; the danger here for Yunior and Díaz is to allow a clean ending, one that would deny that fukú and imperial violence continue unabated.

However, fukú's counterspell, *zafa*, does offer the potential for intervening in this history from a position of relation to others. *Zafa*—from *zafar*, to loosen, escape, free oneself—loosens fukú's hold and creates lateral passages of movement, similar to Odysseus's loophole of escape: "anytime a fukú reared its many heads there was only one way to prevent disaster from coiling around you. . . .Not surprisingly, it was a word. . . .Even now as I write these words I wonder if this book ain't a *zafa* of sorts. My very own counterspell" (7). Where *zafa* loosens, fukú strangles: it coils around its victims, and Yunior's fukú story has "its fingers around my throat" (5–6). *Zafa* is a speech act that intervenes in the story and changes its course by loosening the fukú's grip. *Zafa* turns fukú's unstable temporality against fukú: because fukú is an imminent force, threatening to settle at any moment, *zafa* can have an effect before the curse has had "time to cohere" (10). If fukú is at the heart of these events, it has yet to cohere and yet to claim all its victims, as the amulet Lola's daughter wears suggests. The full effect of the fukú is deferred and thus open to *zafa*.

If *zafa* works by loosening, it is amenable to creating a sense of relation, to loosening borders and boundaries, something that just begins to happen towards the end of the novel. As in

The Last Thing He Wanted, Díaz's theory of writing and belonging finds its fullest expression in and around the archive, where a sort of radical relation takes place. Yuniór still desires narrative coherence and consolation, despite his inability to achieve it. By the end of the novel, he has amassed an archive of Oscar's manuscripts, books, and films, but does not know what to do with it. He fantasizes that Lola's daughter will supply the key that makes sense of this archive and "put an end to it" (246). Whether we read "it" here as *fukú* or the story of Oscar's life, it is clear that Yuniór has a sense of incoherence that he longs to make whole. Although Lola's daughter's name has been deliberately withheld (Yuniór mentions that when he sees Lola, they take turns saying her daughter's name, but he doesn't tell us her name), when Yuniór unfolds his fantasy, he imagines her name is Isis, a reference to the Egyptian goddess who reassembles her lover-brother after he is killed and his body torn apart. As a mythic reassembler, Isis could return the brother (Oscar) and lover (Yuniór) to wholeness, ending the *fukú* and demystifying Oscar's wondrous life.

Yet this drive towards coherence contains an internal incoherence, one in which relation as a reassembly through the other might take place. For Yuniór's fantasy to be realized, he and Oscar have to achieve some sort of mutually constituting identity, as do "Isis" and Lola. Yuniór's fantasy of Isis assembling the fragments and ending the curse is also a fantasy in which brother (Oscar) and lover (Yuniór) become one, as they do in Isis and Osiris's story. And, indeed, this happens: when Yuniór meets Lola's daughter, she initially refers to him as "tío" (uncle), whereupon Lola corrects her, saying "tío's *friend*" (244). Yuniór even refers to "her ["Isis's"] brother's books," conflating Lola and her daughter, another necessary conflation before Lola/"Isis" can become Isis and Yuniór/Oscar can become Osiris. This is a key moment in the novel because, up until this point, Yuniór's stance as narrator of Oscar's story has been mostly

one of distance—despite his similarities with Oscar (their shared interest in comic books and science-fiction, lack of control over their love lives, mothers who survived hard times in Azua, childhoods in New Jersey, a somewhat ironic but still firm belief in the redeeming possibilities of masculinity), Yuniór emphasizes their differences (Yuniór, unlike Oscar, can hide his “otakuness” and is attractive to women [23]). He tends to approach Oscar as an enigma, a wonder; he even admits that if he were Lola, he “would have hidden from a Caliban” like Oscar at college instead of admitting they were related (170). Yet here Yuniór’s identity slips into Oscar’s identity, suggesting that as a narrator he may be tending towards the status of nobody, both in the sense of displacing himself and in the sense that he gains empathy with a nobody like Oscar.²²

This moment of relation or potential relation occurs in the archive, a key setting because the movement towards relation here is also a glance back at history, an echo of Lola’s cryptic remark that “you can’t run away. Not ever. The only way out is in. And that’s what I guess these stories are all about” (209). There is, Lola argues, no simple escape valve, no way to cleanly cast off and take flight. One needs to become entangled—with others, with a story, with history—to take flight, to move outwards. It makes sense, then, that it is in the archives, where he and Isis handle documents and survey the past, that Yuniór anticipates a sense of relation between himself and Oscar. Becoming entangled with Oscar allows him to engage these documents and

²² There are some repressed traces of this connection earlier. When Yuniór is explaining how different he and Oscar are because he can hide his love of science-fiction and fantasy, a footnote undermines him by seeming to conflate Yuniór and Oscar: “Where this outsize love of genre jumped off from no one quite seems to know. It might have been a consequence of being Antillean (who more sci-fi than us?) or of living in the DR for the first couple of years of his life and then abruptly wrenchingly relocating to New Jersey—a single green card shifting not only worlds (from Third to First) but centuries (from almost no TV or electricity to plenty of both)” (283). Although we know Yuniór moves to New Jersey when he is nine years old, Beli never lives in Santo Domingo after leaving as a teenager, suggesting that neither does Oscar. This description of a “wrenching relocation” may actually describe Yuniór and thus act as a triple relocation: Yuniór’s relocation to New Jersey, a relocation of his story through Oscar’s story, and moving of this story of relocation from the text to the footnotes.

engaging these documents opens up the possibility that he will become entangled with Oscar or that he will admit that he and Oscar are already entangled.

Relation, then, is neither easy nor complete in *Oscar Wao*. Just as Yunior's desire for a coherent narrative is established and then denied by the ragged beginnings and endings of his story, his desire for a consoling narrative is established and then denied—or more precisely, readers are asked to deny themselves a consoling ending. The denial of consolation goes to the heart of the idea of relation; in asking his readers to deny themselves a consoling ending to Oscar's story, Díaz points out the vigilance needed to take up his call to relation. A story that sought to console readers might end much as this one does, with Oscar finding some happiness with Ybón before he dies, Yunior settling down, and Lola having her own family. Paul Jay reads the endings as coherent and consoling: both Yunior and Oscar, he argues, overcome the “ultimate curse of fukú . . . the pressure to perform a model of masculinity.” Oscar discovers that “the beauty” of sex is actually intimacy and Yunior settles down to married life (182). However, Jay overlooks the fact that while Oscar is discovering this beauty, Ybón is terrorized by nightmares about the Capitán, to whom she will eventually have to return. And even if marriage is an alternative to the hypermasculinity Yunior has displayed all along, his marriage is not all that different from his earlier relationships: he admits that he doesn't “run around after girls anymore. Not much, anyway” (243). I will suggest that the figure of Ybón and the very non-consoling end of her story both tests Díaz's notion of relation and forces the reader to consider the price of consoling narratives.

Ybón represents one of the two “co-constituting groups” of a transnational world that Donald Pease identifies: she is one of “the diasporized populations” who make up a good deal of the transnational flows of people and labor but who do not enjoy the freedom of the “citizen-

subjects” who move with ease through the world, embodying “the traits of flexibility, non-identification, hybridity, and mobility” (“Re-mapping” 10, 4). Díaz describes the broad section of people for whom easy travel and transnational crossing, if anything, only exacerbate misery: “it’s one big party; one big party for everyone but the poor, the dark, the jobless, the sick, the Haitian, their children, the bateys, the kids that certain Canadian, American, German and Italian tourists love to rape” (204). A sex worker who is cheated of her earnings, stuck in an abusive relationship with a powerful member of the police, and feels unable to leave the city she hates, Ybón is left out of this party; thus when Yunior offers up Ybón as a happy ending for Oscar and for readers who want to believe that Oscar could be “due a little luck,” we are forced to consider the price of that consoling ending. After all, when the Capitán has Oscar beaten up, he beats up Ybón as well, and she asks Oscar many times to leave her alone because she is afraid of the Capitán. During their weekend together, “every night Ybón had nightmares that the capitán had found them; once she’d woken up and said in a voice of true fear, Oscar, he’s here, really believing he was” (334). Her unhappy ending carries on long after Oscar’s death; as we learn at the end of the novel, she is still working at the same strip club and brothel. Her curse, and the curse of all the people who are left out of the “party,” is still in effect. To be consoled by Oscar’s finally finding love and losing his virginity would mean ignoring Ybón’s unhappiness and the likelihood that it will continue.

It is important that Ybón’s status stems from her being a prostitute, since sexuality and gender have all along been sites for the reproduction of oppression, both through physical force (every female character in the book is the victim of domestic or sexual violence) and through the cultural pressure of narratives about gender and sexuality that enact standards that the character can only fail to meet (as Oscar does) or exceed to an absurd degree (as Yunior does). Ybón’s

story is another story of a fall—the fallen woman, whose otherness is a constant in *Oscar Wao*. In the background of every female character’s story is a hum of disapproval that marks her as fallen: Maritza Chacon is a “*cuero*” (prostitute or promiscuous woman) (36); Beli is “a puta [prostitute] major in the cosmology of her neighbors,” who “lov[e]” the scandal when she is caught having sex with a boy at school (82-83). Lola has her “big puta moment” when she sleeps with a classmate’s father for money, and her relationship with Yunior is portrayed as a fall for her: when they resume their relationship, Yunior describes Lola looking as though “she was already on her way down with me and didn’t, for the life of her, understand why” (153). The fallen woman is trapped by a narrative that narrows the borders of her life, one that, like the other narratives of falls, memorializes an imaginary lost innocence as it recasts her as an other of all society. Like the other stories of the fall, the narrative of the fallen woman is linked to fukú; it also acts as the counterpart to the narratives of hypersexual masculinity that bedevil Oscar. Like Oscar, cursed to never be able to perform the version of Dominican masculinity he so wants to, Ybón and every other woman in the novel is cursed to always be fallen, always be other, by virtue of their gender. If we accept Ybón’s misery as the trade-off for Oscar’s final moments of happiness, we are simply trading one fukú for another, Oscar’s for Ybón’s.

Readers like Paul Jay can read around Ybón’s unhappiness and be consoled by the ending because she is fallen; the inevitability of unhappy endings for fallen women makes her unhappy ending all but invisible. But her invisibility presents a problem for Díaz’s theory of relation, or rather, Díaz presents her invisibility as a problem for his theory of relation: for Ybón and all the people at the bottom of the power structure, reconstituting their identity through others is not an option (or not a good option). It is up to the reader to recognize and feel in relation to Ybón. Ybón’s position in the story is subtly paired with and compared to that of Walcott’s Shabine.

Like Shabine, Ybón is referred to as a “Chabine” and has traveled widely, but her arc is the opposite of Shabine’s. Instead of taking flight, she has been forced by the international sex trade to return to Santo Domingo, which seems to her “the smallest place on earth.” Although she has worked as a prostitute for decades, pimps keep her money, and she winds up in debt, pushed back to Santo Domingo and into an abusive relationship with the Capitán. Ybón does not need to claim the name “nobody” because it has already been forced on her. The responsibility is thus on readers to decenter and unname themselves, to constitute themselves in relation to Ybón.

Malini Johar Schueller makes a similar point about the potential blind spots of theories of relationality or global connectivity in a critique of Judith Butler’s theory of vulnerability in *Precarious Life*. Butler argues for an increased sense of vulnerability to others as an alternative to the mentality of the global war on terror, which paradoxically posits a threatening other and an invulnerable self, but Schueller points out that this is not universally accessible position since “some vulnerabilities are more vulnerable than others” (249).²³ That is, it is one thing for someone in a position of relative power to develop a sense of vulnerability to and with others, but it is quite another thing for those who are already vulnerable to violence or exploitation to increase their sense of vulnerability. For the vulnerable person, self-unnaming does not create empathy but instead “objecthood”; thus theories of identity and belonging that depend on an openness to others, as I’ve argued Díaz’s idea of relation does, can “reinscribe imperialism” by ignoring the uneven access to representation that called for relationality in the first place (248, 249). Glissant briefly address this problem, referring to those who “bear the world’s injustice” and the “internal exiles” who have been “immobil[ized]” (19). He does not spend much time on these figures but does reiterate that their state is caused by a lack of relation in the first place.

²³ I discuss *Precarious Life* again in the final chapter in connection with theories of peace; although I do not incorporate Schueller’s criticism again, it is something to keep in mind.

Díaz delves into this problem and signals the danger of reinscribing imperialism through a “Note From Your Author” and through Oscar’s final letter. In the “Note From Your Author,” Díaz attempts to forestall any criticism of Ybón as unrealistic by foregrounding Ybón’s constructedness even as he insists on her authenticity:

I know what Negroes are going to say....A puta and she’s not an underage snort-addicted mess? Not believable. Should I go down to the Feria and pick me up a more representative model? ...But then I’d be lying. Can’t we believe that an Ybón can exist and that a brother like Oscar might be due a little luck after twenty-three years?” (284–85).

This note is something of a paralipsis: in defending his choice to draw Ybón as he has and asking readers to believe that someone like Ybón can exist, Díaz draws attention to her construction as a character. If Oscar pursued a drug-addicted child prostitute, it would be much more obvious that his happy ending was achieved at her expense. An adult who owns her own house in the suburbs is not only a more likely character for bringing Oscar a little luck, but she is also more likely to fade into the background, allow readers to feel consoled since her situation is not so obviously desperate. Díaz’s deliberate choice here, one he draws attention to as an authorial choice, puts his readers in the position of being tempted by consolation and to therefore lose the idea of relation.

The narrative further undermines this possible consoling, coherent ending with Oscar’s final letter, in which he describes his weekend with Ybón and closes with an echo of Kurtz’s dying words in *Heart of Darkness*, exclaiming, “The Beauty! The Beauty!” Significantly, the narrator of *Heart of Darkness*, Marlow, changes those words when relaying the story to Kurtz’s fiancé, providing her with a false conventional romantic ending in which Kurtz dies calling out her name. Marlow does this, he says, to console Kurtz’s fiancée, or at least to keep her in the

dark about “the darkness” of Kurtz’s life and death. The hint of narrative unreliability connects Marlow’s relaying of Kurtz’s words to Yuniór’s relaying of Oscar’s words, suggesting that Oscar, too, may not be “rendered . . . that justice which was his due” (Conrad 216). Beauty and horror, apparent near opposites, share, in this context, the possibility for complicity. Kurtz’s recognition of the horror of the European imperial project in Africa is made more beautiful when Marlow tells Kurtz’s fiancée the story and erases that horror. We might read this as a coded message: Yuniór is consoling the reader, masking Oscar’s final horrifying revelation by substituting the word “beauty” for whatever unspeakable reality he actually articulated.

But it might make more sense to see Oscar’s words as a warning against the seductions of beauty, where beauty stands in for coherence, purity, and consolation. In *Oscar Wao*, beauty—that is, the beauty of consoling, coherent narratives, whether literary or historical—is the site of complicity with horror; beauty in the hands of dictators and writers can be a powerful force for unnamings and misnamings. The novel, in many ways, revolves around the dangers of beauty and ugliness: Oscar’s lack of beauty, Belicia’s excess of it. Beauty is associated with dictatorial rewriting and unnamings: when Beli first tells the Gangster her full name, he replies, “No . . . Your name is Beautiful” (118), an attempt to objectify her not only in the simple sense, but, as becomes clear after his wife has her beaten almost to death, in the more complete way that Galactus or Trujillo might, by erasing any importance her life has, by erasing her very name. His naming her “Beautiful” is an attempt to elicit her cooperation with this project, to charm her into seeing his unnamings of her as flattering instead of as consuming. Beauty in *Oscar Wao* is thus complicit with the authority of empire and dictators, as it disables resistance and masks suffering.

Oscar’s final words should alert us, then, to whatever violence lurks unseen at the end of the novel—whatever the Capitán does to Ybón after he has Oscar killed and whatever the very

narrow-seeming confines of her future have in store. The narrative's last word is a reminder of how difficult it is to challenge the legacies of empire and live in a state of relation. For Yuniór, this would mean recognizing his relationality with Oscar; for the reader this would mean recognizing his or her relationality with Ybón, or any of the other figures who are left out of the party.

Relationality, however incomplete or partial in *Oscar Wao*, is Díaz's answer to a world that is caught in the structures of violence and inequality inaugurated by imperialism. Imperialism's legacy, this violence and inequality takes hold through the historical narratives we tell, narratives that Díaz attempts to unseat. Similarly to Didion, Díaz takes on the post-cold war narratives discussed in this dissertation's introduction, but he aims particularly at post-cold war narratives of globalization that claim that we, like Fitzgerald's Dutch sailor, can move into a fresh, green breast of a new global world, unworried by the effects of empire. In place of these globalization narratives, Díaz rewrites the narrative trope of the fall, arguing that our world was born from an imperial violence that will continue to reverberate as an endlessly circulating and indiscriminate form of blowback. The narrative of the fall, I suggested at the beginning of this chapter, refers not only to the biblical story of the fall but also to the "falls" of late twentieth-century geopolitics, as told from a U.S. perspective: Saigon, the Berlin Wall, and the World Trade Center. In framing imperialism as the prior fall, Díaz makes clear how popular post-cold war narratives of globalization work to extend imperialism's legacies by denying their existence (a denial that is as effective as denying the fukú, which "no matter what you believe, believes in you" [3].) Like Didion, Díaz takes issue with the archive of historical narratives that are based on this denial of imperialism. Yet Díaz is, if not more optimistic than Didion, at least more willing

to entertain a way out: in locating the key scenes of relationality discussed above within archives or around archival material, Díaz imagines building an archive (tellingly, one that is missing key pieces) that allows writers to become entangled with their subjects, to develop a form of relationality that will intervene in rather than deny imperialism's legacy. This chapter suggests that Díaz's probing of the possibilities and limits of relationality constitutes a heuristic for reading and responding to the post-cold war's anti-historical narratives.

CHAPTER THREE

Empire's Excess: Rewriting Globalization and Development Narratives in Jessica Hagedorn's *Dogeaters*

In his 1999 book *The Lexus and The Olive Tree*, Thomas Friedman offers a simple end-of-the-cold-war narrative in which the “Cold War system” is replaced by globalization—a system driven by “free-market capitalism”—in a neat handover of power (8). To illustrate the stark difference between the two systems and the complete replacement of one by the other, Friedman structures part of his first chapter in competing paragraphs that contrast the old and new systems: the cold-war system was “static” where globalization is “dynamic”; power in the cold war revolved around the superpower states, but power under globalization is up for grabs by any corporation or individual; the pre-1989 world was divided into camps, but globalization aims to “integrate” the whole world into one happy camp of entrepreneurs (7–8). Where the cold war was hierarchical and authoritarian, the global system spreads out fluidly and horizontally; some may be, as Friedman euphemistically puts it, “left behind” by globalization, but it is, on the whole, a “democratizing” force.

Friedman follows most popular arguments about globalization in insisting that the spread of free-markets and neoliberal culture is inherently democratizing. In this view of global capitalism, authoritarianism and free markets cannot coexist; in fact, dictators and other forms of state repression are the ultimate enemies of capitalism.¹ Yet Friedman’s description of the shift to the global era suggests just how narrowly democracy has to be defined in order to make this argument. If the cold war and globalization regimes were sports, Friedman imagines, the cold-war system would be sumo wrestling, while globalization would be represented by the 100-meter

¹ This is a point that Friedman draws on in his “golden arches” theory; see page 153 n7 in this dissertation.

dash, if it were run “over and over again” (10). Even in this analogy, Friedman’s assumptions about the democratizing power of globalization are clear: only two sumo wrestlers can compete at a time, but many runners can compete in a race; where sumo wrestlers are outsized, like a top-heavy dictatorial regime, any person on the street could look like a runner. His stated point, though, is that cold war power was all about amassing weight—weapons, alliances, and so on—that could be thrown around, while globalization demands speed and therefore, he implies, getting rid of excess weight. Here is where Friedman’s analogy suggests the brutality of this regime: the excess weight that must be gotten rid of is not the competitors’ body fat but the lives of those whose labor fuels these runners.

Jessica Hagedorn’s *Dog eaters* (1990) is interested in precisely these excesses and the means by which global capital uses and then “purges” them.² The world that Friedman so happily describes as edging out empire is what Hagedorn and others define as contemporary imperialism.³ *Dog eaters* anticipates and challenges this narrative, showing how, under the Marcos regime in the Philippines (1965–1986), the ideologies undergirding globalization went hand-in-hand with a dictatorship propped up by the U.S.⁴ Hagedorn returns to a violent and repressive period of the cold war—the Marcos era—from the vantage point of the end of both the Marcos regime and the cold war. *Dog eaters* places the Marcos era within the context of a long history of imperialism, presenting the “New Society” Marcos aimed to bring into being (and that,

² “Purges” is Neferti X.M. Tadiar’s terms for the “bulimic” way the neoliberal state manages the overflows that it creates by periodically attempting to “clean up” and correct people it considers excessive to its needs (“Manila’s New” 300).

³ *Dog eaters* was published nine years before Friedman’s book, but Friedman’s ideas are fairly well-trod by the time *The Lexus and the Olive Tree* comes out.

⁴ David Harvey shows how inaccurate this argument is; the sort of neoliberal free-market ideology that Friedman sees as defining globalization is very compatible with, indeed often dependent upon, neocolonial conditions and authoritarian rule. When faced with opposition, “the role of the neo-liberal state quickly assumes that of active repression even to the point of low-level warfare against oppositional movements” (“Neo-Liberalism” 155).

in a somewhat different form, later administrations would continue) as another phase in this history.⁵ Marcos' era here is both postcolonial and neocolonial, marked by its history of Spanish, American, and Japanese occupations and by the late twentieth-century global marketplace. The novel's vision of contemporary imperialism in the Philippines centers around this marketplace's trades in fantasies: the stories that recast the repressions and terrors of the Marcos regime for popular consumption, the colonial fantasies that fuel the sex industry in Manila, and the fantasies of economic mobility sold to and then withheld from an ever-expanding underclass by a globally-connected corporate elite. Hagedorn draws out the continuities between the late- and post-cold war global era and earlier periods of imperialism, suggesting that 1989 did not constitute a clean break with this history; imperialism persists, creating both structures of oppression and resistance.

This chapter examines how Hagedorn envisions and criticizes the workings of contemporary imperialism in the Philippines and the narratives that empire generates in order to reproduce itself. Hagedorn employs an archival style to build a history of imperialism in the Philippines that stretches into the contemporary moment. Similarly to Didion and Diaz, Hagedorn incorporates archival material, both fictional and nonfictional, into her novel, yet she goes further than either Diaz or Didion does, using typeface to offset this archival material and leaving it to stand on its own rather than incorporating it into her narrative. Where Didion's and Diaz's characters quote and read newspaper headlines and historical texts, Hagedorn creates an archive-like effect by placing her newspaper articles and other documents alongside her stories so they resemble artifacts in an archive. Assembled and reassembled into various formations, these "artifacts" tell the story and history of contemporary imperialism. Against the clean-slate

⁵ Philip F. Kelly details how, during the 1990s, the Philippines intensified "an explicitly globalized development strategy" consisting of deregulation and market liberalization (1).

approach of globalization boosters such as Friedman, Hagedorn argues for an archival approach to history, one that accretes histories that can be assembled and reassembled in order to expose the rough edges, excesses, and miseries of contemporary imperialism.

The Novel as Archive

Dog eaters collects disparate texts of imperialism from a one hundred and fifty year span of time to create an archive of imperialism in the Philippines. Collectively, the stories Hagedorn tells and the documents she incorporates form an archive from which histories of imperialism in the Philippines can be generated. In an essay written while she was working on *Dog eaters*, Hagedorn suggests the need to generate new histories of imperialism. Reflecting on the “lopsided . . . colonial version of history,” “full of lies and blank spaces, a history of omission” that she learned as a child in a convent school in Manila, Hagedorn writes that this history taught her to “scorn” herself, but as an adult, “living in the country of my oppressor, I learned to confront my demons and reinvent my own history” (“Homesick” 180). The colonial version of history to which Hagedorn refers includes the cultural narratives that elevated Spanish and English over Tagalog and American, and European cultural productions over Philippine ones, as well as the narrative of tutelary colonialism with which the United States justified its imperial advances on the Philippines as a generous exporting of democracy. Tellingly, Hagedorn writes of “reinventing” rather than discovering or recovering her own history, the colonial version having so successfully erased and reshaped the Philippines that history needs to be created again. Confronting the demons of empire, Hagedorn suggests, is not a project of recovery, in which authentic memories and histories may be recuperated, but one of revision. The idea of revision is key to *Dog eaters*’ archival style; her archive is revisionary, and it is open to revisions, to being composed, decomposed, and recomposed.

What I call *Dog eaters*' archival style includes Hagedorn's use of fictional and nonfictional historical documents and her depiction of how the immiserating effects of imperialism are inscribed on people and places, how bodies and memories archive this brutality. One of the most remarked-upon aspects of *Dog eaters* is its use of historical documents and fictional renderings of newspaper articles and radio dramas laid alongside and intercut with the stories that make up the novel. Critics tend to read this as a form of collage or pastiche that privileges marginalized forms such as gossip and constitutes an alternative to the dominant modes of representation embodied by *The Metro Manila Daily* newspaper.⁶ This chapter rethinks this argument, suggesting that *Dog eaters* does not hold up any form as necessarily resistant to power; if anything, Hagedorn suggests that any narrative form, including an archival narrative, can be used to serve power. On the level of historical narrative, collage's power is rooted in its demand to be read archivally. Thomas P. Brockelman writes that collage lives a "double life" because it "gather[s] . . . material from *different* worlds into a single composition, demanding a geometrically multiplying double reading of each element" (2, 10). According to Brockelman, collage elicits something like a parallax view that is necessarily archival—in order to read the

⁶ Lisa Lowe and Maria Zamora, for example, argue that the "collage" style of the narrative interrupts the formation of a national subject by revealing the fissures between people's experiences and the representation of those experiences by the state. Helena Grice argues that Hagedorn's juxtapositions constitute a "counter-discourse" that subverts a patriarchal political system (195). Rachel C. Lee refers to Hagedorn's style as a "fragmentation" that challenges colonialism's "absolute truths and narratives of progress" (81). Debra T. Werrlein interprets the novel's multiple narrators with conflicting views of events as a sign of counterhistory's impossibility, a suggestion of an "irrecoverable" history (47).

Hagedorn herself describes *Dog eaters* as having a collage-like aesthetic: "You can have a novel that is like a collage, which I feel *Dog eaters* is. A lot of novels about the Philippines or set in the Philippines don't cut it at all because they don't capture the crazy-quilt atmosphere and the hybrid ambience" ("An Interview" 97). Hagedorn's point is somewhat different from the critics: for her *Dog eaters*' form is visually collage-like, meant to mirror the sensory experience of life in the Philippines, the "noise and crowds and beautiful animals and amazing flora. . . pollution and urbanization"; collage conveys these hectic assemblages because it is itself a form of (hectic) assemblage.

collage elements in their new context, one must be able to recognize and read them in their old context. That is, one must track and archive the elements' shifts from one "life" to the next.⁷

The archival form is well-suited to the history Hagedorn is reinventing, in which imperialism brings about what Rob Nixon calls "slow violence." Slow violence, as Nixon defines it, "occurs gradually and out of sight" and its consequences are often distant in time, space, and kind from its causes—for example, diseases caused by pollution and people displaced and impoverished by development projects (2). In theorizing slow violence, Nixon is primarily interested in the slow violence of environmental degradation that destroys the lives and health of poor and isolated people, but his concept can also describe the toxic, accretive effects of imperialism seen in *Dogeaters*: splintered memories, urban landscapes overrun with waste, economic and racial inequality, and exploitation, particularly in the form of sex tourism. This slow violence is shown to be the enabling condition of what Nixon would call the "spectacular violence" of the Marcos regime—Martial Law, prison camps, torture, rape, and murder. Hagedorn's archival style is slow in the same sense: it is attuned to processes that occur over time. *Dogeaters*' archives accrete, building up through the addition of archival material, and they attend to the way that empire accretes—the processes by which empire fashions narratives of itself for public consumption and the means empire uses to dispose of its waste products.

Near the beginning of the novel, Hagedorn uses this archival style to stage a scene in which the colonial attitudes of earlier eras ironically blow back, putting a representative of the U.S. military into a grotesque version of the position that imperial policy attempted to put the Philippines. Whitman, the grandfather of one of the narrators and a "leftover from recent wars"

⁷ Referring to her 2003 novel *Dream Jungle*, Hagedorn has said that she used archival material because she was "trying to capture moments in time . . . [a] particular moment in history" ("A Conversation"). She does something similar in *Dogeaters*, although I argue that she is capturing moments in history as they formed, as they become recognizable, "particular" moments in history.

who has married a Filipina and stayed in Manila, nears the end of his life confined to a hospital bed with a mysterious illness that traps him in a violent slumber (14). Whitman is said to suffer from *bangungot*, a feverish sleep from which he never awakens and that his American doctors dismiss as a superstition. Never awake yet not completely asleep, hovering on the edge of death, Whitman is a ghostlike figure. His sleep, however, is not an escape, nor is his dreaming peaceful; he “shrieks,” “twists and jerks epileptically,” “barks like a dog, grunts and sputters like an old car,” cryptically moaning “Chicago” (16). His wife, Lola Narcisa, orders the doctors not to wake him: “If you wake him, he dies. . . . Better to leave him dreaming” (17). Finally, helpless at the hospital, he is given Catholic last rites, despite the fact that he is an atheist and “his hatred for the Catholic clergy runs deep” (17).

Whitman’s illness and death makes sense, I argue, in the context of the historical documents that surround it. The chapter in which Whitman dies begins with a quotation taken from the account of a nineteenth-century French explorer, Jean Mallat, whose book *The Philippines* (1846) catalogs the curiosities of the Philippine islands and the exotic Filipino people for a European audience. Hagedorn quotes Mallat’s description of how Filipinos cannot “abide the idea of waking a sleeping person. . . . They carry this repugnance so far that one can hardly expect them to wake up a priest or doctor to come to the aid of a sick person” (1). Mallat’s pseudo-anthropological gaze produces an irrational other for European consumption, a figure who fits easily into narratives that justified imperial power on the basis of Filipinos’ supposed backwardness. Hagedorn also includes an excerpt from one of these narratives, a 1898 speech in which William McKinley describes taking possession of the Philippines in a passive manner and offers a defense of beneficent, paternalistic colonialism: “I thought first we would take only Manila; then Luzon; then other islands, perhaps. . . . [W]e could not leave them to themselves—

they were unfit for self-government—and they would soon have anarchy and misrule over there worse than Spain’s was . . . there was nothing left for us but to take them all, and to educate the Filipinos, and uplift and civilize and Christianize them” (71).⁸ McKinley describes a reluctant acceptance of imperial power, suggesting that the U.S. had no intention of taking over all of the Philippines; the islands seemed fall into the hands of a passive U.S. Since the country’s inhabitants, true to Mallat’s description, are “unfit” for rule, the acquisition is more of a burden than a boon and McKinley’s decision to “uplift and civilize and Christianize” Filipinos is an act of charity. Whitman is positioned much as McKinley’s imagined Filipinos: claimed by “a native superstition, a figment of the overwrought Filipino imagination” that the American doctors refuse to recognize, his subjecthood, beliefs, and reality are dismissed (14). When Whitman, unfit to rule himself, is Christianized by the priest at his deathbed and Lola Narcisa forbids the doctors from waking him, Whitman is subject to the very logic of imperialism—Mallat’s and McKinley’s logic—that he, as a member of the U.S. military in the Philippines, represents. Thus Lola Narcisa’s performance of Mallat’s stereotype is portrayed here as an act of resistance to authority that “stops [everyone] dead in their tracks, stunned that the shriveled brown woman has so loudly and finally spoken” (17). In the context of the archive that Hagedorn builds in *Dogeaters*, Whitman’s illness appears as a form of blowback, an ironic reversal of the fantasies that European and American colonists imposed on the Philippines. As he is dying, “he shrieks, as

⁸ The quotation from William McKinley is one of the most discussed parts of the novel, but it has a dubious origin. Initially reported by a visitor to the White House, and attributed to McKinley by later writers, this quotation’s authenticity was called into question by historian Lewis Gould in his 1980 book *The Spanish-American War and President McKinley*. Gould traces this quotation back to James F. Rusling, who had published an account of his experience during the Civil War in which he attributed a very similar speech to Lincoln. Gould suggests that Rusling may have “improved on McKinley’s words with a device that served him once before” (109). According to Gould, the suspect part of the speech is the religious framing, something unexpected for McKinley and out of keeping with other public pronouncements he made about the Philippines. Yet whether McKinley actually made this statement about “Christianizing” the people of the Philippines, the statement expresses a common American point of view of the Philippines.

if someone or something had finally caught up with him,” and something has: the dreams of unlimited U.S. power and U.S. exceptionalism (16).

Even Whitman’s status as a “leftover” and his ghostly suspension between sleeping and waking, life and death, echoes the state of spectrality that the U.S. tried to enforce on the Philippines through the so-called Insular Cases, a series of Supreme Court rulings that determined the applicability of the U.S. Constitution to “annexed” territories (Puerto Rico, Hawaii, Guam, and the Philippines). In *Downes v. Bidwell* (1901), a divided court defined those territories as “foreign in the domestic sense,” a ruling that gave the islands, in the words of Chief Justice Melville Fuller, the status of a “disembodied shade” (qtd. in Burnett and Marshall 68). As a “shade” haunting the U.S.’s exceptionalist histories that denied American imperial intentions and actions, the Philippines acted much like the African American presence that Toni Morrison identifies in *Playing in the Dark* as haunting American literature. Legal decisions such as *Downes*, with its assumptions about the domestic and the foreign, galvanized a sense of “America” as a coherent entity outside of whose borders lay entirely spectral realms of people, people who exist outside consciousness. In *Dogeaters*, Whitman is the spectral figure, a ghost trapped forever in a violent dream. His state serves as a reminder of the two faces of imperialism: its spectacular violence and its pacification or attempt to place Filipinos in a state of perpetual suspension. What is “leftover” with Whitman is not the tattered remnants of an imperial system that no longer functions but the powerful attitudes voiced by McKinley and Mallat, the legacy of an imperial system that, although it has changed its shape, continues to have power.

In *Dogeaters*, contemporary imperialism is not far removed from the imperialism of Mallat and McKinley, but it takes shape within late twentieth-century developments. Imperialism survives in the Philippines, Hagedorn suggests, in many ways: through the presence of the U.S.

military, which maintained major bases in the Philippines until the early 1990s; through the dictatorship of Ferdinand Marcos, who was supported by the U.S.; through the pervasive racial anxiety that makes the Gonzaga family so desperate to claim European descent; and, perhaps most clearly in the novel, in the effects of globalization, including neoliberal ideology and the privatization and opening up of Third World countries to the First World's banking sector, that turn Manila into a garbage-strewn playground for tourists. Within this economy, the word "dogeaters" takes on a new meaning. "Dogeaters," a derogatory term for Filipinos, Hagedorn tells us in the notes included with the play she wrote based on the novel, was coined by American soldiers during the Philippine-America War (vii). Hagedorn plays with the word, much as she plays with and turns around Mallat's and McKinley's stereotypes, to describe the various and powerful interests that the neocolony at the end of the twentieth century serves. Originally a racial slur, "dogeaters," like most slurs, more aptly describes its users, the representatives and enforcers of a brutal system.

Showing how a neoliberal economy devours those at the bottom, Hagedorn draws connections between the indentured servitude Mallat depicts in *The Philippines* and contemporary working life. The first sections narrated by Joey, a young sex worker, are interrupted by an excerpt from Mallat's book about a form of slavery that existed in the Philippines: a population called "Negritos" are "sometimes . . . chased out of their homes, taken prisoner, the youngest among them being chosen to be raised by inhabitants in their homes . . . [and] being used for diverse chores, after which they are set free. One of our friends owned one which he gave to us; he was called Panchote" (41). Although the "Negritos" are taken prisoner, owned, traded, and "set free," Mallat does not consider this slavery: he claims that slavery in the Philippines was "abolished at the arrival of the Spaniards" (*The Philippines* 37). In Mallat's

fantasy of a frictionless system of slavery that is not slavery, where abduction and indentured servitude are put right by the eventual freeing of the slaves who are not slaves, he is able to own a slave while denying that slavery exists. Moreover, he occupies the moral high ground even while owning a slave, since slavery is a pre-modern system practiced by “natives” and corrected by Europeans. Placed between two sections of Joey’s narrative, this excerpt suggests that Joey is a contemporary version of Panchote, sold by his mother to Uncle (a detail that immediately follows Mallat’s excerpt). Joey is locked into a system of sex work that resembles indentured labor and allows him few options: Joey’s mother was a sex worker who, he is told, killed herself, and Joey is raised by a pimp. As Joey recognizes, his choices are limited to street prostitution or becoming a kept man; if the latter (unlikely) possibility doesn’t materialize, he will wind up like his mother or Carding, another sex worker who is “finished at nineteen” (45).

Yet Joey is not the only character likened to Panchote; the liberalized economy has room for many Panchotes. In the section immediately preceding Mallat’s description of Panchote, Joey witnesses Pedro, the janitor at CocoRico, being abused by the CocoRico’s owner, Andres. Like Panchote, Pedro works without pay and has been “raised” by Andres, who sends him to a missionary school and gives him cast-off clothing. Pedro appears in only one scene, where he is tasked with cleaning CocoRico’s bathrooms, setting him alongside other figures whose job it is to wallow in the abject of society, to keep a fantasy alive by removing the traces that undermine that fantasy. Although Andres is obsessed with the cleanliness of his bathrooms, he is unwilling to stock them with toilet paper or towels and believes that “no one shits at my disco” (34). His dream of a “gleaming bathroom” achieved without any work is interrupted by Pedro’s labor, which, despite his being “unseen,” is conspicuous. Andres insults Pedro constantly, calling him a dogeater and other names explicitly derived from a colonial context: “savage,” “headhunter,”

“monkey,” “flea,” and “lazy” (33). Joey recognizes that in Andres’s eyes he and Pedro are similarly “charity cases”; they are both modern-day Panchotes, produced by a system that continues to find cheap sources of labor (34).

We can even read Trinidad and Romeo as versions of Panchote; despite their relentless middle-class aspirations, they are low-wage workers without recourse.⁹ Both, to a certain extent, are products of the fantasy of upward mobility that has become a vital feature of global capital’s disposable labor force: “Trinidad loves her job, holds dear the small prestige associated with being an Alacran employee” (160). Although she is poorly compensated and works overtime without pay, Trinidad and the other employees at Sportex are encouraged to see themselves as lucky because they receive a discount on Sportex merchandise, funneling their wages back into the company’s coffers. Trinidad, Pedro, and Joey represent different aspects of a global labor force that has replaced the “primitive” labor force of slavery Mallat describes. In different ways, each supports Sportex and what Sportex represents: the illicit but booming sex trade attracts the sex tourists who shop at Sportex and services the U.S. military that supports and protects the interests of the military and business elites. Pedro and Joey also provide a backdrop of abjection against which the patrons of the expensive Sportex can measure their own comfort and success. Pucha’s mother regularly visits Sportex without purchasing anything but complains about what she consider lower-class patrons, whom she suspects “just mill around the store because it’s air-conditioned” (55). Sportex, although a transnational destination where Japanese tourists feel welcome, is designed to heighten class distinctions: Romeo feels “poorer and shabbier” at the store, his self-consciousness sharpened by the sales staff who, despite coming from similar backgrounds to Romeo, are tasked with making people like him feel unwelcome. The global

⁹ Trini, Romeo, and Joey’s work all bears out Sohn’s argument that the Philippines gains admission to the world economy by “reorganiz[ing] . . . citizens into a service sector that caters to transnational elites” (319).

economy, far from doing away with such exploitative forms of labor, feeds on, multiplies, and diversifies the range of exploitative labor. Yet just as Mallat can believe, even as he owns a slave, that the age of European imperialism put an end to such primitive practices, so too can narratives of the global free-market imagine the global age as inherently democratic and equalizing.

Trinidad, Joey, Pedro, and Romeo are all, one might say, “dogs” in this system: they are disposable, living on the margins and at the bottom of society, but, like Uncle’s dog Taruk, they must protect the very system that makes them disposable. Interestingly, mentions of eating dogs and dogeaters only come up around these characters: Andres calls Pedro a dogeater, Trini worries that the food sold by street vendors might contain dog meat, and Joey jokes with Uncle about eating Taruk (whom he eventually kills). Yet these characters are associated less with eating and more with being eaten. The dogeaters, Hagedorn suggests, are the ones feeding on and profiting from exploited labor: the President and First Lady (characters based on Ferdinand and Imelda Marcos); Uncle, Joey’s pimp and guardian; Joey’s clients; the wealthy Alacrans, who own Sportex; General Ledesma, who runs the military and tortures and kills the President’s political opponents; even the Gonzagas, the upper-class family whose comfortable lifestyle depends on the Alacrans.

In the state of contemporary imperialism, Hagedorn argues, corporate interests, represented by the conglomerate Intercoco and the department store Sportex, are just as oppressive as the “feudal” slaveowners, pimps, and dictators. Indeed, Uncle, Intercoco, and the First Lady are all connected by their ability to bury people, literally and figuratively. Joey’s relationship with Uncle is defined by the fact that Uncle paid to bury his mother, Zenaida, a debt that apparently indentures him to Uncle for life. Intercoco’s name hints at its potential to bury

with the prefix “inter,” suggesting a corporation dedicated to burial, a massive, sophisticated, powerful version of Uncle. Severo Alacran, the “King of Coconuts,” owns almost everything in Manila, from the main film studio to the popular drink TruCola and employs Rio’s father and uncle. Severo’s business, as Rio’s father says, is “built on shit: bullshit” (65). The bullshit of Intercoco, whose real, largely unknown business has little to do with coconuts, is both the corrupt nature of his dealings with the Marcos administration and the actual waste—human and animal—that periodically overflows from the margins of society: the bathroom at CocoRico that Andres is never satisfied is really clean, the outhouse Joey lives next to, the effects of withdrawal Joey goes through, and the river in which Zenaida drowns. Severo’s corporate empire is built on the abjection that everyone else lives. The First Lady, in a story based on a real-life event, has a cinema built within a short timeframe for an international film festival; when part of the structure collapses, killing several workers, the bodies are cemented over so that work can continue without interruption.¹⁰ The motif of burial figures the extent to which this system works by burying or occluding its contradictions, a point I take up in the next section.

Manila as Archive

As Hagedorn archives these connections between apparently disavowed exploitative labor systems and the contemporary global marketplace, she also offers an analogy for the novel’s archiving impulse: the landscape of Manila.¹¹ In *Dog eaters*, Manila is characterized largely by garbage—in the background, there is always the smell of garbage, Joey lives next to

¹⁰ Gerald Lico describes Ferdinand and Imelda Marcos as having an “edifice complex,” referring to the many buildings that the regime commissioned. In *Dog eaters*, the First Lady’s vanity projects, including the arena where the Miss Philippines pageant is held, are part of Manila’s excess—flimsy structures with little use value.

¹¹ Hagedorn has said that Manila is “the central character” in *Dog eaters* (“Homesick” 179).

the city dump, and stories about refuse of various kinds punctuate the novel.¹² The landscape of Manila, then, accretes and archives that which the modern global city does not want to recognize. The persistent presence of refuse in the novel echoes the people who have become a form of refuse—Zenaida, the workers buried building the cinema, Pedro, the children Uncle exploits—discarded and buried by the exploitative economic forces that have extracted enough value from them. Manila’s garbage-choked landscape is, historically, the product of the state’s Friedmanesque longings to remake the Philippines as part of the free-market global economy. Neferti X.M. Tadiar, writing in 2009, argues that Manila is a “product of the historical trauma of martial law,” a city restructured by the Marcos administration’s plans to develop the Philippines—and Manila in particular—into a global destination (149). In order to do so, Marcos took out massive loans through the World Bank and International Monetary Fund and began waging a war against Communist guerrillas that included nine years of martial law (1972–1981). The World Bank and the U.S. supported these repressive measures because they helped secure investors’ returns (Boyce 1). James Boyce details how Marcos’ development plans, based on free-market policies, had the effect of greatly increasing economic inequality and expanding poverty. During Marcos’ two decades in office, although the economy of the Philippines grew, wages, particularly those of the poorest, fell (Boyce 4). Marcos’s rural war against the Communist New People’s Army, along with his sharply shifting the country to an industrial, export-based economy, created an influx of refugees into Metro Manila, where they became both a source of cheap labor and, as they were not all absorbed into the formal economy, an “urban

¹² In his study of squatting and scavenging in Manila, Ricardo G. Abad describes Tondo, where Joey lives, as “a piece of reclaimed land . . . a densely populated area inhabited by large numbers of poor people residing in overcrowded homes and unsanitary conditions” (264). Tondo grew around the city dump and is inhabited largely by people who make a living by scavenging in the dump.

excess [that] overran the government's expectations" (*Things* 146).¹³ Overcrowding and lax public services meant the growth of untreated garbage around the city. At the same time, Tadiar points out, Imelda Marcos, who had been appointed mayor of Metro Manila, began to remake the city as a tourist attraction and cultural center that both depended on this excess population, as it created the thriving sex industry that attracts tourists, and sought to contain it in order to present Manila as a sleek and untroubled destination for elite travelers (146–47).¹⁴ Sohn notes that although characters like Joey may think of Manila as their "personal playground," it is actually "the postcolonial nation-state's essential project, artistically and culturally reconstructed for the benefit of political and economic gain" (319).¹⁵ This is the context that produces both the exploitative labor markets that Trini, Romeo, and Joey work in and the ever-present garbage around the city in *Dog eaters*; Manila's smells of "rotting food," "open sewers" and "fetid canals," is not merely symbolic of, but is also produced by, the collusion of neocolonialism and neoliberalism (207).

The garbage choking Manila inscribes the city's "body" with the social and political upheaval and violence resulting from economic restructuring. A newspaper article details local authorities' plans to pay people for catching flies attracted by the overwhelming amounts of refuse, a problem that stymies even the officials tasked with its management. When mangled,

¹³ Also see Tadiar, "Manila's New Metropolitan Form," for a discussion of "clean-up" and "beautification" projects from the Marcos era to the present.

¹⁴ Kelly notes that, today, the economy of the Philippines is "deliberately attuned to the needs of foreign investors" (1). In *Dog eaters*, this is exemplified by the sex industry, which is attuned to the desires of sex tourists and foreign military personnel.

¹⁵ Zygmunt Bauman contrasts the mobile figure of the tourist with its other, the nominally free but trapped vagabond: "What is acclaimed today as 'globalization' is geared to the tourists' dreams and desires. Its second effect . . . is the transformation of many others into vagabonds . . . travellers refused the right to turn into tourists. . . . There are no tourists without the vagabonds, and the tourists cannot be let free without tying down the vagabonds" (93). Bauman's use of the term "tourist" is broad, but his binary is descriptive of the way tourism and mobility in general works in *Dog eaters*: there are those whom the city is set up to please and those who are at once trapped by the tourists' dreams and desires and at loose ends in the city, as Joey is after witnessing the Senator's assassination.

headless bodies wash up on the river's banks, an extreme example of people turned into garbage, the city's garbage problem takes on a sinister and violent tone. The river Zenaida drowns in is a catalog of abject objects that suggest her devaluation within society and this larger context of violence and abandonment:

They described how she jumped into the river, a watery grave black with human shit, every dead thing and piece of garbage imaginable, the rotting carcasses of dogs and cats, enormous rats with heads blown off by bullets, broken tree branches and the tangled bouquet of wilted banana leaves, palm fronds, and *kalachuchi* flowers. When they pulled out my mother's blue corpse, they say her long black hair was entwined in this mass of slimy foliage and decay, a gruesome veil of refuse dragging on the mud beneath her. (42)

Zenaida is an abject Ophelia, entwined with the other things that have been thrown away and left to decay. The river archives Zenaida's and the city's abjection, mingling violence (dead animals) with signs of natural decay (leaves) and poverty and social breakdown (human waste). As archives, the river and the larger city tell the story of contemporary imperialism, the ways it creates excesses that become refuse. Friedman's vision of the new economy as a 100-meter dash does not suppose any excess; a race run quickly and repeatedly, in fact, needs to be unimpeded by such waste and the runners will, rationally, strip away any excess. *Dogeaters* shows, however, that this economy consumes and produces excesses—people and things with no place in society are used and discarded—and is always struggling to remove the signs of those excesses. The novel's archives function to document these excesses, refusing to allow the smooth surface of global capital to completely bury its waste products.

Empire's Narratives

As *Dog eaters* demonstrates, however, those with power are continuously producing narratives that rewrite and attempt to bury these excesses. Archiving as a narrative strategy is a continuous struggle to redirect attention to these excesses. But empire multiplies and diversifies its narrative production strategies and is most insidious when it outsources its work. In *Dog eaters*, this outsourcing is accomplished by limiting the ways that people can remember, relate, and contextualize within broader historical terms their own experiences and histories.

One way that the state as a representative of empire writes and rewrites history for public consumption in *Dog eaters* is through the collusion between the pervasive entertainment industry, the President, and business elites. Some critics have argued that the entertainment industry in *Dog eaters* acts as a distraction and opiate for a population enamored with American cultural productions, a reminder of the deep entrenchment of U.S. cultural imperialism.¹⁶ It is not clear to me that the entertainment industry is entirely negative in *Dog eaters*; as Hagedorn points out in an interview, Hollywood movies are a “great colonial tool” but “just because you can run into an air-conditioned theater for two hours out of the day to escape from the heat and the oppression and lose yourself . . . the movie musical is [not] the root of our problems.” (“An Interview” 109). However, the novel problematizes the types of narratives produced by the entertainment industry, as the President and First Lady use celebrity gossip magazines and talk shows to burnish their own stories. Because the administration’s appeal lies largely in the First Lady’s glamour, its narratives dovetail with the starstruck narratives of wealth and beauty found in *Celebrity Pinoy* and on Cora Camamcho’s talk show. As discussed at the start of this chapter, much has been written about Hagedorn’s focus on narrative forms that are easily dismissed as trifling, including melodramas and soap operas, and how she brings marginalized discourses

¹⁶ See, for example Myra Mendible and, to a lesser extent, Gladys Nubla.

often associated with women and queer sexuality into the center of her novel. Yet *Dogeaters* also works to expose the extent to which such discourses can collude with power, especially under a dictatorship in which trifling and insignificant-seeming details take on greater significance.

We see this in the description of Baby Alacran's wedding cake, where the story of a seemingly unimportant cake is interwoven with, and depends upon, a story about the military torturing and killing someone. Here, Hagedorn's archival style works much like the landscape of Manila, documenting the process by which an official narrative is made, remade, and packaged for consumptions. What the reader of *Dogeaters* sees is not simply the official narrative but an archive of its becoming an official narrative:

There it is . . . a twelve-tiered, gold and white cake trimmed with silver sugar doves. No. It's a twelve-tiered, white and silver cake with white sugar doves and gold filling, created especially for the occasion by the Alacran family dentist, Dr. Benita Zamora. Her son is a poet of the underground, and. . . [t]he dentist has been detained. Dr. Benita Zamora is simply not at the wedding. . . [T]he poet's mother has been placed under house arrest. Or rather, she was placed under office arrest. The. . . dentist. . . has chosen to spend the rest of her days within the confines of her professional environment.

No. It's actually a twelve-tiered hallucination. . . . No. Actually the silver filigree butterflies were carefully constructed by sixteen blind nuns. . . . The silver filigree butterflies are a gift from the First Lady.

The dentist is dead. The dentist never existed. The unforgettable wedding cake has actually been designed and baked from scratch by the bride's glamorous mother, Isabel Alacran. (153-4)

An example of how, under a repressive regime, “[d]enials [and] disavowals . . . have the ability to create reality outright,” as Grace Hong suggests (119), the wedding cake, at first a definite reality (“there it is”), becomes a hallucination. In a telling example of how dictatorships shape memory against itself, the dentist’s life is erased from memory—she “never existed”—while the cake, the proof that she did exist, becomes “unforgettable.” Even the color of the cake changes several times, suggesting that no fact, even one that should be immediately verifiable, can withstand alteration by the official narrative.

The authorities’ disavowals subject memory to power; something as unimportant-seeming as a cake is not only memorialized but also becomes the instrument for erasing any knowledge of the authorities’ atrocities. Thus the official need to control even the minutest detail, such as the story about who made the cake. The story of the wedding cake displays an intense attention to detail; the color of the cake and its decorations, where the decorative butterflies adorning the cake were made, and the ingredients used to make the decorative doves are described and redescribed, as though the regime’s power to arrest, torture, and kill rested on these details. And, indeed, it is through what might seem to be trifles—soap operas, popular films, gossip—that power is both reinforced and challenged. Here, the official narrative is shored up by the entertainment industry’s narratives of celebrity that describe the dentist as a “popular, affluent . . . dentist to the stars” and Isabel Alacran as “glamorous,” incorporating without a hiccup each new story about the cake. The reference to the sixteen blind nuns reflects popular gossip that circulates a story about the First Lady maintaining a private perfume factory run by blind nuns (139). This shifting story about the cake and the dentist, though, is documented here in all its twists and turns, in a detailed history of its development that tells the story of how a dictatorial regime perpetuates its power.

The narratives supporting contemporary imperialism, though, are many and varied, and *Dogeaters* takes to task both the narratives of a brighter future and social mobility that the neoliberal marketplace sells to Trini, Joey, and Romeo and the nostalgia for an authentic past that characterizes Rio's narration. Both narratives, Hagedorn suggests, route memory and history through channels that are less threatening to power: for Rio, a nostalgia that denies the repressive regime that she lives under and that profits her family, and for Joey, a casting off of memories that impede his optimistic view of the future.

Joey is decidedly uninterested in the past and aware of the ironies of historical representation. Recounting the story of his mother's death, he notes, "This is what they tell me, this is what I've chosen to believe. . . . I don't want to remember anything else about my sad whore of a mother" (42–43). Choosing what he remembers and aware that the story he has may not be the only or the most accurate one, Joey is fully focused on an indistinct future, hoping to leave Manila with a wealthy foreign lover. He can only sustain this hope, though, by denying his knowledge of his mother, who was driven to suicide by this same dream. Yet his lack of memory serves a purpose, perhaps an even larger one than sustaining this hope. As Pucha's letter at the end of the novel suggests, there is an undefined danger, under martial law, in revisiting the past. Pucha tells Rio to "wake up" and accept that the past is past and that embellishing it does not "prove" anything: "*Oye, prima*—this much is true, you'd better wake up and accept it: 1959 was many years ago. . . . Nothing is impossible, I suppose, with that crazy imagination of yours. . . . but if I were you, prima, I'd leave well enough alone" (249). Here, waking up means awakening to the reality that forgetting, moving on, leaving things alone is a safer route. Unlike Daisy's awakening to challenge the status quo, Pucha's awakening involves a type of surrender to the status quo that suggests Joey's refusal to remember may be a survival skill.

This point is reinforced when, after witnessing Senator Avila's assassination, Joey is suddenly open to memories and hauntings, feeling "ghostly apes" and "delicate phantoms" sitting on his shoulders (191–192). Thrust into danger, Joey no longer needs to keep his mother's memory at bay. In fact, to survive, he needs to remember that Uncle has a stake in suppressing Zenaida's memory. When Uncle betrays him, Joey remembers his mother and begins to see the story he has chosen to believe in a new light. Uncle has shut Joey up in a dark, enclosed space—buried him—as he plots to betray Joey to the police. Awakening in the dark and guessing what Uncle is planning, Joey inadvertently whispers, "Zenaida . . . Mother of God, my god, the bastard buried you" (205). Uncle's burying—both literally and figuratively—Zenaida has been the cornerstone of Joey's and Uncle's relationship; Joey has always believed that he owes Uncle everything for burying his mother, whose memory "cheapened and humiliated" Joey and whom Joey was more than eager to forget (205).¹⁷ Realizing that Uncle has tried to bury him as well, Joey comes to see burial as a dangerous oblivion: Uncle not only buried Zenaida in the ground, he also buried her memory as anything other than a "sad whore" and the origin of Joey's debt to Uncle.

Unlike Joey, Rio is obsessed with the past, yet her relationship to the past and her historical imagination are nostalgic. As Linda Hutcheon explains, the term "nostalgia" was coined in the seventeenth century to refer to a deep longing to return to one's home or homeland; by the nineteenth century, nostalgia had undergone "a shift in site from the spatial to the temporal" and largely referred to an impossible desire to return to the past. Rio makes a home in the past and yearns to return to it, a desire that makes her shy away from the ugly political

¹⁷ Chang argues that *Dogeaters* is about the buried mother, a figure for the submerged cost of neocolonialism; Zenaida and Joey represent the Philippines in its relationship to the U.S. Like Joey, the Philippines always "owes" the U.S. for "the gift of itself" (656). Chang also notes that the movies Rio watches are full of "buried" or entombed mothers.

context for many of her memories. Her narrative tries to deny the presence of imperial or repressive power: although her brother and parents discuss curfews and prison camps, features of the Martial Law period, Rio sets her story outside the Marcos era.¹⁸ Rio's narrative begins like a history textbook, with a date stamp, "1956," that suggests more dates will be forthcoming. Instead, Rio returns to 1956 twice, each time with the date stamp, even though we never move out of 1956 in this section. At once initiating and frustrating an expectation of progress, Rio seems unable to move beyond the frame of 1956. Yet nothing particularly remarkable happens in 1956: Rio and her cousin Pucha watch some American films, and we are introduced to Rio's family as they eat dinner and gossip and to Rio's grandmother as she listens to a radio soap opera. Rio's insistence on this date relieves her of any duty to address the Marcos regime, but it also signals the extent to which she is attached to the past in general—hers is an obsessive return, not to particularly meaningful moments but simply to the past itself.

Hagedorn's links Rio's nostalgic narrative to a history of imperialism. Rio's nostalgia is incited, at least in part, by her family's purposeful forgetting of history in an attempt to align themselves with the colonial elite. In response, Rio comes to romanticize this lost past. In trying to reconstruct her childhood, Rio realizes she has no archive from which to generate that history. Unable to date events exactly, she asks "[W]hy is it so difficult to recall? Why didn't I write it all down, keep diaries and journals, photos arranged in chronological order in a fat picture album?" (238). Rio's parents, seeking to remake themselves as modern European citizens, only selectively discuss and keep records of their families. Her uncle Cristobal burns all photographs of his grandparents, who might be part Chinese, but invests in a genealogical chart in an attempt to prove he is descended from Christopher Columbus. Yet Rio does not have access even to this

¹⁸ When Hagedorn revised *Dogeaters* for the stage, she eventually cut out all of these earlier parts of Rio's story to focus on the parts set in the 1980s, an indication that the Marcos regime is crucial to the story.

chart since her father “purposely misplaces it” (239), preferring to think of himself as a “guest” in the Philippines, a member of the mobile colonial elite (7).

Thus we find Rio, on the Day of the Dead, when celebrants remember and visit with dead family, communing with a souvenir of pastness itself. Playing in the yard with her grandmother, Rio finds a snakeskin and her reaction suggests that her memory and narrative are not concerned with recovering childhood memories as much as they are with reentering the past in a general way. Picking up the snakeskin, Rio is “fascinated by its pale ghostly texture, the ridges of serpent vertebrae so clearly etched in the abandoned shell it makes me shiver” (239). What draws Rio to the snakeskin are the marks of its past, its ghostliness and the imprint of its skeleton. The snakeskin is a relic but is unlike the relic Susan Stewart describes, which erases, rather than celebrating or attempting to restore, history. Instead, the snakeskin functions more like Stewart’s souvenir, a “trace of authentic experience” called into being by nostalgia (135). Despite its materiality, the snakeskin is more trace than presence, less an eruption of history than something left behind by history, preserved as a sign of what once was in a brief period before it disintegrates. Unlike the souvenir Stewart describes, though, the snakeskin does not recall a specific event or experience so much as it recalls the past itself; it is the very mark of pastness. That this takes place on the Day of the Dead is important: the Day of the Dead is also a legacy of colonialism, a holiday brought to the Philippines by Spain as part of the Catholic religion. Just as the legacy of Spanish colonialism has led to Rio’s family dissociating themselves from their history, it frames Rio’s understanding of and relationship to the past.

In *Dog eaters*, Hagedorn joins critics of globalization such as Joseph Stiglitz, who argues that globalization in its neoliberal form gives banks in the global North and international banking

institutions a level of control over the politics and economies of small countries that smacks of “yesteryear’s colonialism” (233). In Hagedorn’s analysis, yesteryear’s colonialism is very much alive today. Returning to the Marcos era, in which a brutal dictatorship was supported, on the one hand, by U.S. cold war policies and, on the other hand, by financial institutions seeking to restructure the country’s economy, *Dog eaters* suggests that contemporary imperialism can be found in the confluence of military force and the coercions of global capital. Challenging globalization narratives that spring from the post-cold war end-of-history thesis, Hagedorn shows how, in the decades before 1989, global capital was already wrecking havoc, in collusion with the very same repressive regimes that it was supposed, after 1989, to replace.

Deploying an archival style, Hagedorn documents the slow, accretive effects of a long history of imperialism that continues into the present, effects that include both violence and dispossession and the narratives and spectacles that smooth out and over violence and dispossession. Like Junot Díaz, Hagedorn is interested in how repressive power and the representatives of empire use art to advance their goals. In an interview, Hagedorn compares the imaginative work of dictators to art, pointing out that dictators like Ferdinand Marcos know how to produce “spectacle for the people” and “successful work[s] of the imagination,” statements that might remind us of Yunió in *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, suggesting that writers and dictators have a fundamental similarity (“I’m Interested” 1224). Hagedorn and Díaz take different approaches to the art of empire, with Díaz more concerned about the potential slippage between writers and dictators, yet both ultimately see the danger of such art as its ability to render people invisible, to devour (as Galactus does in *Oscar Wao*) and bury (as those in power do in *Dog eaters*). Both find an antidote of sorts in the archives—in Díaz’s novel, the potential for relating instead of devouring is born out of an archive, and in Hagedorn’s novel,

different archives attempt to roughen the smooth spaces along which global capital glides and under which are buried those it has devoured. I mark this comparison with Díaz novel because it suggests the indispensability of various art forms to contemporary empire. Within the framework of this dissertation, *Dogeaters*' critique of post-cold war developments makes the crucial point that, contrary to what the end-of-history crowd believes, the inevitability of global neoliberalism is not assured. It is these very narratives, whether spectacular and imaginative or (as Francis Fukuyama imagined) boring and (as Joan Didion argues) technical, that attempt to make it so

CHAPTER FOUR

Empire as War Culture: Composing an Archive for Peace in Maxine Hong

Kingston's *The Fifth Book of Peace*

The main text that this chapter examines, Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Fifth Book of Peace*, is in many ways different from the novels by Joan Didion, Junot Díaz, and Jessica Hagedorn on which earlier chapters focused. To begin with the obvious, *The Fifth Book of Peace* is not a novel, although it contains a short novel. Written after Kingston lost an unfinished manuscript for a novel in the 1991 Oakland fires, *The Fifth Book of Peace* knits together a reconstructed version of her lost novel with several pieces of memoir—the stories of how Kingston lost her book on the day of her father's funeral, her search for three legendary lost books of peace, the Buddhist-influenced writing workshop she organizes for war veterans, and her 2003 protests against the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. On the other hand, *The Fifth Book of Peace* does share the main concerns of Didion, Díaz, and Hagedorn's novels: like these writers, Kingston looks back at a cold war event, here the Vietnam War; she examines the narratives of nationality, belonging, and violence engendered by the Vietnam War and locates the war within a longer history of imperialism, domination, and warfare. She also employs an archival imagination, although one that differs from the archival imaginations of *The Last Thing He Wanted*, *Dogeaters*, and *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*. Most importantly, though, Kingston spends less time exposing this history and its extension into the present than she does developing a theory and a text about peace that will counter these forces of domination and violence. Where Díaz, Didion, and Hagedorn unpack the histories and fallouts of violence, they do not directly broach the issue of peace. For Kingston, though, the challenge lies not only in

writing about the Vietnam War and connecting it to the Gulf War and the ongoing wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, but also in developing a theory and practice of peace that allows her to write about the wars critically and that offers an alternative to this history of imperial violence.

I turn to Kingston's unusual text in the final chapter because *The Fifth Book of Peace* offers a different vantage point from which to reflect on this project's key questions about the status of the U.S. as an imperial power in the contemporary era; the fallout from both the wars waged across the globe as part of the cold war; the marginalization of the global effects of the cold war; and the willful amnesia and violence that accompanies the move, in the last decades of the twentieth century, towards a supposedly happier world of globally-linked consumers. As a manifesto of peace, *The Fifth Book of Peace* opens up peace as a new (or newly rediscovered) area in literary studies, one that has the potential to address some of the most pressing problems in our field. As the U.S. fights (or "winds down") two overt wars and untold covert wars, war, security state apparatuses, and defense technology are some of the primary ways that people, states, and transnational entities interact across the globe. In this context, peace is a timely analytical concept. By ending with Kingston's book of peace, I hope to encourage in literary studies a renewed interest in the concept of peace, which is presently undertheorized and understudied in our field. In this chapter, I redescribe the history of imperialism raised in earlier chapters as part of a war culture. Unlike many studies that examine war literature, I am interested less in the well-trod ground of war trauma and the horrors of war and more in the operations of war culture and the ways those operations might be decelerated by a serious engagement with the concept of peace.

The first section of this chapter analyzes how *The Fifth Book of Peace* responds to the often unspoken assumption that peace is not a fit subject for literature, particularly not for

narrative works. In this section, I examine how Kingston's theory of peace reasserts peace as a human endeavor and an art form, rebutting the notion that peace is boring or a sanitized utopian vision removed from human striving and therefore not amenable to storytelling or rigorous thought. The second section contextualizes Kingston's theory of peace within other theories of peace, both negative—defining peace as the mere opposite of war—and positive—a peace that includes social justice. Finally, the third section suggests how the concept of peace that Kingston develops in *The Fifth Book of Peace* reflects on our contemporary war-on-terror culture.

Aesthetics of Peace

In 1999, Werner Sollors noted the striking absence of discussions about peace in American Studies, hoping that peace would soon become a “buzzword” of the field. Ten years later, Giorgio Mariani took up Sollors's appeal, arguing that the concept of peace has an important place in American studies. By and large, though, peace has not become an important concept, in its own right, in American studies or literary studies, although it does provide the backdrop for a good deal of criticism: peace is one of the unspoken goals of critiques of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, of literature that describes the misery and inhumanity of war, and of the critical interest in identifying and exposing forms of violence. Even in these contexts, peace often exists only as the untheorized, unanalyzed, and often unmentioned other of war. The study of peace, in the late twentieth and twenty-first century, has largely been the province of Peace Studies or Peace and Conflict Studies programs, which take a social science approach to peace, studying the causes of wars, theorizing the possibilities for creating negative and positive peace, and enumerating the conditions needed for achieving various kinds of peace.¹

¹ For example, a graduate seminar on peace studies in Rutgers' Political Science department, *Theories of War And Peace*, focuses on “the causal paths leading to war or to peace, and the conditions under which various outcomes are most likely to occur.” At the University of Virginia School of Law, *War and Peace: New Thinking About the Causes*

This disciplinary pigeonholing seems to be both the result of and a driving force behind literary studies' hesitance to make peace an issue, despite its being a rather obvious home for the study of peace. Peace is generally seen as a utopian concept and therefore perhaps best suited to the rigors of political science, where it can be measured, carved up into achievable, local goals—a set of plans to achieve a stable peace in a particular place at a particular time. Without this orientation towards praxis, peace threatens to become what Robert Pinsky calls “the religious rhetoric of peace achieved” or “salvation” (“Peace” 172). The religious rhetoric of peace disengages with the world, focusing either on an individual and interior sense of peace or a peace that exists in an afterworld; this type of peace is neither critical nor applicable to a world of war and injustice. While literary scholars often study utopian concepts and are eager to claim rather utopian goals for their work—social justice, environmental sustainability, the deconstruction of destructive gender and racial roles, the ethical treatment of animals, and so on (all of which are, it should be noted, components of a positive peace)—they generally see their work as disturbing the peace. Peace, in this sense, is another word for the status quo, quietism, apathy, or the navel-gazing of self-help books. Literary studies, for obvious reasons, privileges the study of struggle. The theoretical concepts, texts, and movements that have had the most impact in contemporary literary studies are those concerned with the radical struggle and resistance that constitutes democracy, that motivates decolonization, that resists imperialism, and so on. In contrast, peace seems to describe a state beyond struggle, of consensus, where the work of literary critics is either finished or has been foreclosed.

Fiction, literary critics' main object of study, seems embarrassed by the notion of peace. Mariani suggests that peace may have no place in fiction because, “like happiness, harmony, or

of War and War Avoidance is taught as a seminar on national security law and “explores the latest research about controlling war” and “efforts to strengthen world order and human freedom.”

requited love . . . [peace] may indeed lack aesthetic appeal and—to the extent that all storytelling hinges on some kind of conflict—be virtually impossible to narrate”(112). Mariani goes on to propose ways to reconceptualize peace in order to make it narratable, but he suggests that for most writers and critics peace is an admirable goal but a boring subject. Robert Pinsky’s 2006 poem “Stupid Meditation on Peace” offers some insight into why peace might be seen this way. Pinsky reflects on the apparent opposition between art and peace, suggesting that peace is anti-narrative and not particularly compelling as the subject of poetry because it is not a human phenomenon: “The current of Art . . . runs not between / Banks with birdsong in the fragrant shadows— / No, an artist must follow the stinks and rapids / Of the branch that drives the millstones and dynamos” (“Stupid” 21–24). What is most striking about these two sites—the banks with birdsong and the stinks and rapids—is their very different relationship to humanity. Peace is represented not by a stream but by a still life, one notably uninhabited by people, a place outside human life and understanding. It may inspire description, but it lacks the movement and humanity of narrative. Where art and industry are currents in motion, peace stands still on the banks. Even as a tableau, the tweeting of birds and “fragrant” space might only support a lightweight, perhaps trivial or insipid, piece of art. The “stinks and rapids” of industry, though, are so full of humanity as to be polluted by it; they contain not only movement but also plenty to aggrandize, criticize, regret, and resist about human industry. It makes sense, then, when the speaker concludes that although he envies the dove, “[s]ymbol not only of Peace but sexual / Love,” (2–3) his “monkey min[d]” turns away from the dove and towards his “restless, inferior cousin / Who fires his shit in handfuls from his cage” (10, 29–30). The human, even in monkey form, is the source of conflict and interest. If literary studies has overlooked peace as an object of study, it may be in part because peace is viewed as a state outside the human, beyond the

purview of the humanities, and therefore outside of the literary. Peace, on this view, takes place after the end, when characters live happily ever after and the dead rest in peace, when narrative and all its possible meaning has concluded, and the flux associated with the human has flattened and stilled, when there is, quite simply, nothing left to say.

As anyone involved in a peace movement, arrested during an antiwar demonstration, trying to build the conditions for peace, or who simply identifies as a pacifist or nonviolent person would be quick to point out, though, the pursuit of peace is not itself peaceful in the sense of Pinsky's bird-filled riverbanks. It is entirely human, very messy, and, like many of the ideas valued in literary studies, indefinitely deferred and full of strife.² Mariani eventually comes to this very point: "if peace is reimagined as the struggle for peace and justice, it becomes both as narratable and 'spectacular' as war" (112).³ In an essay published the same year as "Stupid Meditations," Pinsky argues that peace is a more complex concept, one which has all the elements of narrative: peace, he asserts, is "unexpected," "many-sided," and "rooted in conflict" ("Peace" 178). Art, represented in this essay by poetry, with its "unsettling and contradictory" ability to "embrace . . . the beautiful with the terrible," is the ideal site for thinking about peace (175). Contrary to his vision in "Stupid Meditation," in which peace is necessarily divorced from art, Pinsky here argues that in art peace does not "avoi[d] violence and struggle and terror," does "not ris[e] above them but somehow include[es] them" (175). Of course, Pinsky's original

² Judith Butler develops a theory of nonviolence (which is not necessarily the same thing as peace) as a call that arises from formative violence—the violence and aggression through which subjects are formed (*Frames*). In the general struggle to resist this violence and the specific struggle against being violent oneself, a call to nonviolence can be made and heard. Without this struggle, Butler argues, there would be no possibility of nonviolence; nonviolence is forged in and constituted by struggle.

³ An example of this might be Norman Mailer's description of the Quaker war protestors who, at the end of *Armies of the Night*, are lying naked "on the cold floor of a dark isolation cell . . . wandering down the hours in the fever of dehydration" (287). Completely committed to the cause of peace, even to the point of refusing to wear prison clothing, the Quakers become a symbol of focused, driven striving, comparable to the salmon making the seemingly impossible trip upstream in Robert Lowell's "Waking Early Sunday Morning."

image of peace as a perfumed riverbank is a fiction: no one knows what a peaceful society or world would look like, nor what the art such a world would produce might be like. In arguing for the grittiness and interestingness of peace, it is important not to assume that achieved peace is, indeed, anti-narrative, boring, static. As Kingston argues, peace is an unknown state, its contours and stories yet to be told; it largely exists in the realm of imagination, even as people and institutions attempt to develop peace in the world. No one knows whether it is possible to sustain narratives of and in a peaceful world, and that ground should not be ceded to a rote argument about how narrative, struggle, and peace work.

Michael Warner offers a genealogy of this view of peace as a static, nonhuman state, a view that he argues is influenced by both war culture and Christianity. He explains that the modern state, in claiming an exclusive right to legitimate violence (thereafter conceived of as force) and thereby delegitimizing violence from any other source, makes it possible for us to think of even subtle types of nonstate force and coercion as violence. (We see the assumed legitimacy of state force contrasted to the illegitimacy of all other violence very clearly in the way state officials in the U.S. and elsewhere talk about terrorism, a point to which I will return at the end of this chapter.) For Warner, this notion of violence has a redemptive function that is entangled with a Christian interpretation of suffering as redemptive. Both of these traditions externalize violence and nonviolence as, respectively, “human evil” and “a realm beyond history and humanity [that is] a point of aspiration” (46). Thus peace becomes otherworldly, even messianic: “The perfect state of peace is now imagined not as the precarious accomplishment of wisdom and just rule but as a heavenly state, beyond human affairs altogether” (46).⁴ I would further suggest that splitting peace from human affairs makes any suggestions for achieving

⁴ Some Daoist texts, such as the *Taiping Jing (Scripture on Great Peace)*, see peace as a product of human organization and outline strategies for monarchs to achieve peace.

peace through “wisdom” or “just rule” seem to be naïve utopianism, an attempt to create heaven on earth.

Kingston responds to this long tradition of divorcing peace from everyday life by grounding peacemaking in human activity, even as she recognizes what Warner calls peace’s precariousness. To make something, especially art, in *The Fifth Book of Peace* is to make peace, and peace, Kingston insists, must be made by people, even if only in their imaginations. Brave Orchid, Kingston’s mother, offers the most bodily version of this view of art when she compares Kingston’s burned manuscript for the Fourth Book of Peace to a burned quilt and tells her not to worry about the lost book because she still has hands and therefore can “make” the book again. “What an odd idea, that books come from the hands,” Kingston thinks (29). This odd idea brings to the fore the crafting, as opposed to the display or presentation, of art. That art must be forged of imaginative and physical work is key; Kingston’s idea of peace eventually returns to a similar idea of craftsmanship. The epilogue of *The Fifth Book of Peace* ends with this injunction: “here’s what to do during war: In a time of destruction, create something. A poem. A parade. A friendship. A community. A place that is the commons. A school. A vow. A moral principle. One peaceful moment” (402). Combining the tangible (a poem, a parade) with the intangible (a moment, a vow) and those that may be somewhere in between the tangible and intangible (a place, a school), Kingston emphasizes the act of imaginative and physical making—constructing objects, spaces, relationships, stories, events—as the proper response to war. Peace (or a peaceful moment) is actually one of the items on the list, suggesting that peace can be a method as well as an end, that it can be made directly or indirectly.

Kingston recognizes the elusiveness of peace, but for her this is not a sign that there is no place in this world for peace and that we should resign ourselves to that fact. Instead, peace’s

fleeting and dream-like nature calls out creativity and handiwork. The list of things to make during war comes directly after a passage that describes peace as tenuous and delicate: “The images of peace are ephemeral. The language of peace is subtle. The reasons for peace, the definitions of peace, the very idea of peace have to be invented” (402). Rather than giving up on peace because it is subtle, Kingston suggests, we have to make it concrete. Kingston’s view of peace works against the tradition Warner describes by placing peace squarely within the realm of human endeavor, where it becomes, for all its ephemerality and subtlety, something to be worked on and towards. Contra Pinsky, Kingston argues that peace may as yet be only a possibility, but that people can construct peace.

For Kingston, that construction is her book; her task is to figure out how to write a book of peace. *The Fifth Book of Peace* embodies and is concerned with a specific type of construction: remaking, reinvention, revision. Kingston attempts to reinvent the ancient, legendary Chinese Books of Peace that may or may not exist, reconstruct the novel that she lost in the fire, and help the veterans of war in her writing workshop reinvent themselves as veterans of peace.⁵ If peace is a struggle, as Mariani argues, Kingston suggests that it is a *constant* struggle to make the elements of peace and remake a culture of war into a culture of peace. The constant work required to pursue peace is echoed by David P. Barash’s claim that peace is “asymptotic”: we may draw close to it, but never quite reach it (1). Enjoining her readers to create parades and poems, Kingston argues not just for making something in the face of war but continuously remaking: “[t]he reasons for peace, the definitions of peace, the very idea of peace have to be invented, and invented again” (402).

⁵ The published collection of writing that emerged from these workshops is titled *Veterans of War, Veteran of Peace* (2006).

That peace needs to be invented and invented again suggests that peace is undergoing a continual process either of revision or of birth and rebirth. Reinvention occurs in two registers here: as a form of revision (reworking what has already been invented) and as a form of continuous creation from whole cloth, a keeping up (making again, perhaps to add to an already existing store or to replace what has disappeared or been lost). This dual impulse is first introduced in the title—as the fifth book of peace, this text is imagined as both a revision of the three original lost books of peace and an addition to a series. The logic of the series suggests continuity, a stretching and enlarging of a theme; the logic of revision suggests a remaking, a transformation. As the fifth in a series, Kingston’s text adds to a collective, imagines itself as one within a community of books of peace, even lost books of peace. As the fifth rewriting of an earlier text, *The Fifth Book of Peace* is transformative, extending but also breaking with what exists; as an ex-minister of culture tells Kingston, because she must have imagined the books of peace, she is “free to write whatever [she] like[s]” (52), unbound by the strictures of any predecessors.

If writing peace is a process of constant reinvention, the scale and scope of a book of peace might be infinite. To accommodate this constant reinvention, a book of peace will necessarily be excessive, as it gathers all of these revisions, these documents of peace, and forms an archive for future use. Kingston’s search for the three lost books of peace is an example of this excessive reach. She finds that the books are untraceable, either because they never existed or because they exist in too many forms; in response, she attempts to trace both the disappearing and the multiplying texts of peace. Colleagues in China and the U.S. give Kingston leads to dozens of sources: titles of ancient texts written on paper, stone tablets, and bones. The books of peace may not even be books at all: “[s]earching for books” Kingston muses, “has lead me to

bones, water, clouds, choreography” (54). She identifies several different time periods during which books of peace “may have appeared and disappeared” (49) and learns that there may have been more than three books: “‘Three Books of Peace’ does not mean exactly three Books of Peace. Three is a symbolic number. It just means there were a lot, more than one” (53). Even the term “peace” proliferates as Kingston catalogues at least eight Chinese characters for peace (51–52). A book of peace, then, must have an overflowing, enlarged scope and scale.

Kingston’s theory of peace is influenced by Buddhism, which takes an enlarged view of responsibility and community—one is responsible to everything, not simply to one’s immediate community. Stretching the limits of any book, Kingston’s idea of peace is not just larger but infinite and indiscriminate. When her mother recounts her experiences nursing the war-wounded and how she refused to tend those who were going to die in order to focus on those she could save, Kingston thinks, “But what about the Buddhist idea: ‘However numerous the sentient beings, I vow to save them all,’” suggesting just how enlarged her idea of peace is (281). It is this push to include everything and to save everyone, even those who cannot be saved, that drives her peace writing.

Kingston builds this expansiveness into her community-based theory of peace. After the fire, Kingston decides that she will not be able to reconstruct her novel in isolation: “The garret where I wrote, which was just my height, burned. A sign. . . . No more solitary. . . . The Book of Peace, to be reconstructed, needs community” (62). This book of peace begins in an inclusive gesture, one that results in Kingston setting up the writing workshops that become her community. Kingston’s notion of *sangha*, derived from Buddhism, describes a community dedicated to peace—perhaps not at peace but always creating, writing; she brings this sense of

community to the writing workshops. Kingston's *sangha* is never limited, though, and its potential to grow stretches her book of peace even further.

The excessive archival style of *The Fifth Book of Peace* is a writing out of this theory: if peace can be built by forming an infinitely-expanding yet intimate community, Kingston's excessive style, and particularly the lists that she uses throughout *The Fifth Book of Peace*, attempt to accumulate and expand the contents of the book while maintaining a sense of connection to each element that enters the book. Kingston refers to this inclusive impulse when, after listing the many items that she salvaged from her burned house, she writes that she "quit collecting stuff when I realized that I could end up carrying all of it, the entire contents of the lot, all of the ashes, even the burned dirt" (36). Her desire to collect and keep everything that was burned or partially burned mirrors her impulse to fit everything that she can into this book. Kingston catalogs the books of peace she comes across, her neighbors, the people she brings to the burn site, the gifts she receives at a conference, the possessions that Taña and Wittman (the characters in her reconstructed novel) give away before leaving for Hawaii.

While some of her lists are simple inventories of items connected only by virtue of being examples of the same category of thing, other lists function to create connections across time and place, inscribing an expansive sense of community. When her translator tells her about the books of peace written on "oracle bones," Kingston constructs a list that connects her peace writing to a four thousand year-old tradition:

Writing on bones, turtle shells, pottery, sticks, and jade began at the start of history, the Shang dynasty. . . . Shang pottery was black; Santa Clara pottery is black. . . . The first king of the first period was Hong, the same Hong as our name, as we Americans from the village of a thousand Hong pronounce and spell it. Hong had an epithet—Hong the

Completer. The Peace hexagram is number 11 of the I Ching, which also began during Shang. There isn't a War hexagram. I did not get the Peace hexagram on a throw of coins. I had to turn the pages to it. (47)

This list functions less as a chronicle or series of like things and more as a narrative that draws together apparently unlike things into a history in which *The Fifth Book of Peace* is an heir to the oracle bones and the I Ching. Kingston's lists work both to pack more into her text, but also to create a kind of community in which Kingston belongs to a tradition of artists and writers producing texts of peace.

These lists recall that other famous cataloger, Walt Whitman, after whom the main character of Kingston's fourth book of peace, Wittman Ah Sing, is named.⁶ Like Kingston, Whitman is attempting to define an expansive, inclusive community. Like Whitman, Kingston creates a community, in part, through lists and catalogs but hers have a somewhat different function than Whitman's famous lists. Whitman's lists have long been read as an expression of the poet's democratic vision: as in a pure democracy, every item in a list (or in Whitman's lists, at least) is equal to every other. Wai-Chee Dimock argues, however, that Whitman's lists create a formal equality that works by denying any possible attachment between particular members of a category; through his lists, Whitman constructs a universal democratic subject who is open to others categorically, but unattached to any other in particular. His community of a democratic nation depends, according to Dimock, on this severing of specific attachments: to ensure equality, people must be freed from any distinguishing features and become substitutable, "one as good as the other" (70). Kingston departs from Whitman on this point: her lists, while echoing

⁶ Wittman Ah Sing channels Walt Whitman in his embrace of difference and his observations of a tumultuous diversity (see Mackin). But, as Patell notes, Wittman's minority ethnic identity also points up the aporias in Walt Whitman's insistently equalizing gaze. Also see Tanner for a discussion of similarities between Walt Whitman and the Wittman of *Tripmaster Monkey: His Fake Book* (1989).

Whitman's all-encompassing embrace and imagining of an open community that any stranger may enter, also insist on the importance of particulars and the attachments necessary to building a community at peace. Indeed, Kingston sees community as a more concrete concept than nation: "Crossing, erasing, broadening boundaries, people had come here from all over the world. . . . living in community, living in peace. . . . abstract terms such as 'nation' put me into despair" (390). The nation, despite its identifiable borders, is abstract; a community that erases and broadens boundaries, as utopian and nebulous as it sounds, is anchored by particulars.

If Whitman's lists of people who constitute the nation limn a democratic community composed of representative types who have shed their particular contexts, Kingston's lists describes a community composed on the basis of particular contexts and connections. Most of the objects Kingston takes from her burned house and catalogs are marked by attachments and carry a history:

The string-holder, once heavy black steel, for dispensing a cone of red string; I'd looked forward to having blessing strings for everybody for the rest of our lives. (My father snapped string apart with a quick move of his fingers, a trick I never mastered.) . . . A faded Christmas-decoration dog that Carmen had given me. (I got so excited, I dropped it on the cement floor of the vanished garage. I kept the pieces.) (36)

These items attain an equal significance within the list as mementos of Kingston's former home, but they also carry particular meanings and attachments. Like many of the objects that were burned, the string-holder is now defined by what it can no longer do: supply the string that Kingston, in retrospect at least, had expected it would. But the string-holder is also embedded in another history and connected to Kingston's father, who dies just before the fire. These two contexts—the fire that touches all of these objects, thereby making them listable, and the specific

link between the string-holder and Kingston's father—are independent of each other but together form a story that spans from the past (her father's snapping pieces of string, her hoping to do the same for the rest of her life—the “I'd” suggesting a hope that existed only in the past) to the future (no longer being able to supply string from this spool).

Other objects in the list are particularized when Kingston describes them as though the reader knew the items: “Monkey with his paint burned off. The Santa Clara wedding vase, the lizard's foot almost detached from it, the mica dimmed.” This assumed familiarity emphasizes how deeply embedded they are in Kingston's life, as though she could not imagine a reader who would not know the Santa Clara wedding vase. Yet other items are generic, but in their physical particulars, shaped by the fire, tell some story about the fire: “Forks with every other tine missing. So, a tine-width apart, the fire had been different.” The fork carries a small history of this event in Kingston's life, a testament to the nature of the fire that took her house and book. All of these objects seem to be admitted to the list on the basis of their particular histories and Kingston's particular attachment to them.

But the inclusiveness of the lists also indicate that writing peace is always incomplete; after all, as Kingston's desire to carry off the dirt from the site of her burned house suggests, there is always one more item that can be added to any list. The incompleteness of peace work is part of why a community is necessary, so that members of the community can carry on work begun by others. Kingston uses Hong the Completer to figure this necessary incompleteness. He reappears when Kingston is readying herself to rewrite her burned novel: “I am related to Hong the Completer [. . .] I should be able to write again about the time during war when Earll and I took our son, Joseph, and left to live in Hawai'i . . .” (62). Perhaps Kingston can be another completer and finish the partial, lost manuscript, complete the series of Books of Peace. Yet she

doesn't even complete the sentence, letting it peter out in an ellipsis, suggesting that though she may continue writing her novel where she had left off before the fire, the writing of peace is necessarily incomplete. Others will need to pick up the work, as she picks up the work done by Shang Dynasty writers who carved "peace" on bones. Only in a continuous community can this always incomplete work happen.

Like the scale of peace, the time of peace is not simply long but infinitely longer and requires patience: "Peace . . . would take a longer writing-out to make real. Its book has to be longer than war books. . . . Sudden fast change is a method of war. The logic of peace has to be spoken out at length." (54). If thinking peace demands a different time frame than war culture, a slowing down, then peace might happen across geologic spans of time. The work of peace may never be complete because it can only happen in and over such an elongated time. Kingston suggests that time and peace are analogous precisely because the time of peace is longer; peace, like time, is ungraspable in its entirety. Time is, Kingston writes, an "[u]ntraceable element. Invisible, untouchable, maybe unreal, like silence, like peace and silence" (392). A quantity like time, a quality like silence, peace is (at least initially) only approached through simile. Like silence and time, peace resists being represented whole; it may be apprehended in partial or singular measurements—an hour of time, an eon, a moment of silence, a silent space, a period of peace, a region not at war—but it cannot be traced in its entirety.

Denise Levertov makes a similar point about the time of peace in response to calls for poets to create an "imagination of peace" (3). Levertov resists this call, writing that peace is like a poem in that it can only be imagined in its construction: "peace, like a poem, / is not there ahead of itself, / . . . can't be known except / in the words of its making" (6–10). Untutored as we are in peace, all we can do, Levertov claims, is "dimly sens[e]" peace until we happen upon the

right language for it (14). Like Kingston, Levertov sees a link between patience, deferral and peace: we might only find the language for peace if we “allo[w] / long pauses” (21). Levertov’s analogy of peace and poem speaks to the artfulness of peace and to its elusiveness. Kingston might say that if peace can be imagined only in its writing, then we should write all the time, until something like peace does arrive.

Time is perhaps most important to Kingston’s theory of peace because revision and recreating imply a need for more time. Late in *The Fifth Book of Peace*, Kingston recounts an episode from *The Odyssey*, in which Athena stops Odysseus from continuing his war, saying “Now, hold,” a line that Kingston repeats:

Now, hold.

Of all that Thây [her mentor] said in the last few days, the one hard-to-believe assertion is: “You can stop time.” I am to stop time. ...I have to stop time. The difference between my father dead and my father alive was but a moment....

My mother is so old. I may have already seen her for the last time. I need to go home. (392)

Holding time has two connotations here: holding time up and back, demanding the patience needed for peace, and containing or embracing. “Now, hold” becomes for Kingston a way—although a cryptic one—for creating peace: she feels charged with creating some kind of holding, a holding back of violent impulses and of time. This cryptic idea of holding is introduced immediately after Kingston revises her woman warrior story; the two moments are connected, I propose, through the way the story holds time and describes the passage of time. There are two key revisions that Kingston makes: in this version, time becomes an important element of the story, and, after being released from her duties, Fa Mook Lan reveals to her troops

that she is a woman and disperses them to a peaceful life. Time separates Fa Mook Lan from her parents: “She is away long years, / and many battles, so long a time / that her father and mother grow old and die . . . she suffers wounds; blood drips red from the openings of her armor. / Her army . . . passes her home village six times / but she cannot stop to place offerings / on the graves (391). These details—the wounding and blood dripping from her armor, the permanent separation from her parents that she joined the army to prevent—speak clearly to the pointless violence of war, its ability to render generous acts meaningless. They also emphasize the passing of time, as Fa Mook Lan, busy with war and the time of war, loses her parents. The time of war, quick though it is, can outlast lives.

This revised woman warrior story reflects Kingston’s concern about her parents’ deaths, which bookend *The Fifth Book of Peace*—her father at the beginning and her mother at the end. Kingston, a warrior for peace, has been away from her parents for a while, traveling with the writing workshop. Her desire to hold time is clearly linked to her wanting to stop time so her mother does not die. Of course, Kingston does not believe she can stop time. But what does hold both time and Kingston’s fears is the woman warrior story itself, a story that can be rewritten to suit Kingston’s current concerns: “I have told her story as a women’s liberation story and as a war story. But I now understand, it is a homecoming story” (390). The only thing that can hold time is writing, which survives time and therefore can be returned to and revised many times. A story can hold and be made to tell many stories, as the story of the woman warrior does for Kingston.

The story of the woman warrior can hold time, though, because it is fiction; *The Fifth Book of Peace* posits fiction as the place where peace might be created through this holding. Yet Kingston has, about midway through *The Fifth Book of Peace*, rejected fiction as a site for

dealing with real-life concerns. Although she introduces her reconstructed novel by claiming that her lost Fourth Book of Peace “had to be fiction because Peace has to be supposed, imagined, divined, dreamed,” in the section that follows the novel, she turns away from fiction (61). Voicing her regrets about the historical events her novel was based on—how she lost contact with her brothers when they were in Vietnam, lost the notebooks of deserting soldiers she and her husband harbored, did not prevent her husband and her brother-in-law from going to war—Kingston decides that “it can’t be too late. Things that fiction can’t solve must be worked out in life” (241). What Kingston seems to mean, though, is that all the losses she suffered during the war cannot be made whole by writing a novel about them. The novel she completed “found no happy ending. The war in Viet Nam won’t come to a happy ending” (241). Fiction has failed her by not excising her regrets, an impossible request. Yet Kingston continues to pursue tidy, happy endings, the property of fiction, in life: when, on the last day of the workshop, the writers start fighting, she “grope[s] for agreement,” unwilling to have an unhappy ending (395). When Kingston turns away from fiction and towards life, what she actually seems to do is transplant the methods of fiction into life, suggesting that fiction does indeed offer the tools for “working out,” even if that working out is never wholly satisfactory.

When Kingston then works out her fears about her mother through the fictional Fa Mook Lan, she makes a claim for fiction as the place for working out what cannot be worked out, a working out that is condemned to never satisfy. If peace is ultimately what cannot be worked out in life, or at least in one lifetime, then fiction is the ideal place to hold and revise stories of peace. Kingston’s theory of peace, then, makes a clear case for literature as the privileged site for developing ideas and art about peace. If scholars of contemporary literature ever collectively take

up peace as a serious topic, they will have a strong starting point in Kingston's writings on peace.

Positive Peace and Negative Peace

This section contextualizes the theory of peace that Kingston sketches in *The Fifth Book of Peace* within debates about the meaning of peace. Particularly, I look at theories that gained traction in the U.S. after the cold war and into the twenty-first century, including the democratic peace hypothesis and its variants and the resurgence of hawkish realist theories of war in the U.S. after 2001. I also look at the writings of philosophers and critics who develop theories of peace that are similar to Kingston's.

In the aftermath of the cold war, as different visions proliferated of what shape a post-cold war world might take, peace emerged as a key concept. Yet the ideas of peace that became—and remain—popular in the U.S. are, by and large, in the service of promoting either free-market capitalism or war. For some, the end of the cold war signaled the start of a period of peace defined as the end of the threat of nuclear brinkmanship and, therefore, the end of the possibility for large-scale war in the U.S. or Western Europe. For others, like Francis Fukuyama, the apparent ideological triumph of capitalism meant that former Soviet and developing countries would be too focused on developing markets, and the U.S. and Western Europe too focused on capitalizing on those markets, to risk serious conflict.⁷ Yet others theorized that conflicts would soon arise to destabilize a fragile post cold war world with newly-formed, and newly-forming, states. Most of these theories of peace are essentially negative; that is, they define peace as the absence of official or declared war. That creating and maintaining global markets involves a

⁷ For example, Thomas Friedman's "Dell Theory," which argues that countries that are part of the same supply chain will not jeopardize their economic relationship by going to war with each other. Meant to replace his MacDonald's or "Golden Arches" theory of peace, which was quickly undermined, the Dell Theory has essentially the same problems.

great deal of violence, and sometimes open war, or that the popular perception of security in the U.S. does not reflect the state of the whole world does not enter into these notions of peace. *The Fifth Book of Peace* contests these negative and limited notions of peace.

In calling attention to the lack, and arguing for the creation, of visions of positive peace, *The Fifth Book of Peace* enters into conversation with others writers and critics who reflect on cultures of peace: Arundhati Roy, who seeks to uncouple peace from its military usage; Jacques Derrida, who links peace to a cosmopolitan hospitality; and Amy Kaplan, Judith Butler, Patrick Deer, and others who analyze different aspects of contemporary war culture in the U.S. These critics provide different approaches to thinking about peace, alternatives to the liberal theories of just war and democratic peace and the realist theories propagated by war hawks and the defense industry.

Kingston's theory of peace as a global, communal, infinitely inclusive effort echoes ideas about peace unfolded by Jacques Derrida and Judith Butler. Derrida ties peace to his theory of an impossible but necessary hospitality in order to develop a sense of what it means to "live together well," a concept similar to Kingston's "living in community" and "living in peace." Living together is an expansive concept and state: one lives together not only in the present and with the living but also with the past, the dead, and "the unpredictable future to come" ("Avowing" 20). "The best of 'living together,'" Derrida observes, "is often associated with peace"; peace, particularly peace between Palestinians and Israelis, is a reference point for much of his essay. Occupying the same land, attempting to construct nations of the same people, and engaged in various states of war for decades, Palestinians and Israelis live together in the most common geographic sense, but they will only "truly" live together when someone "take[s] the initiative for peace in a manner that is first of all wisely unilateral. . . .before all exchange and

reciprocity to come, in the approach of peace or of reconciliation” (23). Building a community that can live together means risk, being the first to offer hospitality without any assurance of reciprocation. This risk is muted in *The Fifth Book of Peace*, but for Derrida it is foundational to a living together that exceeds the social contract and biological chance: “‘Living together’ supposes . . . an interrupting excess *both* with regard to statutory convention, to law *and* with regard to *symbiosis*” (26–27). That interrupting excess takes the form of “the stranger, of a hospitality to the wholly other” who and which remind us that “there is ‘living together’ only there where the whole is neither formed nor closed” but radically open to interruption, strangers with whom one has to take the initiative to live together before anything is offered in exchange (26, 28). A similar spirit of hospitality pervades *The Fifth Book of Peace*, as Kingston invites to her workshop speakers who speak only Vietnamese (when no one at the workshop speaks Vietnamese), veterans of the North Vietnamese army, and Vietnam protesters, hoping that they will be welcomed despite the tensions and miscommunications between them and the U.S. veterans.

In her recent writing on war and mourning, Judith Butler similarly argues that an ethics of nonviolence can be built through a global sense of empathy. In *Prekarious Life*, a collection of essays critiquing U.S. government, media, and popular responses to the events of September 11, Butler proposes that being injured should, instead of propelling one to war, lead one to realize that “there are others out there on whom my life depends” and that others have been injured as well, perhaps in the same way (xii). Recognizing this dependency and developing empathy can become the foundation for a “global political community” that is necessary in a world in which “radical forms of self-sufficiency and unbridled sovereignty” are a myth (xiii). In *Frames of War*, Butler continues the critique she begins in *Prekarious Life*, examining how certain lives

(for example, those lost in the attacks on the World Trade Center in 2001) become more recognizable in contemporary U.S. war culture than others (for example, the lives of Iraqi and Afghani civilians killed by U.S. or coalition forces). The unrecognizable are framed as not human, not real lives; thus the American public does not register their loss as a loss. Butler's empathy is not the same as Derrida's hospitality, most noticeably because it is not predicated on danger and risk. Extending empathy to others who have been defined as the enemy and acknowledging the reality of blowback, one risks being labeled an enemy as well, particularly in the hyper-repressive immediate aftermath of September 11. But this risk is entailed, not integral, to empathy. Like Kingston, both Butler and Derrida are oriented towards an enlarged sense of community that resists violence; the goal of both Derrida's living together well and Butler's empathy is to create and live in peace.

Making Peace in Contemporary War Culture

This expansive, hospitable, empathetic approach to peace offers a serious challenge to contemporary U.S. war culture, which works on the opposite principles—resistance to acknowledging connectivity, refusal of empathy. The figure of the terrorist as the contemporary enemy discourages any sort of hospitable, empathetic gestures, even though—perhaps because—what is supposed to constitute the terrorist's complete otherness is indistinguishable from the tenets of war culture. The uncomfortable contradiction of the contemporary war culture in the U.S. is that it is justified almost entirely by a concept—terrorism—which has no stable meaning and from which those supposedly fighting terrorism cannot completely distinguish themselves except by tautology. Eqbal Ahmad points out that not only is there no consistent definition of terrorism, so that “one person's terrorist may be another's freedom fighter,” these categories shift over time, so that one person's terrorist may the next day be that same person's freedom fighter.

In seeking retribution against Afghanistan (and later Iraq), the U.S. government is committing what it would otherwise call terrorism, except “dressed up as a . . . war by a recognized government” (Roy 216). Of course, for the Coalition forces, the key difference is that they are a coalition of states. Wars or warlike gestures by nonstate actors are one thing; wars launched by governments are quite another. When Obama describes the power that “a few small men with outsized rage “ have to “murder innocents on a horrific scale,” he could as easily be referring to Donald Rumsfeld as to Al Qaeda. Yet where members of Al Qaeda, although defined by their membership in the group and interchangeable with each other, can still be singled out as individuals driven by emotions, Rumsfeld represents the state, whose collective purpose and motivations cannot be devolved onto any one member. “Terrorism” and “terror” suppress the contradictions of war culture, and terrorism is insistently referred to as the harsh reality that makes peace impossible.

In war culture, peace can only be achieved through war. When Barack Obama was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 2009, his lecture focused less on the virtues of peace than on the necessity of war. Praising the nonviolence of Martin Luther King, Jr., and Mahatma Gandhi, he goes to suggest that, for a head of state, peace as an end or a means is naïve. Despite his detailed description of a “just and lasting peace” that includes dignity, human rights, and economic equality, he concludes that war is indeed a means to peace: “The service and sacrifice of our men and women in uniform has promoted peace. . . . the instruments of war do have a role to play in preserving the peace” despite the fact that “war promises human tragedy.” In attempting to justify war while upholding peace as an end, Obama collapses peace and security: in going to war for reasons of national security, we are reaching for peace; national security is another name for peace. His lecture echoes both the liberal theory of just wars and the realist

belief in the need to eradicate “evil” through war. If those urging war are to be believed, peace is the most common reason to fight.

In a wide-ranging essay on the war in Afghanistan, written in late 2001 as the war was in its early stages, Arundhati Roy underscores the absurdity of “war is peace” rhetoric. She quotes Tony Blair and George W. Bush repeatedly testifying, in *1984*-esque language, that their respective countries are peaceful and “reject violence,” all in the service of gaining support for going to war. Yet war can never achieve anything other than more war, Roy’s essay suggests; the net effect of the war in Afghanistan and the Coalition’s bumbling campaign to provide aid to those they have just bombed is to produce more war. This is something that the architects of the war in Afghanistan could have foreseen, for the Taliban that the war was supposedly meant to destroy had been created by decades of war: “The Taliban was compounded in the crumbling crucible of rubble, heroin and landmines in the backwash of the cold war. . . . Years of war have stripped them of gentleness, inured them to kindness and human compassion” (219). There is no peace on the other side of war, Roy suggests, only more violence, as anger, opportunity, and fear coalesce to create another generation of those who yearn to wage a retributive war, those who will profit from war, and those who have no choice but to live with war. In seeking retribution for one violent action (the September 11 attacks) with another, the U.S. and its partners demonstrate, even as they use the language of peace, how untenable the concept of “war is peace” is.

Much of Said’s *Peace and Its Discontents*, a collection of essays and articles on the Mideast peace process, is devoted to the idea that the word “peace” is much abused, with those who have the power to write the narratives of peace (here, Israel and the U.S.) being able to claim, unchallenged, the roles of peacemakers and peace lovers and calling those who reject their

power terrorists or saboteurs. While the U.S. and Israel condemn “terrorists” who reject “the peace process,” Said points out that it is U.S. and Israeli policies “calculated to humiliate, dispossess, and render desperate an entire nation” that give rise to terrorism (“Justifications” 143). Condemning terrorism and its violence, Said insists, means condemning its causes as well, seeing those policies as anything but peaceful. But those who want to claim the mantle of peacemaker must ignore the causes of violence and therefore the possible conditions for peace. Said’s critique of the peace process suggests that giving peace a positive definition—for example, by linking it to dignity or freedom of movement—undermines power. As long as conflicts can be defined as sovereign states battling terrorists, peace can be defined as a cessation of terrorist activity, and as long as peace is seen as an exercise of sovereign power over rogue actors, it is nothing more than pacification. Thus peace becomes a form of war, a violent oppression.

Kingston’s archival writing style offers a detour around the binaries (terrorist versus good guy) that foreclose empathy, hospitality, and the possibility for peace. Kingston connects the Iraq War to the Oakland fires by portraying the fire as a sort of cosmic blowback from the supposedly bloodless war: “For refusing to be conscious of the suffering we caused—the camera-eye on the bomb went out as it hit the door or roof at the center of the crosshairs—no journalists allowed, no witnesses—we are given this sight of our city in ashes.... this scene that is like war” (14). The landscape that looks as though it has been through a war is a device for reflecting on the suffering that war causes and, even more so, the refusal on the part of U.S. citizens to develop any empathy for those who are suffering. The fires are not payback for the suffering per se but for the refusal to acknowledge or look at the suffering, to take responsibility for it. The residents

of Oakland are punished in a particular way: with a sight and a scene. The fire is not an eye-for-eye dose of suffering but a scene of devastation from which they cannot look away.

Kingston connects the Gulf War to the Vietnam War and contextualizes both wars as part of an ongoing imperial war culture. Describing how she and her friends sneak through the police lines to visit her burned house, Kingston depicts them as Vietnamese soldiers hiding from U.S. military helicopters: “Bessie hunkered down under a bush...She looked like a Viet Cong” (31). Surveying the damage caused by the fire, her thoughts move from Oakland to Iraq, from late-twentieth-century U.S. to Vietnam to ancient China in the space of a few sentences, archiving the connections among people, places, languages, and texts, linking the flames and destruction to the Gulf War that has been declared over several months earlier. When she sees a neighboring house, “the house-in-the-gulley,” has survived the fire because it is placed so low, “crouched under the flames and ... made it alive,” she immediately links the house to three wars: World War II, Vietnam and the Gulf War. “So—firewinds blow over the top of the earth. You can see why people lived in tunnels in Viet Nam and Okinawa. (But months ago we bulldozed the desert sand into the trenches, and buried Iraqi soldiers alive. I had read an impossible number—seventy thousand. ‘A turkey shoot.’)” (12). Linking the house’s survival to that of people surviving in tunnels in Vietnam and Japan, Kingston also remembers how staying low can mean dying, burial. The event that Kingston refers to, when U.S. forces used steamrollers to bury an uncounted number of Iraqi soldiers in desert trenches, was itself buried. The strategy was meant to do double duty as a killing and a cover up, leaving no trace of the Iraqi soldiers (Sloyan). The event was kept secret for months; even once it came to light, only estimates of the dead could be given. Kingston collapses this with other Gulf War atrocities, the “turkey shoots” that occurred on what became known as the Highway of Death after American and Canadian forces shot Iraqi

soldiers, many of whom were retreating, and in Rumalia, Iraq, where the U.S. Army cornered and killed Iraqi troops after a ceasefire was in effect (Hersh). Kingston's style embodies Roger Luckhurst's claim that wars can be written about through other wars. Yet Kingston's archival technique is not in the service of representing war or probing its unrepresentability but of building a space for peace. Layering the violence of the Gulf War over the survival of the house-in-the-gulley is both disjointing and connective, calling attention to the ways in which war infiltrates peace and makes survival a figure for destruction.

The Fifth Book of Peace refocuses the questions about imperialism posed in the introduction to this dissertation by defining empire as war culture. In discussing the Gulf War alongside the Vietnam War and the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, Kingston signals her view that the end of the cold war did not change the U.S.'s position as an imperial power nor did it make possible a pacific global order. The Gulf War, a war that is largely absent from American literature and that constituted the first blow to the tenuous promise of a post-cold war peace, plays a crucial role in *The Fifth Book of Peace* as another, contemporary instance of U.S. war culture. This war culture depends as much on brute force as it does on narratives that distance U.S. citizens from that brute force. (Even narratives critical of war culture tend to overlook the Gulf War, reading the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan as the resurgence of an imperial war culture that went dormant after 1975.) Kingston argues that a just blowback from the Gulf War would force U.S. citizens to face the destruction in Iraq. As I have argued in this chapter, though, Kingston is doing more than challenging these narratives of the post-cold war; developing a concept of peace as an art form, Kingston proposes an intervention in those narratives. Kingston's book functions as an archive (as in *The Last Thing He Wanted* and *Oscar Wao*, a necessarily incomplete archive) of documents of this war culture and, more importantly, of

documents of peace. Read as an archive, Kingston's book functions as a call for more thinking of peace, for additions to the archive that might challenge war culture.

Kingston's call for theorizing, thinking, and making peace also, I have argued, creates new ground for critical conversations about contemporary imperialism, conversations that I have suggested literary studies might usefully take up. To close this chapter, I offer one brief example of where Kingston's work might take us. In a 2009 article in *Critical Inquiry*, Dipesh Chakrabarty proposed that postcolonial theory may no longer be up to the challenges that confront contemporary criticism, most notably the challenge of climate change. His argument and a 2012 response by Ian Baucom make the case for a critical concept very much like Kingston's concept of peace. Chakrabarty suggests that postcolonial studies' focus on difference and freedom within the limited time span of colonial history is inadequate for understanding the anthropocene (the current geological epoch defined by the effects of human activity on the environment) and addressing climate change. Freedom, Chakrabarty reminds us, has more often than not been founded on fossil fuel use. Climate change calls instead for thinking about humans as a species within a geologic time frame. In his response to Chakrabarty's essay, Baucom, attempting to find a place for postcolonial studies within this new paradigm, argues that we need "to find . . . in our interpretive strategies, the ability to imagine a counter concept of the commons . . . through which we might be able to find a way out of the anthropogenetic catastrophe gathering around us" (18–19).

If Chakrabarty and Baucom are right, and what is needed is a concept of the human that pays attention to the deep time frame in which people become "geological agents," then the concept of peace that Kingston outlines and archives, which takes place over deep time and within global space, can do valuable work (Chakrabarty 206). Kingston's ever-expanding human

and nonhuman community might be the basis for a “counter concept of the commons.” Peace and the war culture it challenges lie at the heart of concerns about climate change. As Baucom points out, war is an environmental issue: “the time of air war, the time of the jet, is also the time of oil, the time of fossil fuels, the time of vapor trails polluting the heavens” (20). Peace, as Kingston imagines it, bridges the time zones of war and fossil fuels, the populations of empire—those who kill and are killed in wars—and the human species—the community that can make peace. Indeed, the issues that most concern contemporary critics of empire—social injustice, violence, environmental degradation—all overlap with thinking peace. Kingston’s idea of peace as a political concept that has strong roots in the arts challenges the traditional idea of peace as an overly utopian, inartistic, ahistorical concept. If critics of empire can move beyond traditional views of peace, texts such as *The Fifth Book of Peace* can expand current discussions of empire, perhaps to address the anthropocene, perhaps to approach from a new direction the destruction caused by contemporary imperialism.

Conclusion

The post-cold war, the framework this dissertation has developed for studying contemporary American fiction, puts literary texts into relation with the forces of global capitalism and blowback from U.S. imperialism. Defining the post-cold war as the confluence of political and cultural developments that began in the last decades of the twentieth century and that shape the historical imaginations of contemporary literature, this project suggests that we rethink the way contemporary literature is periodized and contextualized. Given the importance of the cold war to literary studies, it is crucial to understand the end of the cold war and its attendant developments: here, I focus on globalization, the spread of neoliberal culture and ideology, and end-of-history narratives. In examining these developments as related forms of contemporary imperialism, this dissertation intervenes in current debates about the nature of contemporary imperialism and its relationship to past imperialisms. I anchor that intervention in the idea of blowback, a corrective to theories that are too quick to predict the end of imperialism and its discontents. Each of the novels discussed in this dissertation returns to the site of a cold-war proxy war and examines the inadequacy of the dominant American post-cold war narratives for addressing the blowback these wars engendered. Joan Didion parallels cold war anti-communism narratives and post-cold war narratives about the liberating potential of finance to show how both narratives blind us to the workings of empire. Junot Díaz and Jessica Hagedorn critique, from different perspectives, the “end of history” thesis and its enthusiastic embrace of the most brutal forms of globalization. While Díaz takes on the idea that the falls of Saigon, the Berlin Wall, or the World Trade Center towers have caused imperialism to go into retreat or nullified its legacies, Hagedorn shows how a long history of imperialism in the Philippines culminates in a neoliberal ideology that drives schemes for “developing” and “opening up” the

Third World. Maxine Hong Kingston, writing from within the post-cold war's overlapping narratives of negative peace and war on terror, proposes an alternative to empire's war culture and its endless cycles of attack and blowback.

In all of these texts, narratives of the nation-state are unraveled yet not replaced with another fixed boundary. An advantage of the post-cold war, as theorized here, is that it aims beyond the borders of the nation to understand how the cold war and its end were (and are still) experienced outside of the superpower states, especially in the Third World locations where the cold war was waged through hot wars. Texts that address the twentieth- and twenty-first-century entanglements of the U.S. and other countries can be placed in a new context when read as post-cold war literary productions. The cross-border trade in body parts and the homeless encampments in Karen Tei Yamashita's *Tropic of Orange* (1997) and the stories of Americans wandering into geopolitical nightmare scenarios in Ben Fountain's collection *Brief Encounters with Che Guevara* (2006) are in some way outgrowths of post-cold war shifts in the nature of imperial power and offer arguments about the accreting forces of blowback around the world.

My sense that the post-cold war should not be bounded, as others have suggested, by 1989, on one end, and September 11, 2001, on the other, not only allows us to read more texts as post-cold war literature but also displaces the U.S. as the center of American literature. As I argue in the introduction, beginning the post-cold war with the U.S.'s supposed triumph and ending it with the U.S.'s tragedy only reinstates the U.S.-focused trajectory that American studies has sought to move beyond. Doing so also runs the risk of prioritizing what Rob Nixon calls "spectacular violence" as the expense of the "slower" forms of violence that imperialism produces. The less rigorously bounded concept of the post-cold war period that I have advanced here provides a framework for scholars in a number of disciplines to extend their understandings

of contemporary global formations. Recent scholarship in history and anthropology has framed the cold war as a global issue; the post-cold war is likewise ripe for a global makeover. Although this dissertation assembles a diverse group of texts, they all easily fit within the category of American literature. Yet the post-cold war need not be limited to American literature. The epigraph to this dissertation's introduction, for example, is taken from Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* (2000), which charts a friendship that begins during World War II, takes occasional detours into England's colonial history with India, and witnesses the fall of the Berlin Wall as a momentous occasion; the two friends are sure that it was built for a good reason but are unable, by 1989, to remember what that was.

Perhaps just as importantly for literary studies, eschewing the popular notion that the post-cold war period came to a halt when the world changes on September 11, 2001, makes possible new assessments of the literature of 9/11 and the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.¹ Indeed, the post-cold war framework that I have laid out here goes a long way toward critiquing contemporary literature along the lines of Michael Rothberg's call for literature that "charts the outward movement of American power" while "provincializ[ing]" U.S. claims to exceptionalism (153, 158). Reviewing some of the best-known 9/11 literary works, Elizabeth S. Anker concluded that much of this work failed to react critically to the event and thus contributed to an ongoing "amnesia" about the U.S.'s global role while reinscribing "myths of sovereign exceptionalism and greatness" (481). If September 11, 2001, is not posited as a bookend to an era, more critical literature on 9/11 and its aftermath can come to the fore. For example, Sherman

¹ Wendell Berry's essay "Thoughts in the Presence of Fear" exemplifies this type of thinking in its first thesis: "The time will soon come when we will not be able to remember the horrors of September 11 without remembering also the unquestioning technological and economic optimism that ended on that day" (37). "Technological and economic optimism" are defining features of the post-cold war, and, of course, Berry's prediction did not come true. However, the assumption that this could happen is based on the idea that technological and economic optimism are divorced from and opposed to the worlds of war and blowback, a point that this dissertation has sought to subvert.

Alexis's short story "Can I Get a Witness?" (2004) irreverently questions the assumptions of popular reactions to 9/11 through the story of a woman who escapes a small-scale terrorist attack shortly after the 9/11 attacks and then scandalizes her rescuer by refusing to call those who died in the 9/11 attacks "innocent." Could there have been among their numbers, she wonders, abusers whose families' lives were made better when they never came home? This framework also allows a different approach to what are widely considered successful 9/11 stories, such as Joseph O'Neill's *Netherland*, a novel that is tangentially about 9/11 but whose main characters are not anchored in the U.S.

Understanding the post-cold war from this larger vantage also helps dispel the idea that the period between the end of the cold war and the beginning of the war in Afghanistan was a time of universal peace and prosperity, as predicted by the end-of-history theorists. In a 2001 essay about writing literature after 9/11, James Wood makes just this mistake when he reviles a scene from Jonathan Franzen's *The Corrections* (2001) in which an elderly woman muses that the U.S. in the twenty-first century is somehow safe from disasters like the Great Depression. To Wood, this statement "now seems laughably archival"—as though until September 11, 2001, it would have seemed perfectly reasonable. This character, though, is defined by her sheltered view of the world, blissfully unaware of the revolution her son has just escaped in Lithuania. For her, and perhaps for Wood, the period after the cold war may have seemed entirely safe and sound; a wider perspective on the post-cold war would make this statement (although not necessarily Franzen's novel) laughable long before 9/11.

As the post-cold war heuristic encounters the literature of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, it offers a broader context for this literature by defining the post-cold war as the decomposing of a period of violence that still has the potential to generate a great deal of

blowback. In Mohsin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* (2012), the main character's resentment of U.S. policy and the gathering storm of blowback can be put in the context not only of the U.S.'s wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and the demonization of Arabs and Muslims after 9/11 but also of U.S. support for Muhammad Zia-ul-Haq during the cold war. There are other avenues that the post-cold war heuristic can travel, avenues that will expand and complicate the concept of the post-cold war. I have largely focused on literature dealing with U.S. foreign policy, but studying the post-cold war's importance for domestic U.S. issues might turn up interesting insights. In this dissertation, I have also used the post-cold war to think through not only literary but also political and popular narratives about, for instance, the war on terrorism; the same can be done as new narratives about the U.S.'s place in the world and the state of empire in the twenty-first century emerge. What I hope to have shown in this conclusion is that the post-cold war is a crucial framework for understanding contemporary American literary, historical, political, and popular narratives, and readers can continue to refine and find new applications for this perspective.

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