THE STRANGE PLAY OF TRAUMATIC REALITY: ENCHANTMENT IN JEWISH AMERICAN LITERATURE

Sarah R. Workman

A dissertation submitted to the faculty at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the Department of English and Comparative Literature.

Chapel Hill
2016

Approved by:

Erin Carlston

Tyler Curtain

María DeGuzmán

Dean Franco

Heidi Kim

© 2016
Sarah R. Workman
ALL RIGHTS RESERVED

ABSTRACT

Sarah R. Workman: THE STRANGE PLAY OF TRAUMATIC REALITY: ENCHANTMENT IN JEWISH AMERICAN LITERATURE
(Under the Direction of Erin G. Carlston and Heidi Kim)

This project analyzes the play of narrative worlds in the work of Bernard Malamud (*The Magic Barrel*), Michael Chabon (*The Yiddish Policemen's Union*), Nicole Krauss (*Great House*), Jonathan Safran Foer (*Everything Is Illuminated*), Nathan Englander ("The Tumblers"), and the Coen brothers (*A Serious Man*). These texts self-consciously dramatize the question: How do we know what we think we know about Holocaust history? The serious play of fantasy registers a historical shift in Jewish American literature towards metafictional approaches to mediating Holocaust history, exposing the unconsidered intersections between speculative fiction and historiography. This work flouts interpretive conventions of narrative ontologies to problematize meaning-making in Holocaust studies, subverting assumptions that this history is either knowable or not knowable. In addition to showing the limited ability of historical realism to incorporate Holocaust representation in an American literary context, the project highlights the ways in which fantasy genres—long discarded to the bottom of the critical dustbin—mediate history, absence, and loss. To conceptualize this contemporary turn to genre-mixing, I develop a critical schemata entitled *enchantment*. This framework encapsulates the strange commensurability between the fantasy mode of storytelling and its representation of traumatic history. Reflecting the third generation's lack of first-hand experience, enchantment

defamiliarizes historical narratives, producing a critical apparatus that enables new discussions of how aesthetic play structures the intergenerational transfer of Holocaust memory.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION. MEANING-MAKING AND FANTASY MODES: HISTORY, GENRE, AND ENCHANTMENT IN POST-WAR JEWISH AMERICAN LITERATURE.....1

Genre-mixing: Defining the Terms of Impossibility and Play 17

A Genealogy of Enchantment.....31

Chapter Summaries.....47

CHAPTER 1. THE AESTHETICS OF INDIRECTION IN BERNARD MALAMUD'S EARLY SHORT FICTION.....56

"Why Fantasy?" 63

Delusions of History: Fantasy in "Lady of the Lake" and "The Last Mohican".....75

Fantastic Spaces and Inter-ethnic Dialogue in Malamud's Short Fiction.....95

CHAPTER 2. ENCHANTED OBJECTS: "VIBRANT MATTER" AND THE HISTORIOGRAPHY OF ABSENCE IN *GREAT HOUSE* AND *EVERYTHING IS ILLUMINATED* 104

Animating the Inanimate: Enchanted Objects in *Great House*.....114

The Wreckage of History in *Everything Is Illuminated*.....134

The Novel as Enchanted Object.....149

CHAPTER 3. "STRANGE TIMES TO BE A JEW": THE REDEMPTION OF MEYER LANDSMAN IN *THE YIDDISH POLICEMEN'S UNION* 163

Unsettling the Strange Space of Sitka: Slipstream Storytelling.....173

Plotting Histories: The Grim Reality of Jewish Terrorism.....190

The Evolution of Meyer Landsman: Romancing the Hard-Boiled.....193

CHAPTER 4. STORIES FROM A POSTMODERN CHELM: THE ABSURD LOGIC OF HISTORY IN THE COEN BROTHERS' *A SERIOUS MAN* AND NATHAN ENGLANDER'S "THE TUMBLERS" 209

The Postmodern Schlemiel 213

"Accept the Mystery": The Play of Uncertainty in *A Serious Man* 215

"Hup! Hup! We must Tumble!": Survival and the Carnivalesque in "The Tumblers" 244

CONCLUSION 260

WORKS CITED 270

INTRODUCTION

MEANING-MAKING AND FANTASY MODES: HISTORY, GENRE, AND ENCHANTMENT IN POST-WAR JEWISH AMERICAN LITERATURE

"Fantasies have become literally true—a principle, as we shall have occasion to see, that was to have a profound shaping effect on the writer's conception of his world. Fantasy, of course, had been employed for centuries by artists, for its own sake and to offer commentary on the human scene—Bosch populated his canvases with creatures of fantasy; and the records of myth and literature, from the Minotaur to the Houyhnhnms and beyond, are crowded with comparable distortions of reality—sometimes comic, sometimes tragically earnest—and though the reader or observer is often absorbed by these universes of the imagination, he never mistakes them for literal reality. . . . But when fantasies become literally true, the artist, the writer, must record a reality that has become an *expression* of the impossible, at the same time convincing his audience that whatever distortions he employs do not negate, but clarify reality and subject it to an illuminating metamorphosis" –Lawrence Langer, *The Holocaust and the Literary Imagination* (1977) (23-25)

As Lawrence Langer remarks, when writers and artists employ fantasy to represent the Holocaust they face complicated issues of rhetorical strategy. But when the human scene is something of the incomprehensible and inhuman in nature, when the reality of the Holocaust "transcends" the imagination as Elie Wiesel[1] and others contend, what does fantasy illuminate? In other words, when reality becomes fantastical, how does literature respond? Does recourse to the fantastical merely add to the mythology of the already incomprehensible? In Nathan Englander's short story "The Tumblers," (2000) the narrator tells us that this story is "an absurd undertaking. But then again. . . No more unbelievable than the reality from which they'd escaped, no more unfathomable than the magic of disappearing Jews" (99). The elements of the

[1]Elie Wiesel has famously argued that "the Holocaust as Literary Inspiration" is a contradiction in terms (7).

fantastic are disturbingly commensurate with the degree of unbelievability of lived historical experience. "The Tumblers" imagines a series of events and a community that emphasizes the impossibility of recreation. The turn to fantasy in Englander's work, and how it illuminates the absurdity of historical trauma, presents the interconnection between genre, history, and aesthetics that is characteristic of third-generation Jewish American writing. In this interrelationship, the commensurability of a non-rational or fantastic literary mode as an apt approach to fictionalizing the history of an "event at the limits" (3) as Saul Friedlander famously declared—at the limits of comprehensibility and representation—results in the "delight and disturbance" of enchantment (*Enchantment* 5).

I begin this study with the short stories of Bernard Malamud published in the 1950s, which I consider an early precursor to the contemporary trend, before I turn to the fiction of Michael Chabon, Nicole Krauss, Jonathan Safran Foer, and Nathan Englander, as well as a film by the Coen brothers. These writers draw on the fantastic to make commensurate otherwise incommensurate historical experiences—for Malamud, it is the experience of American post-war Jews and European Jews; for Krauss, it is the experience of Holocaust survivors and third-generation Jews across the diaspora. As I use the term throughout my project, enchantment refers to the strange commensurability of the fantasy mode of storytelling and historical representation that "delights and disturbs" as it defamiliarizes specific historical narratives and larger questions of historiography (*Enchantment* 5). That is, these works play with fantastic and fantasy tropes to reframe particular historical events alongside larger questions of historical interpolation. For example, the question, how do we know what we think we know about Holocaust history? is central to the works that are specifically entangled with the Holocaust. Although film critics argue that the Coen brothers' film *A Serious Man* (2009) does not engage

in any way with the Holocaust—whether directly or indirectly—my reading of the film shows that it does engage with the Holocaust indirectly; the film deepens the question of how aesthetic play and uncertainty mediates history by framing the quasi-nihilistic question, how is it that we know anything at all? All along, this project asks what happens when the fantasy mode of storytelling, premised on the *impossible*, is utilized to represent a historical event that exceeds all comprehension of what was possible in historical reality—an event that in and of itself constitutes a "transgression of reality"? On the one hand, it may seem both unlikely and ethically problematic to pair fantasy tropes with Holocaust representation. But on the other, and as my project argues, we may think about the conditions structuring comprehension of fantastic genres and seemingly fantastic historical trauma as similarly "absurd," "unbelievable," and "unfathomable," as Englander's text instructs, and moreover, as a way to illuminate the dark reality of the past. In these texts, loss conditions the impossible nature of aesthetic codes and historical recreation.

Both "fantasy" and "the fantastic" have been used to designate effects within texts (modes[2] of storytelling) and the work containing these effects (genre). Following Tzvetan Todorov, I use the "fantastic" to refer to uncertainty about reasons for and causes of events that violate the laws of reality. This paradigm is most useful as I think about Bernard Malamud's short stories and Nicole Krauss's novels, textual universes set in "our world" that share our reality-oriented ontologies. "Fantasy," however, refers to the literature of the impossible and the

[2]As Fredric Jameson argues: "for when we speak of a mode, what can we mean but that this particular type of literary discourse is not bound to the conventions of a given age, nor indissolubly linked to a given type of verbal artifact, but rather persists as a temptation and a mode of expression across a whole range of historical periods, seeming to offer itself, if only intermittently, as a formal possibility which can be revived and renewed" ("Magical Narratives" 142).

mode of storytelling employed by that literature. In this context, impossible indicates those elements that refuse a rational means of explanation; that is, such elements are irreducible to reason as it exists in "our world." Departing from Todorov's formulation, I agree with the consensus of contemporary critics that "fantasy" literature need not be set in the reality of "our world" in order to violate or transgress principles of reality. I favor John Clute and John Grant's definition in *The Encyclopedia of Fantasy* (1999): "a fantasy text is a self-coherent narrative. When set in this world, it tells a story which is impossible in the world as we perceive it. . . when set in an otherworld, that otherworld will be impossible, though stories set there may be possible in its terms" (80). The texts I include in this project traverse narrative geographies of "this world," "otherworlds," and play with the in-between or "no man's land" of textual realities and impossibility; in this way I expand Clute and Grant's definition to include postmodern fantasy, those texts that play with fantasy as a mode of storytelling. The turn to aesthetic play, like metafictional tropes, and generic play, like the mixing of distinct generic formulas, extends the sense of uncertainty in already fantastical narratives to problematize specific historical narratives as well as broader questions of historiography.

Thus, as I employ these terms, fantasy literature encompasses literature of the fantastic, but fantastic literature does not necessarily include fantasy. To clarify this distinction, I differentiate the way the impossible works in fantastic versus fantasy literature. In fantastic texts, the possibility exists to explain away the magic, wonder, or reality transgressions by rational means—a character may be hallucinating for example, and thus the cause of the ghostly apparition is psychological (Todorov 46). In this way the uncertainty is resolved.[3] Or, if no

[3]Todorov refers to this type of story as fantastic-uncanny: "in works that belong to this genre, events are related which may be readily accounted for by the laws of reason, but which are, in

psychological explanation exists, then the uncertainty is resolved through the acceptance of the supernatural (Todorov 51-2).[4] Here there is a tendency toward explanation and resolution—to resolve the duration of uncertainty in one direction or another. In fantasy literature, impossibility will always *already* be irreducible. Furthermore, as I theorize the function of enchantment across both fantastic and fantasy modes, even if the possibility exists to explain away the impossible, the open-endedness of the text's generic codes and playfulness refuse to privilege this explanation; the impossible—as a source of wonder, mystery, or magic—may *not* be wholly explained away or understood by rational means. Whether due to the sense of historical or aesthetic impossibility, these texts resist the proclivity to tie up or resolve the "duration of uncertainty."

In his foundational essay for the high fantasy genre "On Fairy-Stories," Tolkien elucidates how impossibility functions in fantasy and describes his theory of enchantment. While Tolkien's schemata is helpful to discern the function of impossibility—and thus, how we are going about defining fantasy—I am employing the term "enchantment" more broadly and as a way to describe the affective and aesthetic play of genre, history, and estrangement. I do not mean that these texts are part of the "high fantasy" genre initiated by Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*; rather, they are characterized by a postmodern sensibility (they contain critiques of metanarrative; disrupted chronology; they are highly intertextual and metafictional) and play with ontologies of realism and fantasy, and thus, distinct models of narrative estrangement. I differentiate my own concept of enchantment from Tolkien's, and to clarify, I refer to Tolkien's

---

one way or another, incredible, extraordinary, shocking, singular, disturbing or unexpected, and which thereby provoke in the character and in the reader a reaction similar to that which works of the fantastic have made familiar" (46).

[4]What Todorov refers to as the fantastic-marvelous (51-3).

enchantment as an aesthetic concept that indicates the irreducibility of wonder that structures belief in the world of the text.[5] Tolkien writes that enchantment creates a Secondary World into which author and reader enter, and whose purpose is "the realization, independent of the conceiving mind, of imagined wonder" (19).[6] For Tolkien, enchantment refers to the nature of belief in the Secondary World where the wonder or impossibility is *irreducible*. And while the term enchantment as I use it is not synonymous with Tolkien's formula, I purposefully mean for the enchantment—as a mode of defamiliarizing history—to recursively reflect a sense of performativity and magic.

It is this concept of irreducibility that influences my own schemata (Tolkien 60-1). If the fantastic is related to the uncertainty about reasons for and causes of events, enchantment emphasizes the irreducibility or the open-endedness of the irrational phenomena in a text that may not necessarily inhabit the fantasy genre in a strict sense of the term—it may occur in "our world" or a world that looks nothing like our own. Because these texts flout more than just reality-oriented possibilities and play with generic conventions, the attribution of impossible phenomena to structural conventions is insufficient; that is, the impossible exists in excess of generic codes and cannot be explained away by rational means. While the narrative and affective strategy of enchantment is possible in both fantasy and realist texts, it is not realizable

---

[5]While my conceptualization of fantasy and enchantment necessarily draws on this idea, terms like "wonder" and Tolkien's concept of enchantment as he develops it in "On Fairy-Stories" are not interchangeable with my own expansion of the term.

[6]Tolkien explains the "enchantment of the effective fairy-story" in the following terms: the Primary World is considered "reality." Therefore, "In the Secondary World, what is "true" does not mean "reality," but that the artist makes a successful Secondary World which your mind can enter and "inside it, what he relates is 'true': it accords with the laws of that world. You therefore believe it, while you are, as it were, inside. The moment disbelief arises, the spell is broken; the magic, or rather art, has failed. You are then out in the Primary World again, looking at the little abortive Secondary World from outside" (60).

without the open-ended possibility for the non-rational interpretation of key textual elements, or the irreducibility of elements that include but are not limited to settings, behaviors, apparitions, relationships, or plots.

In third-generation Jewish American literature, behind the strange combinatory power of fantasy and reality is a double enchantment; that is, enchantment highlights both the "impossible" nature of the original event coupled with its historical removal from "authentic" experience in the present. Double enchantment is an aesthetic expression that shapes the loss of "authentic" experience of the Holocaust, serving as a kind of substitute or at least mark of the lack. These texts present an array of characters and narrators with various connections to Holocaust trauma. Some characters, like George Weisz in Krauss's *Great House* (2010), have survived the Holocaust. Approaching death, these characters are aligned with the grandparents of the younger characters whose adolescence is coterminous with the contemporary present. Yet other characters are displaced from this historical event because genre intervenes and overwrites or reimagines historical trauma. As such, third generation Jewish American literature is not invested in direct representation of Holocaust trauma and does not depict the horrors of the concentrationary universe.[7] In a recent interview, Nicole Krauss laments being labeled a Holocaust writer and maintains that she has "written very little about the Holocaust in terms of actual events" ("On Fame" n. pag.). As the grandchild of people who survived that historical event, she continues, "I'm not writing their story—I couldn't write their story. There are characters in my novels who have either survived the Holocaust or been affected by it" ("On

[7]The term "concentrationary" has become commonplace in Holocaust literature. It is taken from the French "concentrationnaire" from the title of the 1946 book *L'univers Concentrationnaire* by former political prisoner of Buchenwald, David Rousset, and was used extensively by Primo Levi in his last book *The Drowned and the Saved* (1986).

Fame" n. pag.). Rather, this literature is "Holocaust-inflected,"[8] meaning that the Holocaust is invoked indirectly or through signifiers of Holocaust trauma (these texts include references to familiar narrative tropes like "Kristallnacht" or the effects of post-Holocaust dispersion and diaspora) *without* claiming direct representation of traumatic experience. Often references or memories are subordinated to other narratives and themes within a given novel; that is, in third-generation Jewish American literature narratives of Holocaust experience are somewhat *displaced* from the center of the text yet retain a haunting or absent presence. More prevalent than direct Holocaust representation are themes of absence and loss that have a diffuse yet palpable influence. In addition, these artists thematize their own indirection and metanarratively reflect on mediation and knowledge-making. A writer like Nicole Krauss is invested in indirect Holocaust representation precisely because she aims to understand the intergenerational transmission of trauma and the "burden of emotional inheritance" of the Holocaust. Chronologically distanced from that event and removed from the historical realities, what interests Krauss "is the response to catastrophic loss" ("On fame" n. pag.). Enchantment allows these authors to explore Holocaust representation without laying claim to direct experience; it is a narrative strategy that allows them to reflect on the struggle of their desire to make these stories their own.

Like Krauss, Michael Chabon struggles with the implications of fictionalizing the Holocaust as a writer with "no direct personal experience of it whatsoever" (qtd. in Baer 148). Chabon wrestles with the question of what "right" he has to "use" the Holocaust for the purpose

[8]In a more recent review of Holocaust texts, Emily Miller Budnick defines three kinds of Holocaust narratives: 1) "the handful of more popular, epic novels that appeared in the decades immediately following the war"; 2) texts that "deal explicitly with the survivor experience"; and 3) "fictions that are Holocaust-inflected rather than about the Holocaust per se" (215-7).

of writing fiction. He contemplates, "you know, is it okay for me to write about the Holocaust, having had no direct personal experience of it whatsoever? To what degree am I entitled to portray or represent it in my work?" (qtd. in Baer 148). There are at least three implications for third-generation writers that we can read from Chabon's quote. First, Chabon is asking an ethical question. "Is it okay?" implies the discourse of ethics surrounding direct experience and authenticity—that without such experience, it is ethically problematic for Chabon to engage with this material. An important example to cite here is Cynthia Ozick's novella *The Shawl*, a beautifully written story about the Holocaust that is emotionally and morally compelling. Amy Hungerford notes that in a speech to undergraduates at Yale, "Cynthia Ozick discouraged them from reading her novella *The Shawl*. . . because she herself is not a survivor. She advised them that they should read all the factual literature there is on the Holocaust before they look at her story, " but as Hungerford comments, "it would be a shame if those students took her advice" ("Holocaust of Texts" 155). Second, Chabon's question implies that there is a historical problem at hand. We must think about the point at which any writer can tackle a historical event when the alternative—to Chabon or others without "direct experience" writing about it—is is the end of history. And the third implication is the use of the imagination: that there is and always will be a yawning gap between what happened and the imagination's use of what happened, or between the "Real" and the real as deployed as literary material. That Safran in *Everything Is Illuminated* cannot find the woman Augustine suggests "that Foer has already internalized something that previous Holocaust literature has intently examined and questioned: can one ever have an unmediated relation to the past?" ("Holocaust of Texts" 3). These writers locate new ways of fictionalizing history through an aesthetics of indirection that registers the impossibility of making or establishing a genuine connection. As I will go on to show, third-generation

writers play with gaps within and between genres in order to emphasize this breach between the imaginative and the historical.

Chabon's and Krauss's concerns as third-generation writers highlight many of the complex issues that have come to comprise the double-bind of Holocaust Studies. As Saul Friedlander has instructed, there is both a need for truth and a difficulty of historical knowledge when it comes to the Holocaust. Michael Rothberg relays how Holocaust Studies developed two broad approaches to the Holocaust's availability as an object of historical knowledge through "realist" and "antirealist" modes (*Traumatic Realism* 23). Rothberg explains,

> By realist I mean both an epistemological claim that the Holocaust is knowable and a representational claim that this knowledge can be translated into a familiar mimetic universe [. . .] By antirealist I mean both a claim that the Holocaust is not knowable or would be knowable only under radically new regimes of knowledge and that it cannot be captured in traditional representational schemata. (*Traumatic Realism* 3-4)

The realist approach emphasizes what is nameable and what can be translated, within existing methodology, into the mimetic universe (*Traumatic Realism* 4). As Jenni Adams points out, this approach risks obscuring what may be resistant to knowledge and representation, "the absence of the 'Real' of historical experience, and traumatic experience in particular" (25).[9] But because the antirealist stance refutes the possibility that the Holocaust can be known and represented, it rejects the possibility of the objective dimension (Adams 25). Neither the realist nor antirealist modes is sufficient in itself (*Traumatic Realism* 5). As Rothberg reflects, there is "something

[9]Dan Stone offers the following critique of realism for Holocaust historiography when he argues that the most influential narrative histories of the Holocaust "display a continued allegiance to concepts of attainable objectivity and totality in representations of the past" (qtd. in Adams 25). These narratives decline to acknowledge "the contingency, selectivity, and imposed coherence of the accounts advanced" (qtd. in Adams 25). Thus, Stone attributes the realist treatment of the Holocaust to the therapeutic operation of "a strong desire to impose cognitive order over the events" (qtd. in Adams 25).

particularly striking about the field of Holocaust representation in which two almost entirely incommensurable visions can coexist" (*Traumatic Realism* 5). Through the play of fantasy and reality, enchantment draws attention to these incommensurable visions and invokes what Rothberg refers to as "traumatic realism," a hybrid representational strategy that bridges these incompatible approaches. Traumatic realism "mediates between the realist and antirealist positions in Holocaust studies and marks the necessity of considering how the ordinary and the extraordinary aspects of genocide intersect and coexist" (9). As such, enchantment engages the ontological multiplicity of the real and not-real in order to address traumatic realism. Approaching texts that play with the unreality of historical representation and narrative possibility, enchantment highlights the inadequacies of realist and antirealist modes and creates a third, hybrid space of representation.

Enchantment addresses the double-bind of Holocaust representation and plays with the in-betweenness of realist and antirealist modes. Often these writers draw on fantasy as a way to mark what cannot be articulated, the presence of absence, and the hauntingly real beyond the strange or unreal. Remarking on the power of cinema, sociologist Edgar Morin connects concepts of the magical and marvelous to the inarticulable. He writes, "what comes back once again. . . is the word *magic*, surrounded by a cortege of bubble words—marvelous, unreal, and so on—that burst and evaporate as soon as we try to handle them. . . They are passwords for what cannot be articulated" (qtd. in Felski 69). These passwords for "what cannot be articulated" also inform the in-between spaces of mixed-genre narratives, an approach that I will extend through genre analysis of fantasy modes (qtd. in Felski 69).

I was originally drawn to the term "enchantment" because of the way it captures the current spirit or mood of third generation Jewish American literature that is equally interested in

an oblique or indirect representation of the Holocaust and telling stories that foreground wonder, mystery, and imagination. When Weber spoke about the "disenchantment of the world" in his 1922 speech "Science as a Vocation" he was referring to the way in which scientific advancements now preclude the possibility of wonder and mystery, because somehow and somewhere we have "mastered all technical means by calculation." Weber divorces scientific knowledge from progress, which means

> that principally there are no mysterious incalculable forces that come into play, but rather that one can, in principle, master all things by calculation. This means that the world is disenchanted. One need no longer have recourse to magical means in order to master or implore the spirits, as did the savage, for whom such mysterious powers existed. Technical means and calculations perform the service. This is above all what intellectualization means. (139)

But much has been done to dismantle the disenchantment/enchantment binary and reveal that the contrast is not as stark as Weber made it out to be; rather than a binary logic, many theorists view disenchantment and enchantment on a contiguous plane. For example, Jane Bennett's work questions the conventional characterization of modernity as a world devoid of wonders (*Enchantment* 4). Rather, she proposes an alternative view of modernity replete with wonder, surprise, and affective attachments. Bennett defines enchantment in secular—not sacred—terms, which means that the end of divine purpose does not indicate the end to enchantment (*Enchantment* 4). She writes that enchantment may actually be fostered through deliberate strategies, such as giving greater expression to a sense of play, honing what she calls "sensory receptivity to the marvelous specificity of things," and resisting the story of the disenchantment of modernity (*Enchantment* 4). Arguing that enchantment persists whenever we are "stuck and shaken by the extraordinary that lives amid the familiar and the everyday," Bennett contends that wonder is potentially enlivening and even ethical (*Enchantment* 4). Bennett's work suggests that

grappling with questions of belief, as many of the texts under consideration here do, may be considered alongside aesthetics of enchantment. Moments of arrest within these texts and practices of estrangement tied to the fantastic come to characterize the "marvelous specificity" of the aesthetics of Jewish American literature. Furthermore, scholars point out that Weber himself noted the wondrous capacities of science, thus enchanting his so-called disenchantment hypothesis; as we will come to see, this paradox will substantiate uncertainty as a mode of mediating the past in the Coen brothers' *A Serious Man*. Regardless of the limitations to this binary concept, the paradigm has remained influential.

Thus, I use the term "enchantment" purposefully to invoke the historical and social context in which it has come to bear meaning and incite debate beyond literary discourse. The thread of disenchantment is often referenced in relation to the Frankfurt School critics' attempt to grapple with the Holocaust and their suggestion that the Holocaust is an extreme example of disenchanted modernity, of rationalization and bureaucracy and race science brought to their logical extremes. In fact, both Tolkien and the Frankfurt School critics were concerned with "corrosive effects of pathological modernity" (Drout 160). This becomes clear when we note that Tolkien specifically reserves the term "magic" for Magicians, a term that indicates the "will to power, to dominate and create changes in the Primary World" (72). Tolkien positions enchantment, then, as a structure of signification aimed against modernist magic. The concept's affinity with Weber's analysis of the disenchantment of the world is intentional, just as it is implied in Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno's critique of modernity as suffering from a deficit, rather than a surplus, of reason (Bernstein 4).

The narrative tropes of fantasy become an intentional aesthetic mode that third generation Jewish American literature relies on to complicate Weber's binary logic. While these texts

confront narratives of totalitarian destruction they do so alongside narratives that beget wonder, whimsy, playfulness and mystery. For example, in Englander's Tumblers, mentioned at the outset, a ragtag bunch of uncoordinated, mismatched Jews pass as gentiles in the unlikeliest of circumstances—they pose as gymnastic circus performers—to outsmart an audience of Nazi officials. Michael Chabon rewrites the defining narratives of 20th century Jewish American experience when he invents a Yiddish-speaking metropolis in the present of Sitka, Alaska, replete with a detective plot and the idioms and comedic sensibility of lost Yiddish culture. And in *Great House*, Nicole Krauss's mysterious, shape-shifting monstrosity of a writing desk, somehow reclaimed from the Nazi Gold Train, connects disparate characters and narrative threads across the Jewish diaspora and Holocaust histories.

This sense of whimsy has both a narrative and affective component, an interrelation expressed by Raymond Williams's "Structures of Feeling." Enchantment refers to the "structures of feeling" in contemporary Jewish American literature that makes no claim to direct or authentic Holocaust experience. Rather, these texts rely on an aesthetics of indirection, or more specifically, in these novels narrative play generates aesthetic and affective "delight and disturbance" in the reimagination of the Holocaust (*Vibrant Matter* xi).

Raymond Williams's term "structures of feeling" is a notoriously difficult term to define; critics have called it "ambiguous," "slippery," and "shifting" over the thirty years since Williams developed the idea (Filmer 199-200). I find it useful for the ways that it is situated at the intersection and reflexivity of culture and aesthetics. Williams's concept highlights the analysis of structure, in particular art works and periods, which illuminates those forms but also "the forms and relations of more general social life" (*Problems in Materialism* 20). Williams uses "structures of feeling" to identify "a cultural hypothesis" (*Marxism* 132-3) that distills the

interrelationship of an empirical historical specificity "most readily accessible in the art and literature of a period" (Filmer 201). In what follows, Williams reflects on the "structural homology" between the ongoing experience of social life and its literary formulations. He writes that the "underlying and formative structures" of literature are creative and imaginative acts of literature, which in turn constitute he community: "these creative acts compose, within a historical period, a specific community: a community visible in the structure of feeling and demonstrable, above all, in fundamental choices of form. (*Problems in Materialism* 24-5). Williams developed his own sense of method in the analysis of changes of literary form through which "changes in the pace of a life, an experience [Williams often used this term interchangeably with "feeling"] can be quite directly apprehended" (*Problems in Materialism* 27).

Enchantment is a way to describe the nexus of the reflexive experience of social life for third generation writers, shielded from the horrific realities of the Holocaust by grandparents and parents, and the literary formulations that draw on fantasy to nevertheless express the emotional inheritance of the past, the intergenerational transmission of loss, and their oblique or indirect relationship to this historical event. This kind of shielding, which sometimes occurs via silencing, generates its own strange form of trauma. Enchantment mediates the third generation's need to respond to its own anguish and anxiety as inheritors of the traumatic repercussions of an experience that is not "their own" yet nonetheless shapes their experience. Thus, to draw on the term "structures of feeling" means to invoke the emotional impact of impossibility already built into the function of fantasy and these writers' recourse to this strategy as a way to define their strange, double removal from the historical event. As Brian Attebery observes, the effect of wonder on the reader structures reading and "has as much to do with ways

of seeing as with emotional payoff" (Attebery 16).[10] As Williams attests, "literary style" summarizes effectively some features of the relations between aesthetic forms and conventions, which he invoked specifically as referents for semantic figures (qtd. in Filmer 205). In the contemporary archive of Jewish American literature, "literary style" refers to those operating principles shared by these texts that in turn reflect the intersubjective experience of its writers and readers. Williams writes,

> a correspondence of content between a writer and his world is less significant than this correspondence of organization, of structure. A relation of content may be mere reflection, but a relation of structure, often occurring where there is no apparent relation of content, can show us the organizing principle by which a particular view of the world, and from that the coherence of the social group which maintains it, really operates in consciousness. (*Problems in Materialism* 23)

Here that "relation of structure" interrogates the double-bind of Holocaust representation from a contemporary vantage point.

Instead of an utterly fractured narrative devoid of meaning, these texts leave the reader with a sense of "enchantment" related to fullness of affect and belief in the irreality of the text as a whole or elements within the text, such as the manipulation of historical events. While the intersection of the fantasy mode and the fantastical reality of the Holocaust profoundly affects "one's default sensory-psychic-intellectual disposition," enchantment is not necessarily positive or pleasant in nature and also may be experienced as discomfort and malaise (*Enchantment* 5). In fact, this juxtaposition of negative affects and fullness or liveliness that engenders this

[10]Williams's "structures of feeling" anticipates the current turn to affect in literary theory. Sianne Ngai has explained, "[M]ost critics today accept that far from being merely private or idiosyncratic phenomena. . . feelings are as fundamentally 'social' as the institutions and collective practices that have been the more traditional object of historicist criticism. . . , and as 'material' as the linguistic signs and significations that have been the more traditional objects of literary formalism" (25).

response denotes enchantment's strangeness and ability to communicate multiple experiences at once.

These texts explore trauma and loss connected to the Holocaust; alongside such cataclysmic loss many affirm a commitment to messianic redemption, the Lurianic Kabbalistic idea of "tikkun" that means "repair of the world," or recreate via wondrous impossibility the richness of a lost culture and language of European Jewry. Enchantment describes a narrative function, a play of the different functions of estrangement, and a mood of fullness that recharges our perception. For Malamud, enchantment provides a protective means to manipulate the harshest aspects of reality. Perhaps the sense of joy or pleasure that results would be inadmissible if not achieved by fantastic means, or as Malamud has stated, "reality may be manipulated because it is safely controlled by art" (*Talking Horse* 50). For the later group of writers, it is only through the fantastic that the grim reality of this loss becomes estranged so that it remains an active part of Jewish American collective memory—so that it is neither forgotten nor absorbed into rote narratives of Holocaust experience. In part this occurs as meaning is forged across generic codes and between genres, aesthetic strategies that privilege open-endedness and construct an elusive sense of wholeness.

Genre-mixing: Defining the Terms of Impossibility and Play

In this section I will further clarify the terms of my analysis—fantasy, the fantastic, enchantment—and explain how they relate to literary theories of estrangement and defamiliarization. I aim to map out a genealogy of the term "enchantment" and to make explicit the theoretical underpinnings that the term invokes in relation to theories of genre, formalist literary theory, and philosophy, as well as pinpoint how Jewish American literature resituates the concept. Both "fantasy" and the "fantastic" come with a great deal of semantic baggage. Gary

Wolfe reveals the common confusion among the various meanings of "fantasy"—"the innocent daydream, the psychotic construct, the propagandistic manipulation, the literary invention" (10). In the context of literary studies, "fantasy" most commonly refers to a formula that designates genre. But the *fantastic* both refers to an effect within texts and designates the work containing this effect. Defined by Tzvetan Todorov, the *fantastic* challenges "the real"—it destabilizes the text's realism and agreement with the laws of everyday reality. Scholars of the fantastic agree that realism, defined as the mimetic[11] representation of reality, is the dominant mode of twentieth-century fiction. For Todorov and these scholars, "the fantastic" is a function or effect that subverts, upsets, or displaces a previously established sense of reality in the text. But for a "transgression" of reality to occur, "the norm must be apparent," Todorov argues (8). Thus, Todorov's fantastic lacks one of the defining features of the popular conception of fantasy fiction, the Secondary World. Rather, fantastic fiction is set "in a world which is indeed our world, the one we know, a world without devils, sylphides, or vampires, [where] there occurs an event which cannot be explained by the laws of this same familiar world" (25). The "fantastic" occurs when the supernatural and the real[12] collide. When an event occurs that cannot be explained by the reality of the text,

---

[11]Kathryn Hume argues that all literature is comprised of two poles, fantasy and mimesis, where mimesis "is felt as the desire to imitate, to describe events, people, situations and objects with such verisimilitude that others share your experience" (*Fantasy and Mimesis* xii).

[12]Rooted in Freudian psychoanalysis and the Oedipal stage, the "real" refers to one of the three psychological orders developed by Jacques Lacan in his triad of the symbolic, real, and imaginary. While it would be impossible to fully outline the contours of the term in a footnote, suffice it to say the term is a slippery one. The real is distinct from yet inclusive of "reality," objective or collective experience which is "perfectly knowable" (Miller 280). According to Lacan, the real is that which resists representation—it is neither symbolic nor imaginary. The real is precluded from analytic experience, which is defined in terms of language; as soon as the real is made conscious through language it loses "reality" (Miller 280). In this way it is also conceived as the "fullness or completeness that is subsequently lost through the entrance into

> the person who experiences the event must opt for one of two possible solutions: either he is the victim of an illusion of the sense, of a product of the imagination—and laws of the world then remain what they are; or else the event has indeed taken place, it is an integral part of reality—but then this reality is controlled by laws unknown to us. . . *The fantastic occupies the duration of this uncertainty*. Once we choose one answer or the other, we leave the fantastic for a neighboring genre, the uncanny or the marvelous. The fantastic is that hesitation experienced by a person who knows only the laws of nature, confronting an apparently supernatural event. (Todorov 25; emphasis mine)

The fantastic is related to the undecidability about reasons for and causes of events witnessed. We will see this undecidability play out in the texts set in "our world": Malamud's short stories from *The Magic Barrel* and Nicole Krauss's *Great House*. Furthermore, "the person" in Todorov's formulation collapses the distinction between reader and protagonist, where "*the reader's hesitation* is therefore the first condition of the fantastic" (31, emphasis original), "but it is necessary that the reader identify with a particular character" (31). Thus, Todorov's formulation allows us to speak of fantastic effects within texts and the subsequent fantastic effect on readers.

In contrast to the fantastic, "fantasy" has commonly been interpreted to designate popular genre fantasy and the two terms, traditionally, do not share much common ground. Attebery attests that Todorov's fantastic has little bearing on the genre of modern fantasy (Attebery 20). In fact, Todorov's definition would not include nearly all "genre fantasy." Describing fantasy, Attebery offers two preliminary definitions to support the idea that fantasy is just as much a narrative strategy as a genre. The first definition adheres to the primary association of "fantasy"

---

language" (Purdue web psychoanalysis—find better source). As Miller explains, the term has considerably changed over time, but eventually begins to appear regularly as an adjective to describe "that which is lacking in the symbolic order, the ineliminable residue of all articulation, the foreclosed element, which may be approached, but never grasped: the umbilical cord of the symbolic" (280).

with genre in a taxonomic sense. The second refers to fantasy as a mode of storytelling.[13] Regarding the former, Attebery explains, "fantasy is a form of popular escapist literature that combines stock characters and devices—wizards, dragons, magic swords, and the like—into a predictable plot in which the perennially understaffed forces of good triumph over a monolithic evil" (1). The premise of my project is that fantasy does important historiographic work, and thus, fantasy is not synonymous with escapist literature in Attebery's sense, nor must it contain wizards, dragons, etc. Rather, this definition seems particularly descriptive of a subset of fantasy—"high fantasy"—the genre inaugurated by Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* and defined by the criteria of being set in "Otherworlds" or "Secondary Worlds" (Clute and Grant 16). This strict definition of fantasy genre combines the familiar and the impossible "within the context of an affirming, reordering narrative" (Clute and Grant 16).

Moving away from definitions that align fantasy strictly with genre, most critics agree that however we define "fantasy," it must chiefly deal with the impossible and that it somehow "deliberately violates the generic conventions of realism" (Attebery vii). The consensus follows W. R. Irwin's noteworthy definition of fantasy as "the literature of the impossible" (qtd. in Wolfe 68). Irwin characterizes fantasy as "antireal," defining it as "a story based on and controlled by an overt violation of what is generally accepted as possibility; it is the narrative result of transforming the condition contrary to fact into 'fact' itself" (qtd. in Wolfe 4). This idea dovetails with Darko Suvin's conceptualization of the science fiction genre as that of "cognitive estrangement," a genre in which the reader is naturalized into the world of the strange (12). Following the fact of impossibility that determines these narrative worlds, Wolfe suggests that

[13]In order to distinguish "fantasy" from "fantastic," Attebery uses the former to designate genre and the latter to designate mode (11).

first and foremost the criterion of the impossible must be agreed upon as one of the genre's defining characteristics (68).[14] To allow for the diversity of impossible worlds or impossibility at work in this group of texts, I rely on Attebery's latter definition of fantasy as a mode of storytelling. This schemata already positions fantasy with an eye towards self-reflexivity that is reinforced by the texts I engage. Attebery writes that fantasy may be considered

> a sophisticated mode of storytelling characterized by stylistic playfulness, self-reflexiveness, and a subversive treatment of established orders of society and thought . . . it draws upon contemporary ideas about sign systems and the indeterminacy of meaning and at the same time recaptures the vitality and freedom of nonmimetic traditional forms such as epic, folktale, romance, and myth.[15] (1)

Genealogically this definition reflects Todorov's earlier work on uncertainty; the concept of "indeterminacy of meaning" in Attebery's definition of fantasy as a "mode" is clearly indebted to Todorov's concept (Attebery 3).

I do not use fantasy to refer to the coded norms of genre because genre is too narrow a concept to encompass the function of fantasy storytelling across time and place. Similar to Junot Díaz's claim that magic realism is not a genre but a narrative strategy, I would argue that fantasy as a mode of storytelling is a narrative method that provides a kind of reading code (Díaz n. pag.).

---

[14]Wolfe cites the following definitions that privilege the impossible: Eric S. Rabkin (*The Fantastic in Literature*) argues that fantasy makes "a direct reversal of ground rules" and claims that the "polar opposite" of fantasy is Reality. C. N. Manlove writes that "a substantial and irreducible element of supernatural or impossible worlds, beings, or objects" is needed for fantasy. Manlove further explains that the supernatural or impossible means "of another order of reality from that in which we exist and form our notions of possibility." Roger C. Schlobin defines fantasy "as that corpus in which the impossible is primary in its quantity or centrality" (qtd. in Wolfe 68).

[15]In this formulation, fantasy and mimesis are the fundamental operations of the narrative imagination, and both are invoked to varying degrees in fantasy texts (Attebery 3). Mimesis is the mode of imitation in which the "aim is to produce the impression of faithfulness to ordinary experience" (Attebery 3).

As Rosemary Jackson's research suggests, fantasy is actually resistant to genre classification because the range of works is too large to constitute a single genre and includes entire bodies of literature also considered genres in their own right, such as fairy tales, detective stories, and Fantasy (13). The propensity to categorize these contemporary Jewish American texts as fantasy in any sense does not stem strictly from the ways their plots or tropes adhere to the rules of the genre. Rather, the texts' recourse to fantasy as a mode of storytelling reflects a loose yet proximal relationship to fantasy genres, where generic ties and histories (reimagined, impossible, alterative) determine impossibility.

Unlike Todorov's conception of the fantastic, which must be set in "our world," this definition of fantasy allows for a greater degree of variability in terms of the reality-oriented function of the text. I favor fantasy to denote the idea that when set in this world, fantasy then tells a story which is impossible in the world as we perceive it (Clute and Grant 80). And thus when set in an otherworld, that otherworld will be impossible, though stories set there may be possible in its terms (Clute and Grant 80). As such, fantasy describes Malamud's short stories (set in "our world") and Foer's fiction (set in both "our" and "otherworlds") alike. This inclusivity is in line with the logic of the *degree* of the impossible built into Attebery's framework of fantasy. He suggests that fantasy is best regarded as what logicians call a "fuzzy set," definable at its center but blurring at the edges (14-15); but still, "the essential content is the impossible," or, as he defined it earlier in *The Fantasy Tradition in American Literature*, "some violation of what the author clearly believes to be natural law. . . there is some general agreement that some such violation is essential to fantasy" (14-15). Thus, "high fantasy" would occupy the center of this "fuzzy set," while texts with some semblance of the logic and order of "our world"

make up the blurred edges (Attebery 14). Throughout this project, I rely on fantasy or fantasy mode interchangeably to refer to the impossible as a mode of storytelling.

All of the texts in this project crowd the edges of what Attebery refers to as the "fuzzy set" of fantasy literature and in this way they may be considered fantasy texts; they orbit the canonical center that has been established by *Lord of the Rings*. But terms that emphasize *play* with fantasy as a mode of storytelling are better suited to conceptualize this group of texts; terms like "postmodern fantastic" (Attebery), "speculative realism" (Saldívar), or "slipstream" (Sterling), which I will go on to explain in-depth below, more accurately describe this group of texts as category or genre. By and large these texts are engaged in some kind of play with genre and fantasy tropes. According to Brian Edwards, play is "the principle of energy and difference which unsettles arrangements, promotes change and resists closure" (xiii). Play thus "affirms freedom and possibility against restriction, resignation and closure" (Edwards xiii). This definition of play allows me to consider the consequences of generic play in terms of historical events and ways of perceiving knowledge.

Ramón Saldívar's term "speculative realism" is helpful especially because Saldívar's concept is rooted in mixed generic modes that combine high and low genres. Rooting his idea in the late 18th and early 19th century hybrid genre of Historical Romance,[16] Saldívar explains, "now the mixing of genres includes not just the canonic paradigms of classical, neoclassical, romantic, realist, and modernist origin, but also their outcast, lowbrow, vernacular, not to say kitschy varieties of what has come to be known as genre fiction, including the fantasy, sci-fi,

[16]Mixing genres first occurred at the end of the 18th and turn to the 19th century with the emergent genre of historical romance. As Saldívar explains, these texts asked, how might ordinary life be interrupted by uncommon incidents? How might the manners of preceding centuries be juxtaposed against modern ones? (5).

gothic, noir, and erotic speculative writings of the postwar era" (4-5). As he defines it, speculative realism refers to "a hybrid amalgam of realism, magical realism, metafiction, and genre fictions, including science fiction, graphic narrative, and fantasy proper" (13). Yoking together "realism" with "speculative," Saldívar wants the term to highlight its own disjunction just as the pairing of "Historical" with "Romance" was considered an oxymoron. Central for Saldívar is the way that these texts raise the formal and thematic concerns of genre itself in relation to matters of racial identity.[17] While he cites the work of a host of African American, Asian American, and Native American authors, he attests, "a case can be made for including Michael Chabon, Gary Shteyngart, and Jonathan Safran Foer's recalibrations of Jewish and Yiddish ethnicity" (3). Rather than focus on racial identity, as Saldívar's analysis suggests, I focus on the way the texts play with the formal and thematic concerns of genre as a mode of mediating history.

In addition to the hybrid nature implied by the formulation of "speculative realism," "slipstream" may also be relevant in certain cases to refer to texts that are in between genres, even purposefully resistant or invocative of particular generic codes. Slipstream is a kind of fantastic or non-realistic fiction that crosses conventional genre boundaries between science fiction, fantasy, and mainstream literary fiction. Cyberpunk author Bruce Sterling coined the term in an article originally published in *Science Fiction Eye* in July 1989 to refer to a contemporary kind of writing that has set its face against consensus reality. As Sterling writes,

> It is fantastic, surreal sometimes, speculative on occasion, but not rigorously so. It does not aim to provoke a 'sense of wonder' or to systematically extrapolate in the manner of classic science fiction. . . Instead, this is a kind of writing which simply makes you feel very strange; the way that living in the late

[17]Texts such as Junot Diaz's *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* and Colson Whitehead's *The Intuitionist*.

> twentieth century makes you feel, if you are a person of a certain sensibility. (n. pag.)

While Sterling emphasizes the strangeness of slipstream fiction rather than its emphasis on "wonder," my project suggests that these aims are not so easily divorced as Sterling's definition implies. What we can take from Sterling, and what I will discuss shortly as the anti-transcendentalist approach to fantasy, is his suggestion of slipstream's inevitable, not bracketed, relationship to reality: "At the heart of slipstream is an attitude of peculiar aggression against 'reality.' These are fantasies of a kind, but not fantasies which are 'futuristic' or 'beyond the fields we know.' These books tend to sarcastically tear at the structure of 'everyday life'" (n. pag.). Not to be conflated with illusions or what lies "beyond," fantasy is firmly entrenched in the structures of the everyday.

More important than the labels we give to these texts is the quality of their impossibility and how such transgressions of reality mediate history. By enchantment, I do not mean disillusion, deceit, or a spellbound state, associations that invoke the way that popular art has often been accused of "disorienting and bewitching its audience, calling up an association of art with magic that stretches back to antiquity" (Felski 52). Rather, I am referring to the specific interrelation of impossibility, as it functions in fantasy literature, and alienation or estrangement, as these concepts have been developed in literary studies.

In literary fiction, the normative models of estrangement and defamiliarization explored by thinkers like Viktor Shklovsky and Bertolt Brecht indicate the way that we become habituated to established habits of perception because, as Shklovsky notes, "after we see an object several times, we begin to recognize it" (779). Habitual recognition in this sense means that we lose sight of the object because we no longer notice its presence; we cannot see what we are familiar

with. But literature "dismantles established habits of perception" by making things appear strange so that we overcome our "blind perception" and begin to perceive anew; the point of estrangement is to understand the world as it really is (Shklovsky 779). In fantasy texts and other genre literatures, however, the normative function of estrangement works differently than in literary fiction. We are in fact *naturalized* into a strange, alternative universe where we come to expect the supernatural elements. For Shklovsky and Brecht estrangement is a stylistic device that can be located at specific points inside "realistic" texts, but as Darko Suvin argues, "in sf the attitude of estrangement. . . has grown into the *formal framework* of the genre" (*Metamorphoses* 7; emphasis in original). Suvin refers to the formal framework of estranged genres, which are comprised of sf, the fairy tale, and myth, genres that he opposes to naturalistic ones, or those with a mimetic relationship to reality.

If estrangement has grown into the formal framework of fantasy texts, it does so by structuring our expectations for strangeness that appear no less strange once we open that fantasy text. As Tolkien writes, fantasy starts out by "arresting strangeness" (69). Attebery echoes the interrelation of estrangement and fantasy when he writes that "wonder is connected with the contemplation of . . . strangeness" (7). Indeed, "the concept of wonder, as a key to fantasy's impact, may best be understood as an alternative formulation of the idea of estrangement" (Attebery 16). For Tolkien, fantasy allows us to see our own world differently not by casting a spell on it but by breaking up the monotony of familiarity.

In "On Fairy-Stories," Tolkien makes explicit how the fantasy-estrangement interaction impacts the reader. He reaches for the term enchantment to describe the experience of Primary Belief in a Secondary World and the irreducibility of the wonder experienced by character or reader (77). For Tolkien, recovery is essentially another way to conceive of estrangement; what

is important here is the relationship between the function of enchantment, in Tolkien's view, and estrangement, and the way in which these modes elucidate reality rather than obscure it. Thus, Tolkien acknowledges that a function of fantasy is escape, but in his view this is a mode of recovering reality rather than retreating from it: "Recovery (which includes return and renewal of health) is a re-gaining—regaining of a clear view. I do not say 'seeing things as they are' and involve myself with the philosophers, though I might venture to say 'seeing things as we are (or were) meant to see them'—as things apart from ourselves" (77). Tolkien is less interested in a realistic way of seeing ("seeing things as they are") than a *resistant* way of seeing ("seeing things apart from ourselves") (77). He continues, "we need, in any case, to clean our windows; so that the things seen clearly may be freed from the drab blur of triteness or familiarity—from possessiveness" (77). "Possessiveness" refers to rote, habitual ways of knowing that dictate a lack of awareness, and through Recovery fantasy frees our sense of perception from the way it has been appropriated (77). Even though Tolkien claims not to want to entangle his ideas with the philosophy, his work intertwines formalism and genre theory to reveal fantasy's import on exactly that (77). Genre play that metafictionally arrests strangeness thus becomes a mode of "cleaning our windows," so that historical narratives, moments of arrest within texts, spaces between genres, recalibrate our perception of historical fragments, ways of knowing, and in some cases, particular histories (77).

Following Suvin's idea that estrangement or alienation structures the genre of fantasy, when we reenter "reality" outside the text, we do so with a renewed sense of wonder. This is essentially the argument for what Tolkien is doing in *Lord of the Rings* and what the genre of high fantasy literature performs if one considers the logic of the disenchantment binary to be somewhat stable: as the reader moves from fantasy world (text) to real world (beyond text), an

otherwise disenchanted world becomes enchanted and our habits of perception are reinvigorated. As Drout writes, enchantment has effects in the Primary World: "Any Secondary World necessarily draws its substance from attributes of the Primary, and the experience of enchantment feeds back into the latter in various ways and contexts—emotional, spiritual, sexual, political—to a powerful if usually unpredictable effect" (160). Drout's analysis of the interrelation between the primary and secondary worlds is well-constructed, yet he fails to account for the historical context. Extending these theories of estrangement and Tolkien's concept of enchantment, I argue that genres predicated on estrangement, or texts that foreground a play of estrangement, perform aesthetic enchantment in relation to history. But texts in this study mix generic formulas alongside ontologies with different relationships to reality. In so doing, they question this binary logic to begin with as traumatic history is estranged from reality.

Enchantment describes the strange commensurability of the fantasy mode and narratives of indirect experience of the Holocaust that reshape and recharge our relationship to the past; they forge surprising encounters that combine sadness and loss alongside in ways that amaze and delight, and in this way dovetail with Jane Bennett and Michael Saler's theoretical work on enchantment. Dismissing Weber's enchantment/disenchantment binary, Bennett describes the "mood of enchantment" that is possible in the modern world and similarly characterizes the texts my project engages (*Enchantment* 5). For Bennett, the "mood of enchantment" describes a "surprising encounter" with something you are not prepared to engage, which contains within it both a pleasurable feeling and an uncanny feeling of being "disrupted out of one's default sensory-psychic-intellectual disposition" (*Enchantment* 5). Bennett describes enchantment as a strange combination of "delight and disturbance," which is another way to theorize the aesthetics of enchantment (*Enchantment* 5). The concept of "delight and disturbance" could refer to the

pairing of aesthetic play with the reality of the historical sobriety of the Holocaust as it relates to the overall narrative arcs of the texts—the strange pairing of fullness and loss. The overall effect of enchantment according to Bennett is fullness or liveliness, having your "concentration powers tuned up or recharged" (*Enchantment* 5). The constant play of narrative ontologies in many of the contemporary texts foregrounds this idea of enchantment—the reader never settles into a single, coherent, narrative mode with clear generic codes/rules of perception. Rather, generic codes, especially those that condition realism and fantasy, are always upended and estranged from one another so that we always perceive things anew; thus, fullness does not refer to the narrative world but to our sense of perception in relation to it. For example, in my reading of *The Yiddish Policemen's Union*, I argue that the play of narrative ontologies results in a constant tension between the familiar and the strange. The reader is denied a sense of "homeliness" in the text, but this discomfort results in enchantment (both aesthetic enchantment and a return to sincere emotion for the protagonist) and is where meaning resides.

Other scholars like Rita Felski have used the term "enchantment" to theorize a "condition of aesthetic absorption" (55). Felski explains that when we are absorbed into reading or watching, "enchantment is characterized by a state of intense involvement, a sense of being so entirely caught up in an aesthetic object that nothing else seems to matter" (Felski 54). This sense of self-immersion is "soaked through with an unusual intensity of perception and affect; it is often compared to the condition of being intoxicated, drugged, or dreaming" (Felski 55). Felski is using the term to describe a phenomenology of immersion; enchantment allows her to reflect metacognitively on how literature and cinema function in relation to reader and audience. I will give a brief summary of how Felski uses the term, where it overlaps with my definition,

and how I am differentiating my use of the idea—as an aesthetic mode within text—versus her use of the term as a broad aesthetic theory.

For Felski, enchantment is self-enclosed and marked by distinct boundaries, that is, until the intrusive transition back to everyday reality (54). Even in Felski's schemata we see how, conceptually, it overlaps with modes of defamiliarization that play out on the narrative level (even though Felski is not using it in this way). Felski writes that such experiences of self-surrender and enchantment are often associated with "genres that cater to escapist yearnings that proffer their readers or viewers the narcissistic bliss of idealized self-images," such as the romance that delights and deludes in, for example, *Don Quixote* and *Madame Bovary* (62). Even so, she argues, enchantment is not limited to these genres: "realism too is imbued with magic and pulls us into an imagined world as inexorably and absolutely as any work of fantasy" (70). While Felski defines enchantment as the "condition of aesthetic absorption," her descriptions of why or how this effect is located within text bears resemblance to theories of defamiliarization or estrangement, theories that do not remain stable across different genres (32). She writes that the novel "haloes the things it describes with a plenitude of meaning, endowing them with an often exorbitant salience as harbingers of events or totemic objects" (70), and continues, "novels give us the magic, as well as the mundanity, of the everyday; they infuse things with wonder, enliven the inanimate world, invite ordinary and often overlooked phenomena to shimmer forth as bearers of aesthetic, affective, even metaphysical meanings" (70).

Resembling Shklovsky and Brecht's ideas of defamiliarization and estrangement, Felski's description of how fiction is being communicated details the way an object becomes "made strange" or new. But she goes a step further, arguing, "aesthetic enchantment leads inexorably to ontological confusion, to a disturbing failure to differentiate between fact and fantasy, reality and

wish fulfillment" (53). As my analysis of genre will show, I agree with the crossed wires of ontological confusion that result from Felski's definition of aesthetic enchantment, but I do not think that conditions of absorption—as in reading and inhabiting a narrative world—are synonymous with the inability to differentiate between "fact and fantasy, reality and wish fulfillment" (53). In fact, genre literatures foreground this exact ability to differentiate when they play with the conditions of reality to which they are inevitably interconnected. As such, this condition of being absorbed in a text fails to take into account the metanarrative play of ontological codes and genres, play that enables both the narrative's own reflection, metafictionally, and the reader's perceptions of exactly what it is that differentiates "fact and fantasy, reality and wish fulfillment" (53).

A Genealogy of Enchantment

"History is not only the passing on of a crisis but also the passing on of a survival that can be possessed within a history larger than any single individual or any single generation"—Cathy Caruth

"Fantasy characteristically attempts to compensate for a lack resulting from cultural constraints: it is a literature of desire, which seeks that which is experienced as absence and loss"—Rosemary Jackson, *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion* (3)

While the texts that make up my archive inhabit Attebery's "fuzzy set" of fantasy to varying degrees, all play with the possibility of wonder and mystery and participate in aesthetic and affective enchantment to reframe our relationship to history. For these writers, the stakes of wielding fantasy to mediate history are our ability to remember and forge connections with a distant past. These writers lack direct knowledge or experience of the Holocaust; as such, the narratives inhabit the "memory of our memories," to borrow from one protagonist of *Great House*, George Weisz (279). As Berger and Milbauer point out, Krauss's *Great House* echoes Elie Wiesel's belief that memory has "vital ontological significance": "If we stop remembering,"

Wiesel declares, "we stop being" (qtd. in Berger and Milbauer 76). Memory has ontological significance for the Jewish condition because it has been essential to survival and integral to defining narratives of Jewish experience.[18] The survival of memory takes on a particular exigency as the number of Holocaust survivors and witnesses dwindles. But because third-generation Holocaust memory is already situated at the intersection of fantasy and historical experience, enchantment manifests the strange way that the fantasy mode is entangled in Jewish memorial practice for the third generation. Regardless of the degree to which a contemporary piece of literature fictionalizes history, these texts will always already be fantasy literatures, a condition to which enchantment self-consciously attests as it interrogates its own boundaries and modes of meaning-making. Enchantment forges surprising, upsetting, and strange encounters between fantasy and history in order to arrest the reader's attention and make inevitable the link between memory and being. It is like what Lista[19] says to Safran when she exhumes a ring buried in the earth by a Trachimbrod victim, Rivka, before she died (192). Jonathan assumes that she hid the ring as proof of her existence. Alex translates Lista's response in this strange moment: "'No,' she said. 'The ring does not exist for you. You exist for the ring. The ring is not in case of you. You are in case of the ring'" (192). In this exchange, the box of "REMAINS," and the ring, maintain the strange capacity to signify (to "exist") and bear meaning about the past (192). "You," the contemporary generation, does not make meaning, but retrieves and receives the material traces of the past, where a sense of inevitability is built into the intergenerational transfer of objects and memories.

---

[18]In his acceptance speech for the Nobel Prize in literature, Wiesel cautions that in order to sustain hope for the future, one must incorporate—never reject—the past (n. pag.).
[19]Lista is the sole survivor of Trachimbrod and the character who comes to stand in for the woman who helped Safran's grandfather survive; literally, Safran, Alex and Alex's grandfather call her "not-Augustine."

Tolkien's Recovery, Shklovsky's ostronanemie, and Brecht's defamiliarization are theoretically invested in understanding the function of literature in relation to seeing primary reality as it *really* is, to see known objects and experiences as strange, distant from ourselves and "penetrate the illusion of reality" (Attebery 16). For Tolkien, Recovery mediates against the dangers of boredom and weariness in art (76), but it also dispels the myths that have come to comprise reality. Here we are reminded of his use of the term "magic" as a comment on totalitarian power, and thus, "Recovery" takes on the politics of history as it unmasks structures of power and control that have otherwise been appropriated by familiarity. Tolkien attests,

> Of all faces those of our *familiares* are the ones both most difficult to play fantastic tricks with, and most difficult really to see with fresh attention, perceiving their likeness and unlikeness: that they are faces, and yet unique faces. This triteness is really the penalty of 'appropriation': the things that are trite, or (in a bad sense) familiar, are the things that we have appropriated, legally or mentally. (77)

Recovery is necessary because the world has become trite, an illusion produced by boredom, habit, false sophistication, and loss of faith. What we will come to see in the literature and film that comprise my archive is the way in which enchantment highlights not only the faces that have become difficult to perceive, but the very modes of appropriation. The language of "appropriation" and "possessiveness" is epistemological in the sense that it refers to the ways we think we have mastered and come to "know" something by mentally acquiring it for our own purpose. What then, has been "appropriated" legally and mentally in terms of Holocaust representation? What is it about history that these writers want to engage with and perceive with fresh attention? These writers are resisting something about the way history and representation have become "trite"—perceived as knowable or unknowable—and even the stable sense of categorization that previous schematas imply. But what happens when even the "unknown" becomes knowable? Because the third generation's relationship to this event is dictated by

postmemory and mediation, memory is already estranged from historical experience, yet these writers invoke postmemory to structure enchanted experiences. In turn, these experiences renew our attention to the ways that Holocaust representation has become "realist" and "antirealist," and in turn, resist even the ways that this representational schemata cognitively and intellectually sorts and "possesses" historical representation.

It is not just our habituated perceptions that such theories aim to reestablish, but the conditions of familiarity itself—the world we *think* we inhabit or our way of thinking about that world. For Shklovsky and Brecht's Marxist views, such ways of seeing are fundamentally political. The initial sense of familiarity was itself an illusion created "by the mystifications of bourgeois ideology and hence must be replaced by estrangement as a preliminary step toward social revolution" (Attebery 308). But in contemporary Jewish American Holocaust literature, the conditions of familiarity are already called into question by the trauma of the Shoah. Here we are again reminded of the double-bind that plagues Holocaust literature: that on the one hand, the Holocaust is unknowable and unrepresentable (and this is an especially fraught statement in relation to literature written by non-witnesses), and on the other, there is the imperative to "never forget." Enchantment is a "structure of feeling" vested in the imperative to "never forget" at the same time that it testifies to the strangeness and anxiety of a desire to remember an experience that one did not personally undergo. In literary fiction, to "never forget" means to recapitulate narratives of history that transcend one's own experience, but to remember means to "witness through the imagination," to borrow from Lillian Kremer, and to somehow make that historical narrative part of one's experience. If memory is a mode of mediating historical experience for the third generation, its slippery, the writers invoke the fantastic to explore traumatic experience that is otherwise inaccessible by direct means.

Through the strange pairing of fantasy and dark history, these texts point to a paradox that is increasingly complicated by the third generation's historical alienation. It has long been the task of the novelist to fill in the gaps in documented history by invoking the imagination. Brian McHale refers to those "dark areas of history" that we may think of in terms of unknowability, "those aspects about which the official record has nothing to report," he explains (87). Furthermore, these historical dark areas are considered legitimate grounds for fabulation according to the ethos of the realist historical novel (McHale 87).

By relying on open-ended strategies of the imagination, fantasy, and mystery, enchantment is a mode of mediating those "dark areas" of historical record, for example—the entire Trachimbrod shtetl is destroyed by the war yet reimagined on impossible terms in *Everything is Illuminated*; the furniture that was destroyed by the Nazi Gold Train comes back to life in *Great House*. Playing with the boundaries of genre, mixing ontological codes means to examine the margins of experience and knowledge on both a narrative level and a historical level. These writers often examine the modes and methods of epistemological claims to history in order to find a middle ground between grandiose signifiers of historical experience that require minimal understanding (like "six million"; "Kristallnacht"; "Auschwitz") and emotional investment—two conditions necessary for interpolating history. These texts examine, often through a sense of play, and refresh, what have become the rote narratives that define the 20th century Jewish American experience. Enchantment marks the mood or structure of feeling that is necessary for the third generation to create an authentic link to the past, even if that connection foregrounds its own inauthenticity, stresses the impossibility of recreation, and performs the impossibility of unmediated or direct access to the past.

We can think about the structures of postmodernism and fantasy as a way to double-down on the alienating effects of history. "Postmodernist fiction has close affinities with the genre of the fantastic," McHale writes (74). And as Attebery notes of Kafka, Robbe-Grillet, Pynchon, Barth, Calvino, Borges, and Lem, these authors' postmodern sensibility "created a lively genre within the fantastic mode" (36), where admirers of its "metafictional play" and "freewheeling inventiveness" rarely acknowledge that these characteristics are shared with what has long been considered the fantasy genre (36). As Edwards suggests, since poststructuralism, the so-called boundaries between mimesis and fantasy have become fluid, and the "supposedly fantastic" is no longer distinct from the "supposedly real" (227).

In this sense we may come to see fantasy not as escapist but both bound up in and resistant to the social, cultural, and historical context that produces it. As Jackson argues in her work on fantasy, this literature is not "outside" time altogether nor should we think of it as somehow apart from or "transcending" reality (8). Making an anti-escapist argument, she writes, "Fantasy is not to do with inventing another non-human world: it is not transcendental. It has to do with inverting elements of this world, re-combining its constitutive features in new relations to produce something strange, unfamiliar and *apparently* 'new', absolutely 'other' and different" (8). Thus, Jackson's description of fantasy makes visible the alienating and othering effects of this mode of storytelling.

Theorists have long discussed the subversive nature of fantasy; the mode exists at the margins of narrative and culture. Díaz actually uses the term "genre" to discuss the way in which his writing is always already marked by its otherness: "everything I write is already considered genre," he says, "if I write anything that is literary fiction—it's considered genre" (n. pag.). It is this marginal quality that Saldívar draws on when he argues that speculative realism

raises the formal and thematic concerns of genre itself as part of the politics of racial identity, thus rendering the aesthetics of marginalization in resistant terms (13). Here postmodern play becomes important in the context of not only marginal spaces, but also what Victor Turner has deemed "liminal" spaces characterized by serious play and the locus of cultural transformation. The term limen itself stems from the Latin for "threshold," and it is in this threshold space where cultural meaning tends to be generated (41). As mixed-genre narratives, these texts engage in a serious play of genre to question history, thus raising the formal and thematic concerns of genre as part of the historical project. In this context, positioning fantasy as a mode at the margins is not a dismissive strategy but rather a strategic one. It means to engage fantasy not as a mode that transcends historical reality but as one deeply entrenched in the social, historical, and political codes of that reality—what Díaz has perhaps best referred to as "deep history," the secret history of genocide, slavery, and occupation that gives rise to our present condition yet remains erased from public discourse and invisible to the constitution of any national myth (Díaz n. pag.). Echoing Jackson's argument, Díaz points out that far from escapist, deep history has always been "absolutely rampant" in the genres like comic books, science fiction, and fantasy texts (Díaz n. pag.). Díaz substantiates the claim that what is difficult for culture to encounter tends to be deposited in our most marginal narratives; it is at this periphery, where the "garbage" resides, that you locate "the heart of things," he contends (Díaz n. pag.).

The turn to fantasy and play of genre thus marks an intersection of the postcolonial project and contemporary Jewish American literature. Here my project takes Díaz to task for his rejection of male Jewish American writers (or even white male writers like Jonathan Lethem[20])

[20]I would argue that Lethem's novel *Motherless Brooklyn* (1999) raises the aesthetics of genre fiction—detective tropes—as a mode of engaging with otherness and alienation of

and their aesthetics as part and parcel of dismantling mainstream literatures or narratives from the margins of "genre." Incensed that Chabon was consulted to discuss the poetics of science fiction by an *LA Times* reporter, Díaz laments that fact that Chabon is too mainstream, "Chabon, most certainly, what the fuck is Chabon doing talking Science Fiction to the *LA times*? There's not 500 more qualified writers than him, that can talk to them?" (n. pag.). Calling Chabon "the polite Black guy who everyone gets along with," he lambasts Chabon for capitalizing on his white male privilege to do something in the realm of "genre" (Díaz n. pag.) It is true that because of the economic and political assimilation of Jewish Americans, their literature is less likely to be considered marginal in the same way as Díaz's; however, economic and political assimilation is not synonymous with cultural assimilation and Jewish American literature should still be considered in a multiethnic context (Furman 10). When treating narratives of Holocaust history, as Chabon does in many of his novels, his poetics of alienation and uncertainty dismantle any accusations that Chabon's white Jewish novels are unquestionably operating from a space of privilege.

There are a few different ways we can think about fantasy in relation to marginalization in the context of this project. As Caroline Rody suggests, fantasy is a way to make real the racialized elements of violence and extermination as a colonialist enterprise aimed to cleanse Germany of Jews or "ethnic Germans" (39). Rody contends that assimilated, middle-class Jewish American writers are positioned differently from magical realism's practitioners in a third world space, but they are still influenced by magic's global rise and assert a kindred "view from the fringe of dominant European cultures" and use magic too "to express. . . a world fissured,

---

psychosomatic disease. Orphaned, overweight, outsider Lionel Essrog suffers from the neuropsychiatric disorder Tourette's syndrome, which dictates the aesthetics of the first-person narration and is key to solving the murder plot.

distorted, and made incredible by cultural displacement" (39). The problem with Rody's analysis is that she fails to show the reader how the aesthetics of magic work narratively and in relation to history. Instead she relies on magical realist tropes to assert a non-European identity politics that borders on nostalgia; she notes that these writers "can rewrite death in a vision that celebrates the power of love" (56). Aside from identity politics, the turn to fantasy also allows us to consider how Jewish American literature expresses a sense of marginalization from a cogent historical narrative because cultural and historical displacement is part and parcel of the Jewish experience. And finally, we may also think about marginalization in terms of alienation, in the present moment, from this historical experience that is overwhelming and definitive at the same time that it is mediated through layers of representation and known as unknown.

Like fantasy and the *fantastic*, magical realism has been used as both a designation of genre and the effects within genre, applied with equal vigor to a text like Toni Morrison's *Beloved* and Gabriel Garcia Marquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. In *Moments of Magical Realism in US Ethnic Literatures*, editors Lyn Di Iorio Sandín and Richard Perez anthologize essays that look at "how magical moments appear episodically in the otherwise realist fiction of contemporary U.S. multi-ethnic authors" in an attempt to de-center magical realism as a monolithic category in the literature of the Americas (1). Sandín and Perez are careful to differentiate what it means to say that a given texts contains magical realist moments ("magical effects"), or even moments of the supernatural, like a ghost, from saying that a text "is a work of magical realism" (1). Díaz discounts this distinction altogether when he argues that magical realism is not a genre, but a narrative strategy, contending that there is no *evidence* for its usage as genre even though it is widely regarded as such (n. pag.).

For Sandín and Perez, the mere act of labeling a text "magical realist" in the U.S. in practice has determined the reception of the work as magical realist, when we need greater attention to "the divergence between Latin American magical realism and the type of magically inflected realism evident in the work of US ethnic writers" (2-3). Contrary to commonplace assumptions about magic realist elements, in U.S. ethnic literature the supernatural does not "seamlessly" coexist in otherwise realist texts. Rather, "Magical moments or irruptions[21] deepen narrative meaning and signal breaks with the hegemonic constitution of everyday reality, which often hides colonial histories of race, class, and sexuality behind a realism that promises a straightforward representation of the myriad situations and conditions of contemporary life in the United States" (1).[22] In this way magical realism attends to the inadequacies of realist-oriented narrative, where, as they argue, "It is as if the shock of magic lies in the revelation that reality, as

[21]Sandín and Perez borrow "irruptions" from Caribbeanist critic Édouard Glissant's influential work *Caribbean Discourse*. Glissant discusses the ways multiple and contradictory literary effects exist in texts by Caribbean and minority writers who experiment with a multiciplicity of literary techniques "all at once." For Glissant, irruption thus refers to the way diversity emerges against the "'sublimated difference' of 'Sameness, which is ultimately saturated by sheer historical complexity and like a liquid overflowing its vessel, has everywhere released the pent-up force of Diversity'" (qtd. in Sandín and Perez). Following Glissant, Sandín and Perez remark, "for pent up within the realism of a narrative is a traumatic kernel that effectively curves the space of fictional description and tears at the very fabric of its form to reveal a series of identificatory, social, and historical meanings released through a seismic irruption and interruption, providing a deeper understanding of a violence otherwise covered over, contained, repressed or dismissed" (3).

[22]"The turn to an imagery and vocabulary of so-called magic calls attention to an incomprehensible or difficult-to-approach aspect of reality that must be rendered in different terms so the diversity of experience colored by a history of violence is represented not by consistently magical or realist portrayal, but deformed by irruptive moments indicative of terrible colonial truths underlying the nature of New World realities and appearing in unexpected moments and locations" (Sandín and Perez 3-4).

is, is an insufficient barometer of lived experience" (4). There is another meaning that a "smooth realistic surface hides" (4).

The function of fantasy as it relates to marginal genre literatures and the narrative strategy of magic realism foregrounds alternative, even resistant, ways of seeing. Resistance to monolithic ways of seeing is similarly embedded in my concept of enchantment as an extension of Williams's structures of feeling, wherein he locates "resistance and opposition to the dominant hegemonic practices and ideologies of existing social orders" (Filmer 205). And while these texts often involve magical realist elements, I would broaden "irruption" to refer to the sets of ontological codes for interpreting fantasy literature and how it enables strangeness. The sense of play, disruption, and the texts' self-consciousness exaggerates the irruption beyond supernatural presence. In Jonathan Safran Foer's *Everything Is Illuminated* chapters have discrete functions. The reader flips back and forth among a narrative told in the style of Yiddish folklore (an entirely fantastic tale set in the made-up shtetl of Trachimbrod), letters, and the protagonist's trip to Poland to locate the woman who he believed hid his grandfather during the war. These are not wholly realist or fantastic narratives, but seem to be situated *in between* genres. In my chapter on Chabon's *Yiddish Policemen's Union*, set in the alternative universe of Sitka, Alaska, I borrow the term "slipstream genre" to designate a text which is in-between genres—a liminal text—rather than one that seamlessly presents the coexistence of realist and fantasy elements. The emphasis in this text is not seamless integration of realism and fantasy, but the way in which narrative play ruptures different generic codes.

As I summarized previously, the authors themselves reflect on the way their writing indirectly or obliquely represents the Holocaust. In this archive, alienation, as both the condition of historical experience of Jewishness *and* an aesthetic mode, is a survival strategy. Narratively,

the play of strangeness offers a fragmented sense of wholeness but an affective sense of fullness—a recalibration of the sensory experience, as Bennett explains. In this way, estrangement is both a narrative technique and refers to the third generation's relationship to history. Alienation also describes the third generation's estranged relationship, in time and place, from the past; they are somewhat stranded in the present and play with defamiliarization to forge the otherwise impossible links between memory and being in the present. For example, the way that Jonathan Safran Foer finds himself belated is characteristic of many of the writers I study. As Hungerford argues, he is "belated" in two ways: first, because the story of the Holocaust and finding out the secrets of a parent's experience has already been told many times, and secondly, because he is generationally farther removed from the experience of the events in Europe ("How Jonathan" 611).

These novels are perhaps more invested in the present's relationship to the past staged through postmodern playfulness rather than the representation of the past per se. Put another way, these narratives perform the problem of *historicity* for third-generation writers that enchantment frames through narrative play. As Jameson explains, *historicity* is more than an historical context. *Historicity* involves "a perception of the present as history. . . a relationship to the present which somehow defamiliarizes it and allows us that distance from immediacy which is at length characterized as historical perspective" (*Postmodernism* 284). Historicizing thus refers to a specific mode of defamiliarization that denaturalizes the "immediacy" of the present and moves beyond a stereotyped set of images that cater to nostalgia rather than historical understanding. One of the key arguments from *Postmodernism* is the "crisis of *historicity*": that this perspective is more difficult to achieve now than it was during the epoch of the historical novel, "when contemplation of the past seemed able to renew our sense of our own reading

present" (284). In the postmodern age, the historical novel is out of fashion because we no longer experience history in the way of temporal narrative, "and indeed, perhaps no longer experience it at all" (*Postmodernism* 283-4).[23] Analyzing a Philip K. Dick novel, Jameson locates the possibility for renewing historicity—"a perception of the present as history"—within the genre of SF: "Only by means of a violent formal and narrative dislocation could a narrative apparatus come into being capable of restoring life and feeling to this only intermittently functioning organ that is our capacity to organize and live time historically" (*Postmodernism* 284). For Jameson, there is something specific about the SF genre that reorients our relationship to the present. Enchantment extends that function in this set of texts, where characters struggle to situate themselves in a postmodern present with known signifiers of Holocaust experience but no "authentic" Holocaust experience. Narrative or aesthetic enchantment draws us back from the "here and now" and attempts to mark the lack of authentic Holocaust experience in the present.

Enchantment makes manifest the notion of imaginative creation already at stake in approaches to Holocaust representation that are heavily mediated, through textuality or other aesthetic modes. These approaches, like Marianne Hirsch's idea of "postmemory,"[24] Gary

---

[23]As Jameson explains, "for if the historical novel 'corresponded' to the emergence of historicity, of a sense of history in its strong modern post-eighteenth century sense, science fiction equally corresponds to the waning or the blockage of that historicity, and, particularly in our own time (in the postmodern era), to its crisis and paralysis, its enfeeblement and repression" (284).

[24]One such theory that remains highly influential for memory studies and third-generation Jewish American literature is Marianne Hirsch's idea of postmemory. As she explains, postmemory is "a powerful and very particular form of memory precisely because its connection to its object or source is mediated not through recollection but through an imaginative investment and creation. . . . Postmemory characterizes the experience of those who grow up dominated by narratives that preceded their birth, whose own belated stories are evacuated by the stories of the previous generation shaped by traumatic events that can be neither understood nor recreated" (22).

Weissman's "fantasies of witness," and Alison Landsberg's "prosthetic memory," foreground the way that "imaginative investment" structures connections to both memory and history.

Enchantment is a compensatory strategy whereby third generation Jewish American writers foreground the "imaginative investment and creation" in an otherwise inaccessible past (22). In this way, the investment in imagination extends Gary Weissman's idea of "fantasies of witnessing" into the present moment. Gary Weissman describes the unspoken desire of many people who have no direct experience of the Holocaust but are deeply interested in studying, remembering, and memorializing it (4). Weissman looks at persons who have no immediate, familial connection and no living memory but who want to feel something, who are searching for ways to gain access and "remember" the Holocaust that eludes us. They reveal a desire to know "what it was like to be *there*" (4). This desire, he explains, "can be satisfied only in fantasy, in fantasies of witnessing the Holocaust for oneself," where "fantasy" functions as a stand-in for memory and refers to the ways nonwitnesses desire to imagine experiences of horror (4).

Because we are living in the moment when survivors are passing away, the possibility of transmitting "living memory" becomes precarious (64). In *Prosthetic Memory*, Alison Landsberg describes living memory as "memory linked to the lived experience of an individual, which therefore corresponds to the lifespan of the body" (64). She explains, "when there are no longer survivors left to testify, when memories are no longer guaranteed and anchored by a body that lived through them, responsible memory transmission becomes problematic" (64). This problem of transgenerational memory is as old as the concept of memory itself, Landsberg explains, and yet the problem posed by the Holocaust is distinct: "we are facing not only the absence of survivors, but the absence of tradition and ritual—of memory practices—that ground the event" (65). Landsman explores the way mass cultural texts and institutions have begun to

imagine strategies not simply for transmitting memories, but for creating rituals and practices necessary for the transmission of memory in the face of such obstacles. Landsberg calls these "prosthetic memories": "prosthetic memories that circulate publicly, are not organically based, but are nevertheless experienced with one's own body—by means of a wide range of cultural technologies—and as such, become part of one's personal archive of experience, informing not only one's subjectivity, but one's relationship to the present and future tenses" (66). Prosthetic memories refer to the production and dissemination of memories that have no direct connection to a person's lived past and yet are essential to the production and articulation of subjectivity. A prime example of this is the way a cinematic experience, like watching *Schindler's List* (1993) or media coverage of a historical event like 9/11, can shape the viewer's experience and subjectivity of an historical event that she did not live through (66). Landsberg calls these memories prosthetic because, like an artificial limb, they are actually worn by the body; they are "sensuous memories produced by experience" (66). In these transferential spaces, people are invited to enter into experiential relationships with events through which they themselves did not live, and "through such spaces people may gain access to a range of processual, sensually immersed knowledges, knowledges which would be difficult to acquire by purely cognitive means" (113). Affect is key to this memory process, where Landsberg is interested in mass cultural representations of the Holocaust and the sites of production of "feeling" (113). Looking at mass cultural representations of the Holocaust--at the sites of the production of "feeling"—Landsberg claims that affect might usefully complement cognition in the acquisition of knowledge about traumatic events of the past (113).

Both Weissman's idea of "memory-as-fantasy" and Landsberg's "prosthetic memory" speak to the architecture of memory construction *beyond* living memory—whether it is made

possible in the museum, cinema, or comic book. These ideas invoke something *other* than memory (fantasy; prosthesis) that performs a memory-like function for nonwitnesses who still maintain the desire to "know what it's like to be *there*" (4). Weissman's and Landsberg's formulations of "fantasy of witness" and "prosthetic memory" suggest how the imaginary or non-real stands in for authentic memory. For Weissman, the nonwitness, never having been *there*, fantasizes what it must have been like. For Landsberg, the prosthetic memory is a surrogate for a living memory that is impossible for the second and third generations. The structure of the loss of authenticity is embedded in the terminology of "nonwitness" and "prosthetic." In the idea of the prosthetic, for example, Landsberg intimates something that is not natural. Prosthetic memories, she explains, "are not the product of lived experience but are derived from a mediated engagement; like an artificial limb, they are worn on the body and often mark trauma" (20). Just as a prosthetic limb performs what it cannot be, an actual limb, a prosthetic memory is also the thing it cannot be—a living memory.

These concepts are helpful in envisioning the structures of mediation and loss of authenticity involved in intergenerational memory transfer. They intimate a desire to affectively connect with the past and read this desire through spaces like the U.S. Holocaust Museum or Art Spiegelman's *Maus.* In so doing, these ideas pave the way for thinking about how third-generation writers aim to forge an authentic, affective connection with the past to which they remain estranged and their relationship inauthentic. Because of the play of defamiliarization at work in the genre-mixing of these narratives, these writers stage a self-consciously mediated encounter with their own estranged relationship to the Holocaust. But at the same time, they express, as in Weissman's formulation, a desire to be *there*, or at the very least, to structurally and affectively connect to and relay a collective memory of the Holocaust. But because first-

and even second-generation experiences are alien to them, they must find a way to stage this encounter that speaks to both their remove and their desire to create authentic connections. This is what I am calling enchantment: narrative and affective enchantment brings together the desire to experience *something* and Holocaust memory with which we may not have a direct, bodily connection.

While this is the first monograph-length study of contemporary Jewish American literature in relation to genre theory, history, and enchantment, many contemporary Jewish American literary theorists' work substantiates the turn away from realism as a vital, important turn in post-Holocaust literature. This work is not meant to supersede or replace those of survivors. Instead, they show the kind of cultural work American Jewish writers are invested in—figuring out how to connect to a narrative past that defines their cultural experience yet one from which they remain alienated. Not an actual account of witness, enchantment draws a first-person or focalized narrator into an experience suspended between narratives, historical temporalities—even ontologies of perception—in order to highlight the desire to connect or that "fantasy of witnessing" that Weissman explicates.[25]

Chapter Summaries

Long before this group of contemporary writers begins to draw on fantasy to explore absence and loss, Bernard Malamud's short stories in *The Magic Barrel* (1950s) represented the Holocaust obliquely. Malamud was writing before any event that we have come to know as "the Holocaust" was integrated into the American historical or cultural imaginary. Even so,

[25]Jodi Eichler-Levine is also interested in the "vigorously transgressive" work she attributes to contemporary fantasy texts by African Americans and Jewish Americans that deal with trauma, especially as these texts "express uncanny desires and 'fantasies of witnessing' in a more explicit manner than do realist works" (xii).

Malamud's early work relies on fantastic tropes to make commensurate otherwise incommensurable experiences, setting up the interrelational poetics of genre, fantasy, and history that the later group of writers extends and complicates through a deeper engagement with enchantment. Informed by Michael Rothberg's *Multidirectional Memory*,[26] my chapter on Malamud investigates how fantastic aesthetics and multi-ethnic tropes serve as the node through which multidirectional experiences may pass, setting up a schemata for later writers to extend by exploring disparate twentieth-century experiences of Genocide.

Following in the wake of Yiddish folklorist I.B. Singer, Malamud was considered a fantasist by literary critics and went so far as to theorize his use of fantasy in a series of lectures he delivered at Harvard. Indeed, his stories are populated by the supernatural and share qualities of myth and uncertainty with the later group. In the way that Malamud's stories sometimes rely on and rewrite mythology, they are intertextual, but they lack a sense of postmodern playfulness and whimsy that characterize the contemporary archive. I am drawn to them because like the contemporary novels, Malamud's texts do not represent Holocaust trauma directly, but rather, through an aesthetics of indirection that becomes increasingly oblique in the present group. Like the Coen brother's period film *A Serious Man* (2009) explored in Chapter four, Malamud's texts are simultaneously obsessed with history *and* ahistoricity as the mythic quality transcends a particular time and place.

[26]As I will discuss in my first chapter, Rothberg positions his work against a framework that sees collective memory as a competitive struggle over a fixed quantity of resources (3). Rather, Rothberg argues that we consider memory as *multidirectional*, which means "subject to ongoing negotiation, cross-referencing, and borrowing: as productive and not privative" (3). He continues, "this interaction of different historical memories illustrates the productive, intercultural dynamic" he calls multidirectional memory (3).

At the time Malamud was writing, a chasm in historical experiences and geography separated the postwar American Jews who were eagerly assimilating and moving to the suburbs, bringing their Americanization full circle, from the total loss and destruction suffered by European Jews. The fantastic allows Malamud to bridge this incommensurability and safely ironize the way in which his stories present American Jews who were eager to turn their backs on their own history and their European Jewish brethren. Transgressions of reality that mark the *fantastic* in a Todorovian sense serve more of an instructive or moral purpose here. These stories are much more indebted to mythology and the fantastic than they are interested in metafictional genre-play.

In Malamud's work, the fantastic and the mythical function as narrative tropes to make the Holocaust susceptible to representation *and* make commensurate the otherwise incomparable experiences of postwar American Jews and European Jews. In this chapter I read three stories, "Lady of the Lake," "Angel Levine," and "The Last Mohican." At the beginning of each story, the American Jewish protagonist is isolated from the recent historical events of the Holocaust and/or his own Jewish identity. All protagonists are placed in "foreign" locations—Freeman and Fidelman travel to Italy, and the poor tailor Manischevitz finds himself aimlessly wandering around Harlem. Anticipating the liminality of the later texts, these protagonists find themselves adrift in uncertain territory, are out of sync with their own realities, and are physically and emotionally displaced. In a post-war context, Malamud inaugurates the double coding of alienation as a function of fantastic literature and historical experience that is again deepened in the later set of texts. (These circumstances of displacement are quite similar to Meyer Landsman and the Jews of Sitka in *The Yiddish Policemen's Union* who exist in between historical realities and genres and have no permanent homeland). In fact, each protagonist is actively in denial or in

the process of escaping Jewish history and Jewish identity, and/or confronts his lack of Jewish ritual practice—in the form of prayer or *mitzvot,* the practice of charitable action towards others. Each story is modeled after the structure of Yiddish folklore where a supernatural or ghostly character appears to offer counsel to a character in need of guidance. In this way, these hybrid stories serve as precursors to the more explicit genre-mixing of the later set. As the names of the stories prefigure, both "Lady of the Lake" and "The Last Mohican" play with tropes of American historical experience alongside the fantastic; and "Lady of the Lake" of course refers to the earliest of American hybrid genres, the historical romance that undergirds Saldívar's theory of speculative realism. By the end of each story, a pivotal moment has occurred that transforms the character's relationship to Jewishness. However, the moment possibly occurs a moment too late, emphasizing to the reader the dangers of what happens when the Jewish American protagonist turns his back on history.

In chapter two, we catapult into the present. The play of "delight and disturbance" key to narrative enchantment invokes the way objects or material traces of history function in Nicole Krauss's *Great House* and Jonathan Safran Foer's *Everything Is Illuminated*, where history animates otherwise inanimate objects as they take on lives of their own. Objects in these narratives function analogously to the ways in which magic objects in fantasy literature perform impossible feats. In these texts, the strategy of enchantment reminds the reader that the objects of history generate meaning and narrative production; that is, objects signify history, not their possessors.

In *Great House* disparate narrative threads cohere around a giant, monstrous, desk that was looted from the childhood home of one of the five narrator-protagonists. Instead of the generic codes of high fantasy that dictate wonder and mystery (world-building, mythology,

magic), history and memory animate the inanimate and bestow a feeling of strangeness onto these objects or narratives. In comparison, Safran Foer's work is both more invested in the otherworldy and more metafictional. Safran Foer's eponymous narrator Jonathan finds himself disconnected from his Russian guide and translator Alex, whose grandfather leads Jonathan on his heritage tour as he tries to reconstruct his family's histories from material traces of the past. The novel foregrounds epistemologies as fantasy stories of the Trachimbrod shtetl intersect with the journey that inspired their creation.

Great House is fragmented, comprised of five loosely connected narrators, and resists a sense of coherence as it rejects closure in favor of uncertainty. While both texts are invested in questions of metafiction, Safran Foer's narrators co-construct stories across fantasy and historical spaces and self-consciously pinpoint the uncertain stakes of creating a Holocaust novel from the space of the present. While Krauss's text reflects larger themes of displacement—the characters often finds themselves adrift or failing to belong—the desk links strangers and disparate narrative threads across the diaspora: Chile, New York, Jerusalem, and London. Similar to Malamud's work, Krauss is invested in the "in-between," but here the fantastic becomes a mode of making commensurate the third-generation writer's burden of inheritance and the past she did not experience.

Across texts, enchanted objects indicate the strange ways in which the material or spiritless animate narrative and juxtapose the knowable and unknowable of Holocaust representation. In realist modes of representation,[27] to possess an object or a narrative is to know

[27]The realist approach, explains Rothberg, characterizes the dominant scholarly methodology of historians and others who argue for an approach to the Holocaust through "Scientific" means that may be inscribed within continuous historical narratives (versus the antirealist approach, which

it. In contrast, by enchanting objects (giving them agency; emphasizing their metaphysics; allowing them to signify) and making such objects incapable of being possessed, novelists like Krauss and others underscore the impossibility for third generation writers to know and possess Holocaust history. Nevertheless, there is an imperative to determine the limits of knowledge and representation by formulating new modes of storytelling that play with fantasy and reality.

In chapter three, I turn to the way in which genre-mixing creates an aesthetics of enchantment in *The Yiddish Policemen's Union*, a text organized around a revisionist or alternative Holocaust history, a murder plot of an Orthodox Jew thought to be the messiah, and a terrorist bombing orchestrated by fundamentalist orthodox Jews. As it plays with tropes of the hard-boiled detective novel, allohistory, biblical history, science fiction, and even romance, this texts flouts distinct genre conventions, plays with meaning of estrangement, and mixes what are usually distinct ontologies of genre: the function of the detective plot is to *detect* the strange; the function of the sf/fantasy genre is to *normalize* the strange; the function of allohistory is to *estrange* history. Also called alternative history, allohistory posits changes in history to bring about different realities; it introduces "otherness" into known historical narratives to reveal the effects of appropriation and possession, raising epistemological questions so that we may "see things as we are (or were) meant to see them" (Tolkien 146).

My reading emphasizes the "in-betweenness" of narratives, geography, historical circumstance, fiction, and reality. Both the protagonist and the reader face the impossible double-bind of locating a sense of "home" amidst utter displacement. In this chapter, enchantment describes the code-switching that occurs across genres *and* histories (for example,

---

radically breaks from such historical narratives). It emphasizes what is nameable and what can be translated, within existing methodology, into the mimetic universe (Rothberg 4).

when the key markers of biblical history are the signs or clues that signal meaning in the detective plot), creating meaning in a liminal space. Chabon's novel raises aesthetics as a mode of defamiliarizing what have become defining fragments of twentieth-century Jewish American history: the founding of the state of Israel in 1948; Jewish diaspora; the novel even engages with 9/11. In so doing, these narratives are revisited as historical contingencies rather than pre-conceived realities and new perspectives make room for long-forgotten or overwritten histories.

In this chapter, I also explore the metafictional elements of the novel and the broader constructedness of history that postmodern genre-mixing problematizes. Bina (Landsman's ex; a fellow detective) has a "detective's appetite for other peoples' stories," while Landsman has an impeccable memory but not emotional attachment to his cases (168). Through these metafictional tropes, the novel explores epistemologies first introduced in tension through Fidelman and Susskind's disparate approaches to art in "The Last Mohican." Through Bina and Landsman's methods of detection or solving we see two contrasting ways of confronting history: storytelling rooted in orality (stresses interpretive freedom) and forensics rooted in his impeccable memory (stresses precision); perhaps emotional investment and detachment are both necessary to solve the crime just as they are needed to interpolate history.

What is the point of this postmodern playfulness that disrupts what we have come to expect as the normal function of literary estrangement? What are we meant to sense and feel anew? Through the play of fantasy and different narrative codes, the loss of Jewish culture becomes available to the present. The novel raises questions of aesthetics in relation to traumatic histories; it inhabits an "in-between" space of forgetting and remembering (a thematic concern for the Jews of Sitka) as the reader confronts rote genres and familiar narratives of the 20th century Jewish experience in unexpected, enchanted circumstances. As Bina and Landsman

remark, the Sitka Jews must not get "too comfortable" in the present and forget the past. Forgetting leads to the recapitulation of traumatic history: "Egypt. Spain. Germany," Bina remarks (380).

The use of non-realist forms of representation to mediate the incommensurability of an historical experience persists from Malamud to the contemporary archive, wherein the historical and cultural divide between an American Jewish present and a European past has deepened with time. Even a text set at total remove from the Holocaust, such as the Coen brothers' *A Serious Man* (2009), contributes to this project as it questions modes of knowing and interpolating the past. In chapter four, I explore this text alongside Nathan Englander's short story "The Tumblers" (1999). "The Tumblers" and *A Serious Man* may initially seem like strange bedfellows—their genres, content, and approach to narrating history could not be more distinct. But the ways in which these two texts yoke together humor and the grotesque to achieve a Kafkaesque sensibility, play with narrative conventions of diverse genres, and rely on the Yiddish trope of the schlemiel to question a cosmic presence in a post-Holocaust world, provide substantial common ground to consider their rich intersections and how the schlemiel survives when confronted with evil. Of all the texts in this project, *A Serious Man* is least obviously connected to Holocaust representation, while "The Tumblers" forges a direct representational link, yet both play with the Yiddish trope of the schlemiel to problematize historical narratives. Extending my analysis of narrative ontology in *The Yiddish Policemen's Union* (2007), and play and objects in *Great House* (2010) and *Everything Is Illuminated* (2002), this chapter turns to the open-endedness of uncertainty specifically in relationship to Jewish literary tropes as genre-mixing continues to disrupt historical narratives. In the invocation of the Chelm story and its symbols, this play *with play* is important to both the trope of the schlemiel and the genre-mixing in each text. These

texts explore how, in a world deprived of order and meaning, play becomes increasingly important as a mode of narrative as well as life.

CHAPTER 1

THE AESTHETICS OF INDIRECTION IN BERNARD MALAMUD'S EARLY SHORT FICTION

"Fantasy, since it is out of bounds of the ordinary, invites the writer to take chances, to venture beyond habitual limits or limitations, to do things he hasn't previously done—to play with fire and magic. Fantasy, whose essence is possibility, affords the writer the pleasure of creating people and events reacting on each other in ways that seem original, perhaps unique. The writer may readily feel that he is manipulating reality itself, yet safely because controlled by art" (50)—Bernard Malamud, "*Why Fantasy*?"[28]

"Think of me above all as an imaginative writer"—Bernard Malamud, Letter to Evelyn Avery, July 8, 1973

Known as a fantasist largely because of his Pulitzer-Prize-winning novel *The Fixer* (1966), Bernard Malamud's early short fiction published ten years earlier and compiled in *The Magic Barrel* (1958) already relied on fantasy-parables to engage with reality. However fantastic or supernatural, these stories tell what Malamud refers to as a moral truth: "the truth is of this world, not beyond, and it is a moral truth. Fantastic, symbolic, mythic, timeless, universal, poetic, or anything else the fantasy may be, the truth it tells is true" (*Talking Horse* 61). Malamud turns to fantasy prior to *The Fixer* and long before contemporary Jewish American novelists find their way to fantasy as a mode of mediating their relationship to traumatic history. His early fiction instantiates this mode as a Jewish American aesthetic indebted to the tropes of

[28]Published in *Talking Horse: Bernard Malamud on Life and Work*. Editor Alan Cheuse notes that "Why Fantasy?" was possibly prepared during Malamud's time at Harvard (1966-68) but stipulates it may have been prepared for one of his public appearances elsewhere (39).

Yiddish folklore,[29] one that serves as a form of philosophical reflection and social commentary intent on reflecting reality rather than escaping from it.

In "Lady of the Lake," Henry Levin, a thirty-year-old floorwalker at Macy's, receives a small inheritance, quits his job and travels to Europe to find love. After visiting Paris, he settles in the Italian town of Stresa on the shore of Lake Como. Levin is "tired of the past—tired of the limitations it imposed upon him," and by the time he arrives in Italy he has taken to calling himself Henry R. Freeman and passing as a gentile (105). Freeman spends his days exploring the neighboring islands, and upon visiting Isola del Dongo he immediately falls in love with Isabella del Dongo, daughter of the wealthy del Dongo aristocracy. The two share a quiet intimacy, interrupted on two separate occasions when Isabella inquires whether or not Freeman is Jewish. Freeman denies the charge both times. After the second inquiry into Freeman's Jewish roots, it is Isabella who confesses her true identity. Her name is Isabella della Seta—not del Dongo—and she is from a poor family, not the wealthy aristocracy. In fact, she, her brother and her elderly father Ernesto (who has been working as a guide and shuttling Henry back and forth across the lake from his hotel to the island) are caretakers of the island and its palace. Freeman is deeply angered, especially at himself, for creating and believing in a fairy tale romance. After briefly abandoning Isabella on the island, Freeman, overcome by his love, decides he will convince Isabella to marry him nonetheless. He finds Ernesto waiting for him at the dock, but when he reaches Isabella on the island she once again asks him if he is Jewish. Fearing the worst, Freeman answers, "How many no's make never? Why do you persist with

[29]Malamud refers to stories like "Take Pity" (1958), "Idiots First" (1963), and "Angel Levine" (1955) as folk fantasies, by which he means, "except for the miraculous element, what happens happens to ordinary people in more or less ordinary circumstances, usually during periods of difficulty or stress. To solve the trouble certain unreal or supernatural beings appear, inducing miraculous events. The classic Yiddish writers wrote stories of this kind" (*Talking Horse* 59).

such foolish questions?" (132). In this climactic moment, Isabella unbuttons her blouse to reveal her breasts—and the blue number tattooed on her chest. "Buchenwald," Isabella tells him. "I can't marry you. We are Jews. My past is meaningful to me," she says. "I treasure what I suffered for" (132). Freeman tries to tell her the truth but it is too late—he is left groping "only moonlit stone" (133) as she disappears into the mist.

Malamud relies on fantasy in "Lady of the Lake" to affirm that an American Jewish future is not possible without recognition of history and memory of the Holocaust. Invested in the present state of suffering rather than its history, the folk fantasy "Angel Levine" presents a Job-like archetype in the character of Manischevitz, an old Jewish tailor in New York, who suddenly loses everything. Overnight, his shop burns to the ground, his wife becomes ill, his daughter elopes with a lout and his son is killed in the war. When it seems that Manischevitz can no longer withstand his pain and suffering, the black Jewish angel Alexander Levine appears to offer his assistance.

The story circles around Manischevitz's decision whether or not to believe in this black Jewish angel who has come to offer his aid. Skeptical of the angel's divine origins, Manischevitz demands proof in a series of tests. Although Levine succeeds, Manischevitz remains unconvinced, and the still-fallen angel departs to Harlem. Manischevitz's suffering momentarily lessens before it gets worse, and he begins to doubt his own disbelief. Was he "in his blindness too blind to comprehend" that God had sent him an angel? (49). The Jewish tailor rides the subway to Harlem, where he is so stunned to discover a disheveled Levine in a honkeytonk that he returns home without entering. After Manischevitz dreams of Levine "preening small decaying opalescent wings," he returns to Harlem seeking the angel. But instead of the honkytonk, he finds a synagogue in its place and watches as four "Negroes wearing

skullcaps" sit around the torah scroll (55). Manischevitz listens to the men debate the meaning of "Neshoma" or spirit and affirm that God's "immaterial substance" is everywhere. The scene in part inspires Manischevitz's revelation: "You are Jewish. This I am sure. . . I think you are an angel from God," he avers to Levine (55). By the time the two have traveled back to Manischevitz's apartment, his wife has fully recovered from her illness. Manischevitz looks out the window to witness a black angel receiving his wings: "A feather drifted down. Manischevitz gasped as it turned white, but it was only snowing" (56). He runs downstairs into his apartment: "A wonderful thing, Fanny," Manischevitz said. "Believe me, there are Jews everywhere" (56). Evinced in his gasp, Manischevitz has sensed the divine spirit in Angel Levine.

Malamud returns to Italy in "The Last Mohican," where failed painter turned "professional student" Arthur Fidelman travels to Rome to write a critical study of the Catholic painter Giotto.[30] Fidelman arrives in Rome and to his disdain meets Shimon Susskin, Jewish refugee and schnorrer. Susskind's relationship to the Holocaust is explicit but limited in detail; a Jewish refugee from Israel, Susskind wishes to stay in Italy where by contrast he "feels free" (160). As "the refugee," Susskind's particular Jewish experience reflects wider human suffering. "I'm always running," he says to Fidelman, "Where else but Germany, Hungary, Poland? Where not?" (158). Fidelman barely acknowledges the geography of the Holocaust in his reply, "Ah, that's so long ago" (158). But Susskind is not simply "the refugee," he is a Holocaust refugee, and the lack of this distinction is an important absence that questions how American Jews recognize and interpolate the post-Holocaust Jewish experience.

[30]Published first in 1958, "The Last Mohican" was republished as the first of the six tales of Fidelman in *The Fidelman Stories* (1969).

Susskind follows Fidelman and begs him for his spare suit because he claims the one he was wearing fell apart after the war. Fidelman's response, perhaps quintessentially American, is to refer Susskind to a Jewish welfare organization. When the first chapter of Fidelman's manuscript on Giotto disappears from his hotel room, Fidelman is convinced that Susskind is the guilty party, becomes obsessed with Susskind (especially in his dreams), and searches everywhere for the refugee. It is at this point that he stumbles through the Jewish quarter of Rome and faces his own relationship to Jewish history. After his transformative experience dreaming of Giotto's painting *St. Francis Giving his Mantle to a Poor Man* (*San Francesco dona le vesti al cavaliere povero*, 1299) Fidelman sees Giotto's painting anew and offers his blue gabardine to Susskind despite knowing that Susskind has stolen and burned his manuscript.

In all three stories considered here—"Lady of the Lake" (1958), "Angel Levine" (1954), and "The Last Mohican" (1958)—a ghostly figure fulfills a primarily instructive role (a trope characteristic of Yiddish folklore) and leads the Jewish American protagonist disconnected from his roots on a path to self-discovery (to varying degrees of success). The contemporary archive that I will go on to explore in subsequent chapters relies on fantasy as a mode of mediating history, self-consciously and self-critically creating moments of arrest that engage with the loss of authentic encounters with Holocaust history. Malamud relies on fantasy as a means to indirectly engage with Holocaust history; his work turns to fantasy tropes to metafictionally mediate the American Jewish experience of the Holocaust, which is set at geographical and historical remove from European Jewry. As Hilene Flanzbaum writes, knowledge of the Holocaust in America "has rarely been delivered by direct witness; it comes to us by way of representations, and representations of representations" (4). In these stories, fantasy becomes a

means to encounter trauma alien to the protagonist's day-to-day existence yet tied to his cultural history.

These stories reveal a delusional post-war Jewish American mindset in the psychology of the protagonists explored through third-person free indirect discourse. In so doing, the narratives focalized through the protagonists problematize the boundary between fantasy and reality. They draw on fantastic tropes—angels, apparitions—wherein fantasy becomes a means of transcending escapism, seeing reality as it really is, and mocking the notion that there is a clear demarcation between fantasy and reality. In "Lady of the Lake," the protagonist's obsession with Italy and romance reveals an American Jew out of touch with his world and suggests that fantasy may be a legitimate deflection of traumatic reality. "Angel Levine" and "The Last Mohican" both dramatize fantasy as an interruptive trope that defamiliarizes the quotidian, allowing the protagonist to see what has been visible all along. The stories imply an analogy between the need to confront reality within and outside the text. The pressures of fantasy within the stories result in epiphanic experiences for the protagonists, suggesting that fantasy serves as a vital means of shocking the gentrified, often bourgeois Jewish American community out of their oblivion to perceive what is already visible yet remains unseen. Thus, like the later texts, fantasy in Malamud's work is used to express removal and mark a loss of direct experience; unlike the later texts, enchantment in Malamud's work makes commensurate the otherwise incommensurable experiences of postwar American and European Jews.

In the two stories set in Italy[31] ("Lady of the Lake" and "The Last Mohican"), sheltered American Jewish protagonists Freeman and Fidelman encounter a Holocaust survivor only to

[31]Malamud set eleven stories in Italy, six of which were collected under the title *Pictures of Fidelman* (1969) and feature Arthur Fidelman as the main protagonist ("The Last Mohican" is

come to terms with their own escape from Jewishness. Fantasy tropes reveal American Jewish protagonists cut off from the reality of European Jews and reflects the larger anxiety surrounding the problem of how to reconcile American Jewish identification with European Jewish suffering. In both "Angel Levine," which is set in New York City, and "The Last Mohican," set in Italy, fantasy tropes also triangulate inter-ethnic experiences of suffering between the African American and Jewish experience ("Angel Levine") and Native American and Jewish experience ("The Last Mohican"). Michael Rothberg's analytic multidirectional memory becomes important to understanding how fantasy aesthetics, at the narrative level, becomes an in-between space to explore intercultural dynamics. In so doing, these stories also engage with philosophies of art critical of the rational as art's expressive mode; rather, they privilege mystery, feeling, and the non-rational as central to art's communicable experience. At a time when the historical conditions of poverty and war in Italy isolate the function of art, Malamud's stories draw on fantasy tropes and the social, inter-subjective aspects of art to foreground its vitality.

Given the anxiety surrounding the divergent experiences between American Jews and the Nazi Holocaust, fantasy and intertextuality rely on the imaginable and the imaginary to allow for ways of accessing the Holocaust that are, as Alter declared, "susceptible to fictional representation" (Jewishness 38). In the Italy stories, the outcome of the indirect encounter with Holocaust history results in the humbling or spiritual education of the American Jewish protagonist. The fantasy elements that connect these characters with ghostly counterparts from the European Holocaust speak directly to the idea that American reticence about the Holocaust up through the 1960s was perhaps most motivated by anxiety about incommensurate experiences.

---

considered the first of the Fidelman stories). Malamud's wife Ann De Chiara was an Italian-American Roman Catholic, and they often visited Italy.

As Sundquist explains, "the relative insulation of American Jews from the Nazi menace and the postwar suburban security to which many aspired simply could not be reconciled with the unfathomable destruction of nearly 6 million European Jews" (205). Adopting George Steiner's language, Sundquist expresses that postwar American Jews lived with historical dissociation, "inwardly tormented about the disaster they had not been able to prevent, publicly silent about an event they wished to make alien to Judaism as they knew it" (qtd. in Sundquist 205). The anxiety surrounding incommensurate experiences is the subject of Philip Roth's "Eli, the Fanatic" (1959), a story that creates a portrait of Americanized Jews who are embarrassed when Orthodox refugees establish a yeshiva in their town. For the Americanized Jews, the survivors present a threat to the town's "peace and safety—what civilization had been working toward for centuries" and reveal the sometimes subtle, sometimes sharp line between "Jew" and American" (Sundquist 206).

Why Fantasy?

As I explored in the introduction, part of the efficacy of fantasy tropes is linked to defamiliarization. In Malamud's work, moments of arrest reveal that the seeming unreal is an apt mode for defamiliarizing reality within the textual world and the reality of American Jewish oblivion towards European Jewish suffering outside the text; in so doing, these moments prefigure the schemata of enchantment that surfaces in the later works. The interruption of fantasy into "Angel Levine" is one such moment of heightened perception and mediates against that automatization that "eats away at things, at clothes, at furniture, at our wives, at our fear of war" (*Theory of Prose* 5). As Shklovsky describes, "if we should wish to make a definition of 'poetic' and 'artistic' perception in general, then doubtless we would hit upon the definition: 'artistic' perception is perception in which form is sensed. . ." (*Theory of Prose* 42). In "Angel

Levine," fantasy mediates against the absorption that results in seeing without perception, a condition that plagues the protagonist when the story opens and presents Manischevitz reading "but not truly reading" (44-5). The narrator describes, "he was not truly reading, because his thoughts were everywhere; however, the print offered a convenient resting place for his eyes, and a word or two, when he permitted himself to comprehend them, had the momentary effect of helping him forget his troubles" (44-45). The angel appears, actively disrupting Manischevitz's automatized reading as he reports having the "shock of his life" (45). Thus, story registers fantasy tropes as a legitimate mode of seeing as the narrator describes,

> Manischevitz put his paper down and looked up with the distinct impression that someone had entered the apartment, though he could not remember having heard the sound of the door opening. . . he stumbled into the living room and there had the shock of his life, for at the table sat a Negro reading a newspaper he had folded up to fit into one hand. (45)

The "distinct impression" reveals that Manischevitz *senses* the angel's presence; here the story introduces sensing-as-knowing, which will become an important trope for experiencing art in "The Last Mohican." Additionally, the angel—as a transcendent being—dramatizes that the mode of fantasy has the ability to transcend, meaning Levine makes visible (to Manischevitz) what is already present yet invisible because of automatized perception. But Angel Levine is not a normal-looking angel, and in this way he registers to both the reader and Manischevitz as doubly estranged; he disrupts the reality-oriented function of the text (set in our world) *and* he is odd-looking: he's black, he lacks wings, he wears a frayed suit, and he has very large feet, to sum up some of Manischevitz's observations (45).

Thus, these stories to turn fantasy to dramatize Malamud's central argument in "Why Fantasy?": that fantasy engages with "reality itself" (*Talking Horse* 5). In a series of teaching lectures first prepared when he was a lecturer at Harvard (1966-1968) and reprinted in *Talking*

Horse, Malamud laments the need to defend fantasy against the critics and editors who, upon encountering his more fantastic tales, never failed to question why he was "still on that kick" (*Talking Horse* 48). Objecting to his own critics and those who similarly disapproved of the fantastical elements in Saul Bellow's *Henderson the Rain King* (1959), Malamud argues that fantasy and serious fiction are not necessarily mutually exclusive. "If the fantasy has meaning, as every work of literary art must," Malamud writes, ". . . then the meaning need not be accounted unreal" (*Talking Horse* 59). Of these critics who disdain fantasy, Malamud summarizes, "on the whole they want their fiction to be 'real' (although fiction is not real but only pretends to be); anyway they want it 'realistic,' and there are some critics nowadays who feel a man can write nothing of importance unless he is dealing with some aspect of society using the method we call social realism" (*Talking Horse* 47). As Malamud puts it, in fantasy, the story becomes "too evidently a work of imagination" for some (47). Regarding those who believe that serious literature is synonymous with social realism, Malamud muses that such critics are wary of any affronts to this realism because the perceived threat to everyday reality makes them personally uneasy:

> And some people don't want 'reality' tampered with, particularly if it is everyday reality and seems fantastic to them, not because of monstrous acts of inhumanity or the flights of missiles through space, made to carry atomic warheads, but because something improbable happens: an angel appears in a story, or maybe a ghost; that of course is personally threatening although the death of multitudes and the everyday threat of the end of the world may not be. (*Talking Horse* 47-8)

While the unfathomable reality of atomic warfare, the apocalypse, and by extension, the incomprehensible event of the Holocaust, are not questioned, the intrusion of purely fantastic elements like ghosts and angels into everyday reality is received as a personal threat.

Malamud suggests that critics and readers find the improbability of an angel or a ghost alarming precisely because these apparitions threaten the boundary between fantasy and reality (in literature; also beyond the text) and the accepted literary tropes of realism and antirealism that accompany each generic realm. Against the dismissal of fantasy as both untrue and unserious, Malamud writes that fantasy does for the reader what it does for the writer: "fantasy challenges him to make use of the earthly wonderful as well as the supernatural; to tie them together in unpredictable combinations with the commonplace, the ordinary, and out of this still produce a real enough truth about life" (*Talking Horse* 50). Thus, Malamud's stories do not fall squarely into the fantasy genre—sometimes fantasy is used merely decoratively for Malamud, and sometimes fantasy becomes the bones of the story structure (*Talking Horse* 51). For fantasy to work—and to work well—according to Malamud, fantasy takes on those qualities that Darko Suvin mentions when he writes that in fantasy, strangeness or alienation has grown into the text's framework (*Metamorphoses* 7). Malamud explains, "the important thing is that in good fantasy the reader forgets the openness of the magic," (*Talking Horse* 51). To "forget the openness of the magic" means that the reader considers Malamud's fantasy tropes part and parcel of his generic craft.

As the above story synopses reveal, Malamud's work is unlike the works of first-generation writers who depict the realities of horrific violence and directly represent the spaces of concentration camps and ghettos. In fact, Malamud's work does not refer to archetypal events in the history of the Holocaust, which will come to characterize the indirection of Nicole Krauss's writing explored in chapter three. Instead, explicit references to the Holocaust are limited to Isabella, the Buchenwald survivor in "Lady of the Lake," and Susskind, a refugee fleeing "Germany, Hungary, and Poland" in "The Last Mohican." Like the mystical Lady of the

Lake central to Arthurian Romance, the presence of the Holocaust in "Lady of the Lake" is shrouded in mystery and reflects the larger impact of the Holocaust on Jewish American consciousness at this historical moment (Kremer 83). Malamud does not present Isabella's experience in Buchenwald, instead choosing to leave the subject, like Isabella, surrounded in mist. And in "The Last Mohican," Susskind begs Fidelman for a suit because, he says, "I haven't had a suit for years. The one I was wearing when I ran away from Germany, fell apart. One day I was walking around naked" (160). The sudden image of Susskind's nude body fleeing Germany solidifies Susskind's relationship to Holocaust trauma, yet it remains ambiguous in contrast to a character like Isabella. "Angel Levine" is increasingly distanced from Holocaust tropes. If the Holocaust appears at all in this story it is through the Jobian character Manischevitz and his grappling with the question of endless Jewish suffering through his dialogue with God.

In contrast to these earlier stories, Malamud's later, and more celebrated novel, *The Fixer* (1966), *is* recognized and lauded for its indirect Holocaust representation based on the blood libel trial of Mendel Beilis, a Russian Jew accused of ritual murder and blood libel in Kiev in 1913. Lillian Kremer notes that "Malamud's novels . . . are Holocaust haunted, not with survivors but with Holocaust references and metaphors. . . [*The Fixer* is] the Malamud novel most closely associated with the Holocaust" (95). Sundquist remarks,

> In adapting the story of Beilis. . . Malamud created both an analogy and a context for an American audience still struggling to grasp the meaning of the Holocaust. The historical displacement served two purposes: it gave scope to the violent tradition of anti-Semitism that had marked European and Russian culture for centuries before the rise of Nazism; and it underlined the double difficulty faced by an American writer seeking an appropriate narrative form in which to contain the concept of genocide. (412)

Based on an earlier model of storytelling, *The Fixer* (1966) pays homage to Isaac Bashevis Singer's *The Slave* (serialized in Yiddish in 1960-61 and translated into English in 1962). In *The Slave,* Singer employed a historic narrative set against anti-Semitic violence of the seventeenth century to explore the millennial upheaval of the Holocaust and its devastating effects (Sundquist 205). As Robert Alter puts it, the Beilis story gave Malamud "a way of approaching the European Holocaust on a scale that is imaginable, susceptible of fictional representation" (Jewishness 38).[32] Two fantasists, Bernard Malamud and Isaac Bashevis Singer, rely on indirection to fictionalize the Holocaust as they depict violent anti-Semitic histories. Responding to *The Slave*, Sundquist suggests, "in order to confront an event seemingly without precedent, one might need to resort to radical indirection" (412). But also, in Malamud's earlier stories' emphasis on morality and responsibility, their depiction of ghostly mentors and lost souls who navigate seemingly incommensurate experiences of Jewishness, Malamud explores the broken world that serves as the backdrop to *The Fixer* (1966).

It was not until Malamud's work in *The Fixer* that he became known as a writer concerned with the Holocaust; however, it is clear that these concerns plagued Malamud's early stories as well. In 1983 Malamud gave an interview clarifying the way in which he embeds the theme of Jewish survival into all of his work:

> Interviewer: "Novelists have shown concern over assimilation and survival. What is your concern?"
>
> Malamud: "Survival, of course! I am deeply aware of World War II and the horrors of the concentration camps. It is a personal thing and I have been, to some degree, conditioned by this experience. Any sensitive human being who calls himself Jewish could not ignore the Holocaust."

[32]Malamud has stated that the novel has a relationship to the Holocaust, noting "Somewhere along the line, what had happened in Nazi Germany began to be important to me in terms of the book, and that is part of Yakov's story" (Conversations 19).

> Interviewer: "This, I believe, has influenced your writing--especially the short stories."
>
> Malamud: "To some degree. I write about the marginal Jew who manages to be influenced by the concepts of morality which, incidentally are Jewish but not only Jewish." (*Conversations* 70)

Malamud indirectly invokes Holocaust themes and narratives at a historical moment when the Holocaust was not yet part of Jewish American cultural memory and when Adorno's "no poetry after Auschwitz" (1949) was an accepted cultural code. In this way his indirection problematizes the discourse that considers the 1950s and '60s as a time when few American Jews, not to mention Jewish American writers, addressed the Holocaust. Writing in 1966, Robert Alter observed that even with all the restless examining of the implications of the Holocaust among Jewish intellectuals, "it gives one pause to note how rarely American-Jewish fiction has attempted to come to terms in any serious way with the European catastrophe," thus discounting Malamud's work engaged with the Holocaust in a "serious way" ("In the Community" 67). Responding much later thirty years later, Andrew Furman remarks upon the subtlety and pervasiveness of Malamud's treatment of the Holocaust (n. pag). Furman stresses that while it is difficult to imagine, one must recall that the 1950s and '60s was a time when few Jewish American writers dared address the topic of the Holocaust in their writing (n. pag). Subtelty and indirection, especially expressed through fantasy tropes, for Malamud self-consciously dramatizes the distance between American and European Jewish experiences and allows him to "safely" engage with a not-yet-discussed trauma.

In the introduction to her anthology *The Americanization of the Holocaust*, Hilene Flanzbaum notes that many contemporary Americans struggle to accept that Americans, including American Jews, said little about the Holocaust in the decade following World War II. She reports, "someone always finds my statement outrageous—if not blasphemous: "How can

you say no one talked about the Holocaust in the 1950s?. . . We all saw Anne Frank. What about Anne Frank?" (3).[33] But as she explains, the "unfailingly optimistic" text that downplayed the dark and brutal side of history makes clear that the Holocaust of the 1950s is not the Holocaust of the late 1990s, when Flanzbaum is writing.[34] Historians like Peter Novick, whose *The Holocaust in American Life* (1999) has become required reading on the topic, have argued that writers in the postwar period did not openly address the Holocaust for three reasons: silence was a manifestation of repression; people may have feared that discussions about the Holocaust would perpetuate Jewish stereotypes of Jewish victimhood; or, as Novick believes, "revolutionary changes in world alignments" made conversations about the Holocaust unadvisable amidst a Cold War climate (85).[35]

---

[33]"Seeing Anne Frank" refers to the stage play, first performed in 1955, and the film, which premiered in 1959 (Flanzbaum 2).

[34]Deborah Lipstadt notes that the Holocaust was not a factor in Jewish American identity in the 1950s, and in fact, the elevation of the Holocaust in Jewish American identity from the 1990s on "is particularly noteworthy since throughout the 1950s and most of the 1960s it was barely on the Jewish communal or theological agenda" (195). But this does not mean that the Holocaust was totally absent from the American popular cultural agenda, and Lipstadt cites the emergence of early plays, books and television productions that garnered substantial attention (she offers as possible explanation the idea that the attention was generated from the non-Jewish community) (195). Nonetheless, according to Lipstadt, the Holocaust did not emerge as a factor in the construct of American Jewish identity in the 1950s (195).

[35]Eric Sundquist echoes the claim that Holocaust recognition was hindered by Jews' fears of being identified with the wrong side of the Cold War and there was apprehension that the very act of speaking about the Holocaust would make American Jews stand out *as* Jews at the moment when they were achieving acceptance and assimilation (205). Scholars like Novick argue that the emergence of the Holocaust as central to Jewish American identity occurs only after the 1973 Arab-Israeli War, when Israeli vulnerability at the conflict's outset highlighted fears that the Holocaust was not a historically isolated event and raised the possibility that a mass obliteration of the Jews could be repeated (151). Many others, however, Sundquist included, point to the much earlier televised trial of Adolf Eichmann (1961) and the publication of Raul Hilberg's *The Destruction of the European Jews* the same year as the event that broke "the silence," ushering in the Holocaust as a subject of study by journalists, scholars, etc. (205).

While the arguments that privilege 1950s consensus and assimilation are widely accepted, it has become more fraught in recent years with the critical reception of Hasia Diner's *We Remember with Reverence and Love: American Jews and the Myth of Silence after the Holocaust*: *1945-1962* (2010).[36] While Malamud's work engages with the Holocaust through indirection, his work substantiates, alongside Diner's claim, that "silence" is too strong a term to characterize American Jewish responses at this time.[37] The indirection of fantasy reveals Malamud as a writer attempting to find a medium or an aesthetic mode to grapple with the atrocity. And while indirection is not synonymous with silence, many critics take Malamud to task for his "universalizing," which they define through the work's lack of direct representation of Holocaust trauma. By and large, the critics reflect that fantasy is an inferior or unserious mode of representation and that it represents the Holocaust superficially and unethically. For

---

Hannah Arendt's *Eichmann in Jerusalem* (1963) was also influential in awakening the guilt of the politically complacent American Jews in their protest to Nazism (Sundquist 205).

[36]Commonly cited is a 1961 symposium conducted by *Commentary* called "The Condition of Jewish Belief." Editors asked questions of young intellectuals about Jewish values, Americanism, conversion, the socialism of the previous generation, and Israel. Many scholars have pointed out that there were no questions specifically about the Holocaust, and few of the thirty-one participants spoke about it (Sundquist 205-6). The subject was also found missing from a 1961 symposium of Jewish intellectuals, "My Jewish Affirmation" published in *Judaism*, where respondents who were asked questions like "What do you regard as centrally significant in Jewish tradition and presently viable?" made no reference to the Holocaust (Sundquist 205).

[36]Hannah Arendt's *Eichmann in Jerusalem* (1963) was also influential in awakening the guilt of the politically complacent American Jews in their protest to Nazism (Sundquist 205).

[37]While Diner's work presents an impressive archive of literature (both popular and scholarly), memorials, school curricula, and Holocaust observances, documenting that many events occurred in public and private spaces of Jewish life that provide evidence for her argument, they seem to have occurred at the margins of Jewish community life and do not necessarily contradict Novick's and others' claims that the majority of post-war American Jews, as a community, did not engage with the Holocaust.

example, Lawrence Langer argues that Malamud's figurative representations of the atrocity fail to present an authentic representation of suffering experienced by Holocaust victims (145). Lillian Kremer objects, arguing, "although Bernard Malamud does not confront the Holocaust experience directly, his fiction is clearly haunted by the Holocaust. His tales of postwar Jewish life are informed by Holocaust consciousness" (82).[38]

This larger debate plays out in critical attention to "Lady of the Lake," and discussions of the story's Jewishness. Critics like Eileen Watts have read the story as a biblical allegory of the Akedah, the binding of Isaac (148). Ezra Cappell is highly critical of Malamud's symbolic Judaism that is based not on any religious system or traditional values, but rather on Malamud's humanistic, ethical, ahistorical system (43-4).[39] Cappell argues that Malamud's work lacks a Jewish content and ultimately, Malamud's Jews "cannot sustain the awesome responsibility of bearing witness to the Holocaust—the actual (and not symbolic) watershed event of the twentieth

---

[38]For Kremer, the most successful stories are those that explore an American's encounter with a survivor or refugee-mentor who initiates the innocent into Jewish history (Kremer 82). The Holocaust survivor becomes the spiritual or historic mentor to an American Jew, who had been either uninterested in Jewish history or openly hostile to Jewish identity (Kremer 82-3). What critics have tended to focus on is the minor presence of these survivor-mentor characters, rather than their pivotal position in their influence on self-denying or marginal American Jews (Kremer 8).

[39]Eileen Watts in "Not True Although Truth: The Holocaust's Legacy in Three Malamud Stories" argues that the perceived difference in religion in "Lady of the Lake" heightens the sense of needless tragedy and allows Malamud to use romantic love as an allegory of the Akedah. But in the biblical story, when something else (a ram) is sacrificed in place of the beloved, in Malamud's version God fails to redeem Freeman because he lacks faith and is ashamed of his Judaism (Watts 148). While Watts points out interesting parallels between the Akedah story and Henry's encounters, the reading fails to account for much of the reality of Malamud's text—the setting of Italy, the presence of history, and the genre of romance.

century" (42).[40] While these arguments are not explicitly directed against fantasy in Malamud's work, they distill the consensus that any abstraction—here, in the form the symbolic—is an insufficient mode of Holocaust representation.

This criticism is often connected to Malamud's interest in the way that human experiences (belief, suffering, trauma) define Jewishness;[41] that is, Manischevitz in "Angel Levine" discovers that he is a Jew because he believes—not that he is a Jew, and therefore, believes. Malamud's stories are at once particular to the immigrant experience and the human experience. As Jhumpa Lahiri writes in her Introduction to a recently published edition of the stories, "to deem this astonishing book 'immigrant fiction' would be inaccurate and absurd. What Malamud locates about the immigrant experience—a sense of loss, of struggle, of wanting what we cannot have—constitutes the nuts and bolts of all dramatic fiction" (x). There are advantages to this kind of universalizing tied to the humanity of all dramatic fiction and revealed narratively through the aesthetics of fantasy and indirection. In fact, contra to Langer's argument, universalizing describes the way in which J.R.R. Tolkien abstracts his experiences of war to a separate narrative world as he does in *Lord of the Rings*.[42] Inverting the relationship between what is perceived as "real" and "escapist," Tolkien underscores this kind of universalizing move characteristic of his fantasy: "The notion that motor-cars are more 'alive'

---

[40]Cappell argues that rather than centralize divine law or a covenantal or traditional Jewish value system that has sustained the Jewish community for thousands of years, Malamud places Isabella's *immediate* past and her suffering at the center of Judaism (42).

[41]Regarding his statement "All men are Jews," Malamud explains, "I never expected anyone to take it literally. It's a symbolic way of showing how history, sooner or later, treats us all" (qtd. in Avery xv).

[42]For more on this argument, please see Michael Livingston's "The Shell-shocked Hobbit: The First World War and Tolkien's Trauma of the Ring" in *Mythlore*.

than, say, horses is pathetically absurd. How real, how startling alive is a factory chimney compared with an elm-tree: poor obsolete thing, insubstantial dream of an escapist!" (57). As Tolkien complicates the idea that there is a definitive line between epistemologies of realism and fantasy, his schemata presents the aesthetics that come to characterize the same notion in the Malamud's stories as well as the works of Nathan Englander and the Coen brothers that I will explore in chapter four.

Building on the validity of fantasy as a mode of mediating the real of historical trauma, A.S. Byatt's "The Thing in The Forest," a short story from her collection *The Little Black Book of Stories* (2004), blends the absurd with the real to describe the experience of two little girls, Penny and Primrose, during their evacuation from wartime London to the safety of the country. Together, the girls encounter a hideous monster-dragon that is at once tubular, worm-like, and disgusting. In the description of the Thing, fantasy and abstraction to embody the reality of death and war (14-5): "its colour was the colour of flayed flesh, pitted with wormholes, its expression was neither wrath nor greed, but pure misery" (14). The Thing destroys everything in its path, including a child who is also an evacuee, and leaves behind "bloody slime and dead foliage, sucked to dry skeletons" (17). As Alexa Alfer remarks, when the women meet as adults, the women's encounter with the Thing is discussed in terms of reality, not fantasy (117). "Well, we know we're not mad, anyway" they confer, "we saw it," and thus, fantasy becomes an authentic mode of expressing trauma rather than an escape from it (24-5). This shared traumatic memory haunts the women well into adulthood. Penny becomes a psychologist, and returns to the forest certain that she can re-experience her childhood trauma, while Primrose becomes a storyteller and creates a children's tale based on the encounter (in fact, it is the very story the reader holds in her hand). Except, Primrose's approach is elevated in terms of success.

Primrose's tales are much in demand, as she knows how to offer the children "just a *frisson* of fear and terror that made them wriggle with pleasure" (19). Their two career paths reflect both the antirealist and realist approaches to trauma as vital and valid representational analytics (*Traumatic Realism* 3-4).

Delusions of History: The Fantasy of Italy in "Lady of the Lake" and "The Last Mohican"

The disruptive moment of seeing—enabled by fantasy—is also central to climactic moment of "The Last Mohican," when Fidelman, a self-proclaimed student of Giotto, finally grasps the meaning of the paintings that he has been studying all along (a moment that will be discussed later on in this chapter). Susskind is not characterized as an angel, but he is described as a man "instead of" an angel (162); mythic and ghostly tropes penetrate Susskind's character. In Rome, Fidelman tries to do as the Romans do, but he cannot escape Susskind, who miraculously knows Fidelman's whereabouts and appears out of nowhere. One evening about a week after his arrival, Fidelman is immersed in work in his hotel room and is surprised to look up and find Susskind at the door: "and though the student, immersed in his work, was not conscious he had said 'Avanti,' he must have, for the door opened and instead of an angel, in came Susskind in his shirt and baggy knickers" (162). Fidelman imagines Susskind as a "clever ghost," (170) one whose miraculous appearances and disappearances are associated with the presence of angels or "about to burst into flight" (159).

The tropes of fantasy intermingle with refugee aesthetics—the fact that Susskind does not have any documentation, for example, also makes him "ghostly." Appearing out of nowhere, Susskind's existence is untraceable. When Fidelman is dismayed by Susskind's refusal to seek charity or return to Israel, he discovers that Susskind has lost his passport:

> "Under such circumstances," Fidelman asks, "How do you live?"
> "How do I live?" He chomped with his teeth. "I eat air."

> "Seriously?"
> "Seriously, on air. I also peddle," he confessed. . . (164).

Susskind embodies the *luftmensch*, a Yiddish term from the German *luft*, or "air," that indicates an impractical person or someone whose head is in the clouds. Ethereal in appearance and living on air, Susskind has no record at the Israeli consulate. Fidelman also discovers that Susskind's address registered at the Joint Distribution Committee is impossible—the building has long been torn down (172). Initially bothered by Susskind's lurking presence, Fidelman becomes obsessed with locating Susskind when he seems to have disappeared; Fidelman lives in a constant paranoia of feeling Susskind's gaze or trying to will him into existence. In turn, Fidelman often thinks he sees Susskind but doesn't; Susskind is everywhere and nowhere.

In addition to the ghostly Isabella of "Lady of the Lake" and Susskind of "The Last Mohican," the stories' play with irony continues to blur the boundary between fantasy and reality. The trope of the innocent traveler abroad, for example, invokes the trope of the American Adam only to thwart its fulfillment and reveal its fantastical quality. In "Lady of the Lake," the trope's failure also foreshadows the failures of Freeman's romantic dreams. Freeman travels with excited expectancy for the future, the newness and the "possible combinations" (105) that his sojourn in Paris and Italy offers. The direction of his journey from the U.S. to Europe of course ironically coincides with the mass exodus of Jews eager to start a new life outside of Europe. Malamud overtly identifies Freeman with the American Adam, the figure popularized through R. W. B. Lewis's attention to the writers of the American Renaissance. In this context, the American Adam is

> [T]he hero of the new adventure: an individual emancipated from history, happily bereft of ancestry, untouched and undefiled by the usual inheritances of family and race; an individual standing alone, self-reliant and self-propelling…. Adam

> was the first, the archetypal, man. His moral position was prior to experience, and in his very newness he was fundamentally innocent. (Lewis 5)[43]

However, as the outcome of the story reveals, Freeman ultimately fails as a Jewish American Adam "happily bereft of ancestry" (5). Even Freeman pauses to identify the ludicrous nature of his dream to remake himself in Italy: "Freeman still hoped for what he hadn't, what few got in the world and many dared not think of; to wit, love, adventure, freedom" (106). Freeman considers how silly the notion sounds as he reflects on their seeming impossibility. "Alas, the words by now sounded slightly comical," he notes, and the story reveals the trope's limitations for a Jewish American protagonist as it underscores its absurd qualities.

Like the assimilated Freeman, Fidelman arrives in Rome as a figure of an American Adam dressed in new clothes and dissociated from his own culture and history; like "Lady of the Like," there is something out of touch about this trope inserted into this particular landscape (in other words, it fails in this story as well). Fidelman is eager to embrace the new—to a fault—and despite the heat he perspires through his new tweed suit and refuses to wear the lighter suit in his luggage (156). Also new are his "gum-soled oxblood shoes" and a "pigskin leather brief case" (156). Despite his fresh appearance, Fidelman is not so easily free of his "bulky" past, which causes him shame (156): "His suitcase, a bulky, two-strapped affair which embarrassed him slightly, he had borrowed from his sister Bessie" (154-5). When his manuscript is stolen, Fidelman tries to recreate the initial chapter "which he felt sure he knew by heart" in order to write his second, which continuously eludes him (172). The ironic pun on "heart" (rote

[43]In a 1974 interview, Malamud shared, "I've been 'influenced' by Hawthorne," and later observed, "I believe that the link with Hawthorne exists" (Conversations 49). In response to Malamud's use of dark, sometimes somber morality and propensity for allegory, he has been referred to as the "Jewish Hawthorne" (Shechner 48).

memorization, passion) reinforces Fidelman's emotional distance from his work. He cannot move forward "because he was lost without a beginning. . . always Fidelman needed something solid behind him before he could advance, some worthwhile accomplishment upon which to build another" (172). Fidelman "needed something solid behind him" yet denies his past; as such, the figure of the Jewish American Adam that Fidelman embodies again becomes a catch-22.

In addition to his characterization as an American Adam, Fidelman also voices narratives of individual rights and responsibilities. Channeling an American ethos of individualism, Fidelman asks, "Am I responsible for you then, Susskind?" (165). Susskind responds, "Who else?. . . You know what responsibility means?. . . "Then you are responsible. Because you are a man. Because you are a Jew, aren't you?" (165). Wedded to his American notions of self-reliance, Fidelman quips that he's not the "only one," nor can he take on everybody's personal burden. His journey is marked by an American mythos seemingly irreconcilable with *tzedakah* or Jewish charitable practice. Touting American ideologies of rights and responsibility, Fidelman says, "To my mind you are utterly irresponsible and I won't be saddled with you. I have the right to choose my own problems and the right to my privacy" (168).

As Freeman attempts to pass as a gentile and an American Adam, ultimately failing on both accounts, the story tries on various generic forms in an attempt to pass as something it is not; alongside Freeman, these tropes inevitably fail as the narrative cannot fully masquerade as something other than what it is—a story about the Holocaust. When Levin changes his name to Freeman and leaves New York "seeking romance" (105), he embarks on a quest narrative that echoes those of Arthurian Romance—an explicitly non-Jewish genre already signaled by the story's title. And when he ultimately fails (or, just before, when Isabella reveals her

impoverished origins), "He called himself a damn fool for making up damn fairy tales—Freeman in love with the Italian Aristocracy" (130). "Lady of the Lake" stems first from the Welsh legend "Lady of Little Fan Lake," whose roots lie in the ancient mythology of the continental Celts (O'Valle 57). Violet O'Valle speculates that since the Celts have always worshipped water deities, it seems probable that the Lake Lady found in the legends was, in ancient times, a goddess (57). However, as time passed she was diminished, first to a supernatural being dwelling under the lake (the Celtic Other World) and, ultimately, to a fairy maiden (O'Valle 57).[44] The Lady of the Lake also appears in legends surrounding King Arthur, made famous by Sir Thomas Malory's fifteenth-century compilation *Le Morte D'Arthur*, and revisited by many since, perhaps most notably by Sir Walter Scott in his eponymous poem published in 1810. In line with the romantic heroes of the past, Freeman seeks fulfillment even if he doesn't quite know what form it will take.

The story presents a number of magical qualities surrounding Isabella, the lake, and Isola del Dongo. Freeman perceives the island in terms of its sublime "awe and beauty," and the narrator remarks that Isola del Dongo is most associated with an edenic paradise not of this world: "the vegetation lush" with "wilder, exotic birds flying around" (108-9). "The long blue lake, sometimes green, sometimes gold" (106) magically changes color; it is variously described as "golden-blue" (110) and also appears black (109). The presence of Isabella is part fairy tale and part Freeman's imagination, resulting in a serious of impossible contradictions that reflects her mysterious aura. Isabella is described as both "elusive" and "evanescent" (121), her

[44]O'Valle explains that the most widely known version of the legend is the one collected by William Rees from various sources in 1841. It was first published in an obscure book by John Pughe called *The Physicians of Mydvai* in 1861 and then popularized by John Rhys's definitive work *Celtic Folklore* (1901). Malamud is indebted to the legend as it appears in Rhys's text (O'Valle 57-8).

comings-and-goings associated with the island's mist (108). She appears transparent in her association with the fairy maiden of Arthurian legend—"Her past he could see boiling in her all the way back to the knights of old, and then some" (115)—yet approaches love with "opaque mystery" (121).

The romantic sensibility of Freeman's perceptions heightens the in-betwenness of this not-quite-fantasy and not-quite-reality world. Reflecting on his own poem, Scott observed that unlike a realistic novel, romance is "a fictitious narrative in prose or verse: the interest of which turns upon marvelous and uncommon incidents" (qtd. in Stewart 5). In the most important of the four plots in Scott's poem that invoked sixteenth-century Scotland, King James V crosses from the Lowlands into the Highlands, where much that would appear abnormal in the Lowlands becomes natural (Stewart 5). Supernatural overtones imply a mythological level of meaning in the poem; narratives of shape-shifting accompany the main adventure story as men transform into animals to disguise their authentic selves (Stewart 5).

Similarly, Freeman tries his hand at shape-shifting, but does not fully succeed. In the same way that Freeman fails to fully embody the American Adam trope, the narrative falls short of fully inhabiting the romance genre. While he signs his real name, Levin, on the pensione's ledger on the mainland, he is stopped by the lake patrol while rowing back to Stresa and is "compelled to show his passport" (116). And when Ernesto catches Freeman absconding from the group tour of Isola del Dongo, he tellingly yells "Transgressor" (114). But like the thwarted invocations of the romance genre or allusions to the American Adam, the paradigm of shape-shifting does not successfully translate in Malamud's version of "The Lady of the Lake"; while Freeman desperately rows against the rocky waves as he crosses to Isola del Dongo, he never fully leaves Levin behind. The story plays with generic tropes, but unlike the contemporary set

of Jewish American texts, these tropes frequently fail; in so doing, "Lady of the Lake" inhabits a mysterious space between the American Adam and the un-American Adam, Levin and Freeman, romance and not-romance. Both the uncertainty of the fantastic and thwarted tropes characterize the liminality of the story, as genre play raises broader questions of Jewish ethnicity and assimilation.

Certain elements of the romance genre fail to transpire in Malamud's text, revealing the intersection of Jewish cultural history and genre play in the story. While romance is not a central trope of Judaism, it is central to Yiddish folklore. In *Unheroic Conduct,* Daniel Boyarin (1997) describes the traditional traits of the European Romantic hero as those antithetical to the male ideal of the Jewish scholar (78). Boyarin refers to all of those traits that in European culture have defined a man as manly—physical strength, martial activity and aggressiveness, wild pleasure in physicality, fierce attachment to nature and to locale, healthy body, and hard work—as part of romance, medieval tradition, and what Jews had derisively referred to as "*goyim naches*," meaning a mode of entertainment or pleasure favored by goyim or non-Jews (i.e., no Jew would it find entertaining or pleasurable) (78). In fact, it is the romantic ideology of manliness that Boyarin points out as the ultimate *goyim naches*, the antithesis of those characteristics of humility, hard work, and diligent study valued in the *mensch* (79). Freeman's shortcomings as a romantic hero, even physically ("well-proportioned" but a "bit short" (112)), further establish the incongruity of the Jew as a romancer. While at first it appears he will uphold the tradition through the rescue of his beloved, who is in fact imprisoned on an island, it is Freeman in the end who needs rescuing, not from his romantic shortcomings, but rather, from his lack of embrace of them, which is a lack of embrace of his Jewishness.

In addition to the genre mixing that characterizes "Lady of the Lake," ironic play in both of the Italy stories deepens to reveal that for these failed American Adams, the task of imagining themselves into Italian history is in fact an absurd undertaking. (Later chapters will extend both the notions of ironic play and the absurdity of history). "Imagine . . . Imagine all that history," Fidelman contemplates when he arrives in Rome (156). But what, in fact, is Fidelman imagining? Is it possible to "imagine all that history" ? (156). Later in the story Fidelman reflects on history's intangible, fantasy-like qualities, as well as the wonder that he himself should be found within it: "it is an inspiring business" that he, a failed painter from the Bronx, should be "walking around in all this history" (162). The vacant, mysterious historical sensibility becomes part of Fidelman's refrain. Again, he comments, "History [is] mysterious, the remembrance of things unknown, in a way burdensome, in a way a sensuous experience. It uplifted and depressed, why he did not know" (162). While Fidelman is in Italy, this sense of fantasy actually refers to both Italian and Jewish history. At once "burdensome" and a "sensuous experience," this is an empty reflection.

Both protagonists' perceptions of Italy are clouded by their delusions; Italy serves as an overtly romanticized backdrop in both texts. Part of Susskind's motivation, which Fidelman of course cannot see, is to help Fidelman—to enable him to see the world as it really is so that he can create his brilliant manuscript on Giotto. "The words were there but the spirit was missing," Susskind relays, explaining why he did Fidelman the favor of burning his manuscript on Giotto. When he arrives In Rome, Fidelman so desperately wants to claim Italy and Italian history for himself that he tries to insert a version of himself into "all that history" (156). He sees himself, "outside and in, not without bittersweet pleasure; and [as] the well-known image of his face rose before him" (156). The act of imagining bcomes a mode of cultural identification for Fidelman,

or at least expresses Fidelman's desire to be identified with Italian culture; ironically, it is in this same moment of Fidelman's "imagining" when Susskind immediately perceives Fidelman as a Jew. Walter Benn Michaels' work on cultural identity dramatizes the irony of this moment. Reflecting on the cultural import of slavery in African American history, Walter Benn Michaels argues that "cultural identities, whether African American or Jewish American, derived from imagined relationships with historical events are neither desirable nor inescapable" (qtd. in Flanzbaum 17).[45] Michaels's account creates an anti-essential Jewishness such that it is possible "to define the Jew not as someone who has Jewish blood or who believes in Judaism but as someone who, having experienced the Holocaust, can—even if he or she was never there—acknowledge it as part of her history" (Sundquist 460). Thus, in this opportunitisic moment to acknowledge the Holocaust as part of his history, Fidelman turns away: "my first hello in Rome and it has to be a schnorrer," he laments (157).

Fidelman is quick to admire the "eternal" status of ancient Rome; however, Fidelman fails to recognize his relationship to Jewish history would predate that of the Roman Empire. While he obsessively studies the work of a fourteenth century Catholic painter, he flippantly dismisses the details of Fidelman's narrative of Jewish suffering as "so long ago" (158). Furthermore, the story mocks Fidelman's reverence of Italian civilization through his reference to Diocletian, a Roman emperor notorious for his cruelty; in his religious persecution of Christians, he fed them to lions. As Fidelman stands in awe of a great persecutor, Fidelman senses

[45]Sundquist remarks of Michaels's argument, "the opposite is also true: Jews who forget their Jewishness, like Jews who assimilate to the point of apostasy, and stop thinking of themselves as Jews, "are therefore collaborators in the work of Hitler" (460). According to this argument, cultural genocide and physical genocide become equivalent (460).

Susskind's gaze and identifies him as "a stranger—give a skeleton a couple of pounds—loitering near a bronze statue on a stone pedestal of the heavy-dugged Etruscan wolf suckling the infant Romulus and Remus" (156). A haggardly portrait of the undead, Susskind stands by a statue of the Capitoline wolf, an image associated with the legend of the founding of Rome. An outcast and oddly dressed in comparison to Fidelman's seamless appearance, Susskind stands before a sign of humanity and the birth of civilization, while Fidelman sees but fails to see what is in front of him as he blindly reveres one of its persecutors.

Fidelman's inability to see the Etruscan wolf suckling Romulus and Remus; the reverence he pays to the Baths of Diocletian; and the flippancy with which he dismisses the refugee's historical displacement and Holocaust experience reveal an American Jew out of touch with reality. It is a lot easier for an American Jew to identify with the romanticized and mythologized Italy than it is to recognize the present poverty of the country recovering from fascism and World War II, which would in turn necessitate Fidelman's uncomfortable recognition of his own relationship to the destruction. He wants to align himself with the victors of European conquest—with the Diocletuses of the world—and he tells Fidelman, "I express myself best in English," not Yiddish, as he associates himself with the more dominant tongue (157). As Kathleen Oschorn argues, Malamud's Americans abroad appear more "sheltered, cushioned" from life's hardships, especially in comparison to the impoverished Italians and their stratified world (59).

Freeman and Fidelman are both guilty of failing to comprehend the reality of the circumstances of a people who, because of war and poverty, fail to resemble dreams of an ideal Italy—in Freeman's case, his desire to join a noble Catholic family. Isabella, the fantastic character in "Lady of the Lake," attempts to get Fidelman to see what is already manifest—their

likeness as Jews, her poverty, the country's suffering—but in this case the American protagonist is so deluded by his own fantasies that Isabella is no match for them. As Kremer points out, Freeman's aesthetic blindness corresponds to his moral blindness (83). The Italian islands provide the perfect backdrop for this aesthetic and moral confusion; as Freeman observes, "the islands, beautiful from afar, up close were so much stage scenery" (107). But even as he learns more of the true history surrounding Isola del Dongo, his perception remains clouded. When Isabella leads Freeman through a tour of the estate, she begins to point out the real nature of the stage scenery all around him. She explains that "no one is sure" if Napoleon really slept on the island as the family showcases to tourists (122). Freeman responds, "Oh ho, a trick" to which Isabella explains, "We often pretend. . . this is a poor country" (122). Freeman is dismayed to learn that the walls are covered in fake paintings. "Isabella pointed out the Titians, Tintorettos, Bellinis, making Freeman breathless; then at the door of the room she turned with an embarrassed smile and said that most of the paintings in the gallery were copies" (123). At first shocked, Freeman then becomes depressed: ". . . I couldn't tell the fake from the real," he confesses (123). In this moment, Freeman's sadness over the fake paintings anticipates his own shame in masquerading as a deceptively authentic version of himself.

Even as Isabella reveals the impoverished origins of the island's history and art, as well as the truth of her own background, Freeman's reality continues to be shaped by his fairy tale romance. He acknowledges the trickery but is quick to cast it aside or delude himself otherwise. For example, as he ponders Isabella's question, "are you, perhaps, a Jew?" he dismisses it for being haphazard, "perhaps a queer thought that for no good reason impulsively entered her mind. And because it was queer, his answer, without elaboration, was sufficient. With ancient history why bother?" (115). Both Freeman and Fidelman are quick to manipulate the recent past so that

they may safely disregard it as "ancient history," as the stories offer a subtle critique of assimilation and the extent to which delusion must factor in one's blindness. The protagonists worship the colossal stature of European grandeur without a second thought, blindly elevating it to mythic status.

Freeman chooses not to observe or heed many of the signs that fail to align with "the island of his dreams" (116). He ignores the padrona's advice when she tells him not to get involved with anyone on the island, because "the family had a perfidious history and was known for its deceit and trickery" (117). Yet when he is startled to realize that Ernesto, the tour guide, was also sent by Isabella as his escort, he conjures strange, irrational explanations for Ernesto's presence: "probably a major domo in the palazzo, long with the family," Freeman thinks (117). He continues to take note of the rickety boat—he had expected a "ritzy launch"—but does not seem to think anything of it; Ernesto smelled freshly of garlic; he seemed tired; he was wearing a black felt hat and was bald, he looked "surprisingly old" (117-18). Not knowing their relation to Isabella, he refers to Ernesto and Isabella's brother Giacobbe as having "dark eyes and greedy beaks, a pair of odd birds" (118), utterly dissimilar to the "loveliness" with which he paints Isabella's portrait—"the large brown eyes," "sweet slender brows," flowery red lips (113). But when he learns of Isabella's true origins, the same faces of Isabella and Giacobbe "were alike as the proverbial peas—two dark Italian faces, the Middle Ages looking out of their eyes" (130). Isabella is often found next to or sitting near marble or stone, elves, or other pagan statues, and the narrator frequently describes her inhabiting a space between art and reality, which is further complicated by the free indirect discourse. When Isabella enters the text, the narrator notes "it had momentarily seemed as though a statue had come to life" (109), and when she exits the

narrative Freeman is left clutching "moonlit stone" (133). Freeman's desire—for Isabella, to escape his past—in part animates this transformation from stone to life.

It is not entirely clear how much Freeman senses and imagines versus sees and knows. Freeman first senses Isabella's beauty rather than sees it directly. The narrator describes how Freeman realizes "a woman was standing this side of a low marble wall, watching the water" (109), and while Freeman cannot see her face "he sensed she was young" (109). Again, in line with his fantasy, "he imagined someone waiting for her lover and was tempted to speak to her" (109). Even upon his second encounter with Isabella, when the haze in front of Freeman's eyes evaporates and he realizes he isn't dreaming, Isabella is described as a statue, a sexualized Botticelli's Venus (112). "Mama, what a queenly high-assed form," he considers, noting that "her dark, sharp Italian face had that quality of beauty which holds the mark of history, the beauty of a people and a civilization" (112). We see the same colonialist impulses in Freeman's desire to both conquer this history through acquisition (Freeman sexualizes Isabella, objectifies her) and imagine himself into it by marrying into the Italian aristocracy.

Similar to Fidelman's mediation, "imagine all that history," Freeman considers her physical difference in terms of imagined history: "her past *he could see* boiling in her all the way to the knights of old, and then some" (115, emphasis mine). Each effort Freeman makes to pursue his "fairy tale" of falling in love with the Italian aristocracy is met with an undercurrent of irony: Freeman worships the art and culture of the notoriously anti-Semitic Roman civilization; he reads "with fascination about the del Dongos in all the local guide books" but is seemingly clueless and uninterested in the recent atrocity of modern Europe; and of course, he remains blind to the difference that actually marks his Jewish kinship with Isabella. He is even thwarted when he attempts to make contact with this "reality" by touching; when Freeman

reaches out to touch the counterpane protecting Napoleon's bed, Ernesto pokes him with his cane (110).

It is not until the final, momentous scene that Freeman's reality and his perception of it align. Freeman finds Isabella standing in the garden: "Isabella, God bless her, was standing at the low wall among the moonlit statuary: stags, tigers and unicorns, poets and painters, shepherds with pipes, and playful shepherdesses, gazing at the light shimmering on the water" (131). Freeman offers a Christian-like benediction "God bless her" (131) amidst this edenic setting filled with pastoral signs of a pagan past. When Freeman lies to Isabella for the last time, eschewing his Jewishness, she unbuttons her blouse, and "to [Freeman's] horror he discerned tattooed on the soft and tender flesh a bluish line of distorted numbers" (132). Here Freeman does not dream, imagine, discount, or dismiss—he sees and groans, not at the question of his being a Jew, but "incensed at the cruelty, stunned by the desecration" (132).

When Freeman responds, "—You? Oh, God, why did you keep this from me, too?" it is ambiguous whether Freeman is acknowledging his relationship with God, or, if it is another instance of his irreverence. If the former, then he may share in Isabella's respect for the past. Freeman's delusions, his love affair with the Italian aristocracy, the instances of fantasy and dreaming that color his vision of the Isola del Dongo, are perhaps less an escape from reality than they are a deflection of his own past. There remains an unexplained, bizarre instance in the story that may indicate his experience and Isabella's are less distinct than the story presents. When Freeman first travels to Italy from France, he has an inexplicably anxious reaction to his train ride: "He boarded the Milan express, and after Dijon, developed a painful, palpitating anxiety. This grew so troublesome that he had serious visions of leaping off the train, but reason prevailed and he rode on. Nearing Stresa, . . . [He] pulled his suitcase off the rack and hurriedly

left the train. He at once felt better" (106). And in a story where Freeman's rationalizations and musings propel the plot, this episode is curiously under explained except for the indication that Freeman, "being a nature lover," was inclined to disembark (106). Trying to abandon Holocaust tropes? Given this strange episode, fantasy perhaps becomes a rational deflection of Freeman's own trauma, of something hauntingly real in his past.

The confusion of aesthetic and moral blindness also plagues Fidelman, who, like Freeman, fails to see the reality of what is in front of him. As it emphasizes the role of art, "The Last Mohican" grapples more metafictionally than the other stories with knowledge and intersubjective communication in a post-Holocaust reality. Fidelman believes he can come to *know* or master Giotto through diligent study and an ambitious schedule that "made the most of his working hours" (161). Thus, Fidelman and Susskind are separated not only by their relationship to history, but also by the gap between knowing Giotto by critical study versus emotional experience. For Fidelman, knowing takes shape through a Protestant work ethic, whereas for Fidelman, knowledge is equal to experience. The disconnect first arises when Fidelman explains to Susskind the purpose of his trip:

> "As for a project, I'm writing on the painter Giotto. He was one of the most important—"
> "You don't have to tell me about Giotto," Susskind interrupted with a little smile.
> "You've studied his work?"
> "Who doesn't know Giotto?"
> That's interesting to me," said Fidelman, secretly irritated. "How do you happen to know him?"
> "How do you?"
> "I've given a good deal of time and study to his work."
> "So I know him too." (159)

Fidelman equates knowing with arduous study—proof in the form of hours—while Susskind's telling smile intimates his knowledge need not be explained in language. There is also a way in which Susskind's retort, "who doesn't know Giotto?," scoffs at Fidelman's sense that his idea to

arrive in Italy and study the painter is anything other than trite. The fact that Fidelman is "secretly irritated" reflects his self-interest in this privileged endeavor, thus gesturing towards the broader insularity of American Jewish preoccupations.

Fidelman turns the experience of knowing art into labor: "Mornings he usually visited the Italian libraries, searching their catalogues and archives, read in poor light, and made profuse notes" and returns in the afternoon guided by "lists of frescoes and paintings he must see" (162). But does Fidelman actually *see* the frescoes and paintings? He withholds pleasure and emotion when directing his course of study, even promising he could return in the spring and "look at anything he pleased" (161). This detachment extends to Fidelman's relationship to history, which "excited his thoughts more than he thought good for him" as the narrative emphasizes Fidelman's emotional repression (162). Excitement, he thinks, is acceptable for a creative artist, "but less so for a critic" (162).

If it is the presence of an angel that shocks Manischevitz into the present in "Angel Levine," over the course of the story, the ghostly presence of Susskind coupled with Fidelman's dream allow Fidelman to see what is already present. Fidelman's first dream of chasing the elusive Susskind through the Jewish catacombs under the ancient Appian Way leads him to wander through the city streets in reality as he searches for Susskind among the peddlers. Weighted Jewish symbols in his dreams, like the "seven flamed-candelabrum he clutched in his hand," begin to lead him astray while awake as Fidelman finds himself in the synagogue or reading a Jewish tombstone (170). Instead of scheduled tours of the Vatican Museum and the library, his search for Susskind for the first time finds him off course and "wandering aimlessly" in Rome (174). "Where in the world am I?" (174), he thinks when he stumbles into a synagogue on Shabbat evening service. In this mode of awareness that eschews Fidelman's rational

approach to "knowing Giotto," Fidelman encounters a different Rome where his relationship to temporality and history, previously detached, begins to change. In the synagogue, a beadle tells him through bleary eyes, "My own son—killed in the Ardeatine Caves" (174). The *Fosse* Ardeatine, or Ardeatine Caves, were the remnants of ancient Christian catacombs and site of a brutal murder of 330 victims, including a number of Italian prisoners already sentenced to death and 57 Jewish prisoners held at the Roman prison of Regina Coeli, the same prison that held the group marked for murder (Holocaust). Fidelman's emotional recognition of the beadle's trauma marks a turning point; instead of flippantly discounting the beadle's experience, Fidelman professes empathy: "Ah, for that I'm sorry," he responds (17).

He heeds the beadle's directive to "look again" in the ghetto, where he meets a "thin-faced" boy who tells him that Susskind is sometimes found praying for the dead in the cemetery. In a gesture of thanks, "Fidelman bought him a quick banana" (176). Seemingly insignificant, the gift reveals Fidelman's changing relationship to charity and human suffering. Earlier in the story, when Fidelman senses Susskind's hunger, he asks if he would like a bowl of spaghetti. But Susskind must refuse the offer according to the premise of Jewish charity or *tzedakah* that permits him to accept only what is given—one cannot beg or request.[46] But this time, Fidelman does not pose his *tzedakah* in the form of a question and his charitable act moves from language to experience. Fidelman then wanders through the Jewish section of the cemetery. He proceeds to read "the stained stones, of those who, for one reason or another, had died in the late large war, including an empty place, it said under a six-pointed star engraved upon a marble slab that lay on the ground, for 'My beloved father/ Betrayed by the damned Fascists/ Murdered at Auschwitz by the barbarous Nazis/ *O Crime Orribile*'" (176). This fantasy space begins to close the gap

[46]Susskind emphasizes the distinction between peddling and begging throughout the story.

between Fidelman and Susskind, the American Jew and the Holocaust refugee; the "empty place" of mourning and the vacant space of "all that history" begin to embody a Jewish specificity (156; 176). When Fidelman first meets Susskind, he scoffs at how "long ago" whatever it is Susskind is running from occurred. But as Fidelman expresses sorrow to the rabbi, wanders among the dead, and reads the inscriptions on the tombstones, he perceives the reality of Jewish history in the context of Italy and responds with empathy.

Three months pass as Fidelman searches in vain for Susskind and his manuscript. Malamud marks Fidelman's final transformation through a dream sequence that blurs the boundaries between fantasy and reality. In his dream, Fidelman wanders through an empty cemetery when Susskind appears to him in the form of a shade, Virgilio Susskind (181). The ghost asks,

> "Have you read Tolstoy?"
> "Sparingly."
> "Why is art?" asked the shade, drifting off.
> Fidelman, willy nilly, followed, and the ghost, as it vanished, led him up steps going through the ghetto and into a marble synagogue. (181)

Still dreaming, Fidelman lies down on the warm stone floor and stares at the sunlit vault above, which reveals a fresco. But before Fidelman names the painting in Italian ("San Francesco dona le vesti al cavaliere povero"), he perceives its sense of color, warmth, and meaning; in this moment, Fidelman finally sees Giotto's work for what it really is: "Strangely warm," the fresco revealed "this saint in fading blue, the sky flowing from his head, handing an old knight in a thin red robe his gold cloak. Nearby stood a humble horse and two stone hills" (181). The boundary between dreaming and reality is further effaced as "Fidelman awoke running," packing his blue gabardine into a bag and next delivering it to Susskind's door (181).

Likened to Virgil of Dante's *Divine Comedy*, Virgilio Susskind serves as a thematic reminder of redemption and the soul's journey toward God underway. The shade's question, "Why is Art?," adapts the title of Leo Tolstoy's 1899 essay, "What is Art?," in which Tolstoy argues that in order to consider art one of the conditions of human life, one must abandon the idea that art should yield pleasure (40). In this essay, Tolstoy remarks that most art created by those, like Giotto, who would be considered great masters, is actually not great art (194). Furthermore, Tolstoy argues that those critics who attempt to apply rational criteria (this brings to mind Fidelman and his lists) to a medium that is supposed to elicit a feeling are misguided (95). For Tolstoy, art is one of "the means of intercourse between man and man," that is, art has a social function (47). The experience of art is thus based on "the capacity of man to receive another man's expression of feeling and experience those feelings himself" (48).[47] It is in this way that the reader finds Fidelman knocking on Susskind's door, blue gabardine in hand, because he has finally received a transmission of feeling *tzedakah* through Giotto's fresco depicting St. Francis of Assisi giving his cloak to an old knight.

This concept of art as part and parcel of inter-subjective experience is extended by John Dewey's "Art As Experience," wherein Dewey attempts to shift the emphasis of what is important about art away from its physical presence in the "expressive object" and instead focus on art as the development of an experience or process: "...works of art are the most intimate and

[47]In contrast to the activity of understanding, for example the sequence of knowledge that requires one first learn geometry before trigonometry, Tolstoy explains that the purpose of art "is to make that understood and felt, which, in the form of an argument, might be incomprehensible and inaccessible" (102). Tolstoy uses the term "infection" throughout "What is Art?" in order to underscore art's role as a unifier of souls: "a real work of art destroys, in the consciousness of the receiver, the separation between himself and the artist--not that alone, but also between himself and all whose minds receive this work of art. . . If man is infected by the author's condition of soul, if he feels this emotion and this union with others, then the object which has effected this is art" (153). Without such infection, there is no art (153).

energetic means of aiding individuals to share in the arts of living. Civilization is uncivil because human beings are divided into non-communicating sects, races, nations, classes and cliques" (Dewey 336). Part of this approach is embedded in what remains *outside* rational explanation. Dewey addresses the intrusion of the supernatural into art, mythology, and religious ceremony and defends the need for mystery in addition to rationalism.[48] He emphasizes that the imagination is a powerful tool to express experience, and like Tolstoy's critique of the critic, Dewey expresses that rationality alone is not sufficient to understand or allow an enriched experience. Like a religious experience, art appeals to sense and the sensuous imagination (22). Dewey closes his chapter on "The Live Creature and Ethereal Things" by quoting the famous line from Keats, "Beauty is truth, and truth beauty—that is all ye know on Earth, and all ye need to know" (32). Dewey parses this line by addressing divine revelation and the import of the imagination in experience and art:

> Reasoning must fail man—this of course is the doctrine long taught by those who have held the necessity of divine revelation. Keats did not accept this supplement and substitute for reason. The insight of the imagination must suffice...ultimately there are but two philosophies. One of them accepts life and experience in all its uncertainty, mystery, doubt, and half knowledge and turns that experience upon itself to deepen and intensify its own qualities—to imagination and art. This is the philosophy of Shakespeare and Keats. (34)

The emphasis on the fantasy tropes both enables this experience of "imagination and art" within the story to take place, allowing for Fidelman's transformation, and self-consciously illustrates the necessity for "uncertainty" or "mystery" characteristic of the fantastic as a way of revealing authentic experience.

---

[48]Keats's emphasis is on the ethereal: "the Sun, the Moon, the Earth and its contents are material to form greater things, that is, ethereal things—greater things than the Creator himself has made" (qtd. in Dewey 18).

Tolstoy's treatise on art centralizes the *spirit* of art when the historical conditions of past, present, and future call it into question. As many scholars have indicated, "art" doubly refers to Fidelman himself in a play on "Arthur." The story's metafictional quality, embedded in narrative layers of dreaming and intertextuality, questions the existence of the character *Art* Fidelman, the artistic merits of the story itself, and Malamud's own role as a post-Holocaust writer. At the story's close, Malamud affirms the inter-subjective experience of art/Art, yet leaves ambiguous the relationship between the American Jew and the Holocaust refugee. When Fidelman discovers Susskind burning pages of his chapter for warmth, he finally "recalled in letters of fire his entire chapter" (181). The moment is spiritual and bittersweet as Fidelman watches the angel-like Susskind take flight: "the refugee, light as the wind in his marvelous knickers, his green coattails flying, rapidly gained ground" (182). Running through the medieval Jewish ghetto, Fidelman stops, crying. While he has a "triumphant insight," it perhaps occurs a moment too late:

> "The suit is yours. All is forgiven."
> "He came to a dead halt but the refugee ran on. When last seen he was still running" (182).

But Malamud does not necessarily foreclose the possibility for redemption. While at first only Susskind is associated with the mythical humanity surrounding the Etruscan wolf statue nurturing Romulus and Remus, Fidelman, finally having experienced St. Francis of Assisi's goodwill through the Giotto painting, cries not over his last chapter, but for his lost encounter with Susskind. By story's end, Fidelman has internalized the warmth of the painting and acknowledged the specificity of a Jewish trauma in post-war Italy.

Fantastic Spaces and Inter-ethnic Dialogue in Malamud's Short Fiction

Michael Rothberg's "multidirectional memory" becomes an important analytic to determine the import of inter-ethnic dialogue in "The Last Mohican" and "Angel Levine." In "The Last Mohican," the figure of the American Indian transposed onto Susskind's character—he is described as "bronzed," alien, and foreign—becomes a means to discuss European Jews who need only state the names of "Germany, Hungary, Poland" to invoke narratives of suffering and persecution. In "Angel Levine," fantastic scenes create a space where African American suffering and Jewish suffering commingle. Both stories rely on inter-ethnic American narratives to register Jewish suffering in a context recognizable and assimilable to an American and Jewish audience. In the latter, the reader opens to find Manischevitz a victim of fire, familial loss, and thus, human suffering in comprehensible terms and ones susceptible to fictional representation, where cross-racial identification opens Jewish American suffering to the experience of another's suffering. In "Angel Levine," movement from self-recognition to recognition of the other crosses racial lines, where accepting the ghostly intrusion pluralizes Jewish and African American suffering. In *Multidirectional Memory* (2009), Rothberg asks what happens when histories of different groups confront each other in the public sphere (2). Rothberg critiques Walter Benn Michaels, who argues that "collective memory obeys a logic of scarcity," meaning that if the Holocaust Museum sits on the National Mall in Washington, D.C., then "Holocaust memory must literally be crowding the memory of African American history out of the public space of American collective consciousness" (qtd. in Rothberg 2). Against a framework that sees collective memory as a competitive struggle over a fixed quantity of resources, Rothberg argues that we should consider memory as *multidirectional*, which means "subject to ongoing negotiation, cross-referencing, and borrowing: as productive and not

privative" (3). Rothberg continues, "this interaction of different historical memories illustrates the productive, intercultural dynamic" he calls multidirectional memory (3).

As Karen Polster has argued, the titles alone—"The Last Mohican" and "Lady of the Lake"—ironically invoke Western historical literary works to describe their protagonists' desire to destroy their own history (64). The title "The Last Mohican" does not merely reflect the protagonist's desire to destroy history, but also, it illustrates how the American (Jewish) innocent abroad, like the American Adam, wishes to overwrite the history of certain minorities in romantic ways. "The Last Mohican" recalls James Fenimore Cooper's 1826 novel (and major motion picture based on the book), and the notion that Susskind is the last one left of his dying tribe of European Jewish refugees. G. Harrison Orian's term "cult of the vanishing American" arose as soon as Europeans arrived in America, revealing the fiction that the Native Americans were in a state of total decline and often-total disappearance. Brian Dippie links the "cult of the Vanishing American" and its success to "its appeal to the awareness of fleeting time so dear to the Romantic temperament," as Dippie puts it (21). The description of Susskind appearing and disappearing out of nowhere, "always running," aligns with this overtly romanticized impulse of the "vanishing American," one that is extended by Fidelman's desire to identify with the victors of imperialism as he imagines his place in Italian history. "Always running," Susskind is described as having "an odd way of standing motionless, like a cigar store Indian about to burst into flight," and he is still running when the story closes (159). By aligning Susskind with the "cigar store Indian," a figurine placed outside a storefront to advertise tobacco for sale within, the story pinpoints the American Jewish propensity to relate to European Jewry through stereotypes and commodification.

In "Angel Levine," Malamud presents an American Jew who is clearly suffering and has memory *only* of his pain, a memory that opens to other historical experiences of suffering as the story progresses. After a brief respite from his backache, "Manischevitz was profoundly disappointed at the return of his active pain and suffering," which he laments because in a way it makes him selfish—unable to recognize or see beyond himself (48). He wants his pain to ease up "long enough to have some thought other than of himself and his troubles" (48). He thinks, "but *all together*—the loss of both his children, his means of livelihood, Fanny's health and his—that was too much to ask one frail-boned man to endure. Who, after all, was Manischevitz that he had been given so much to suffer?" (48). Manischevitz is living in his own pain: "day by day, hour by hour, minute after minute, he lived in pain, pain his only memory, questioning the necessity of it, inveighing against it, also, though with affection, against God" (48). Overcoming Manischevitz's privative memory of suffering in an inter-ethnic American context thus provides a means to consider the American Jewish and European Jewish encounters staged in "Lady of the Lake" and "The Last Mohican." Read in relation to the stories set in Italy, Manischevitz's struggle with personal suffering stages broader questions of the interrelationship between memory and identity, pain and God's existence. The questions Manischevitz struggles with are those exact questions that define the uncertain future of post-Holocaust Jewishness. Considering Manischevitz's questions in light of the other two stories allows larger questions to take shape: Will one memory of Jewish pain and suffering overwhelm another—are they competing memories? Multidirectional memory here applies to both cross-cultural traumas and distinct accounts of Jewish suffering within and outside the text.

At first, Manischevitz does not believe Levine. Even though Levine recites the blessing for the break in sonorous Hebrew and explains he was an observant Jew in life, Manischevitz

cannot believe that a wingless and unsightly character could be an angel delivered from God. As the narrator notes, "the tailor could not rid himself of the feeling that he was the butt of a jokester. Is this what a Jewish angel looks like? he asked himself. This I am not convinced" (47). Manischevitz's pain and suffering persists, so he travels to Harlem to investigate the angel's story. He sees him dancing and drinking in a honkytonk, but Manischevitz is too embarrassed to enter (50-1). Later that day he dreams of Levine "standing before a faded mirror, preening small decaying opalescent wings" (51).

Like the function of the dream in "The Last Mohican," in "Angel Levine" the appearance of the fantasy character, and his reappearance in the estranged dream-space, incites Manischevitz's transformation. When Manischevitz's pain momentarily subsides, he wonders if it is the angel's doing and after wavering in his doubt, he again travels to Harlem to seek the angel. Without directions, Manischevitz is the proverbial wandering Jew in a symbolic Hell: "he wandered in the dark world. It was vast and its lights lit nothing. Everywhere were shadows, often moving" (49). But in his blindness, Manischevitz begins to see. Even though "Manischevitz hobbled along with the aid of a cane, and not knowing where to seek in the blackened tenement buildings, looked fruitlessly through store windows," he has an amazing moment of seeing: "In the stores he saw people and *everybody* was black. It was an amazing thing to observe" (49). He has seen these people before without seeing; now, with the aid of the angel, he sees what was there all along.

In "Literary Blacks and Jews" (1972), Cynthia Ozick treats Malamud's *The Tenants*, work by Irving Howe and Ralph Ellison, and current black-Jewish relations; she looks at the natural and supernatural elements of the text and asks, "Is it the arrival of a divine messenger that

we are to marvel at, or is it the notion of a black Jew?" (90). She continues, downplaying the miraculous quality of the inter-ethnic Jewishness:

> If this is a story with a miracle in it, then the only miracle it proposes is that a Jew can be found among the redemptive angels. And if we are meant to be 'morally' surprised, it is that—for once—belief in the supernatural is rewarded by a supernatural act of mercy. But the narrative is altogether offhand about the question of the angel's identity: Levine is perfectly matter-of-fact about it, there is nothing at all miraculous in the idea that a black man can be a Jew. In a tale about the supernatural, this is what emerges as the 'natural' element—as natural-feeling as Manischevitz's misfortunes about his poverty. (91)

Ozick argues that the idea of a black Jew is naturalized into the story alongside the reader's acceptance of Manischevitz's misfortune and poverty. According to her reading, while black misfortune resonates in a different way than Jewish suffering, Manischevitz recognizes its likeness all the same (Ozick 91). For Ozick, black/Jewish realities *are* commensurate; to Manischevitz, and to Malamud at the end of the fifties, "that black and Jew are one is no miracle" (91). Indeed, when Manischevitz affirms his belief in Levine at the end of the story, "Believe me, there are Jews everywhere," he reveals his surprise that the angel is a Jew sent from God, not his surprise over the fact that a black man can be a Jew (156).

Just preceding Manischevitz's realization, he visits Harlem and comes upon four black men in skullcaps praying together in what was formerly Bella's honkytonk, a space miraculously transformed into a synagogue. Manischevitz hears the men debate the meaning of soul as "dat immaterial substance" (53). When one of the men, bubble eyes, wonders, "then how come we is colored?" another in the group avers, "Ain't got nothing to do wit dat" (53). The youngest—a boy—echoes, "god put the spirit in all things. . . he put it in the green leaves and the yellow flowers. He put it with the gold in the fishes and the blue in the sky. That's how it came to us" (53). As in Ozick's argument, the idea that a black man could be one of God's creations—and a

Jew—is just as natural as the "yellow flowers" (53). If fantasy disrupts Manischevitz's automated perception at the beginning of the story, here it enables the strange commensurability of black and Jewish experiences to coalesce (53).

Narratively, the fantastic renders commensurate these otherwise disparate inter-ethnic narratives of suffering, evinced in the fact that the story's title is *Angel* Levine rather than "Black Levine" or "Negro Levine" (Newton 120). In this way my thinking aligns with Adam Zachary Newton's argument, when he wonders why Levine's Jewishness is so insubstantial in the story (120). In dialogue with Ozick's claim, Newton comments that if Jewish shabbiness is part of the natural elements of the story, then what Ozick means is that black poverty is part of the supernatural: "Those that ventriloquize the black everyday, on the other hand, translate it into the *Black Fantastic*, whether in synagogue or honkytonk, the story's 'blackness' spoken by and through 'Jewishness,'" and in fact, the narrative "is not at all offhand about its refashioning of blacks *as* Jews; a 'miracle' is precisely what is needed if literary black and Jew have anything of substance to say to each other" (120). The trope of the fantastic enables this exchange to occur.

Like Fidelman's shift from rational to sensual modes of interpolation in "The Last Mohican," "Angel Levine"'s recourse to fantasy tropes emphasizes the role of non-rational, spiritual sensibility intended to blur the logical distinction between these modes of experience. For example, Manischevitz realizes, "I think you are an angel from God" and then launches into a tautological rationalization: "If you said it it was said. If you believed it you must say it. If you believed, you believed" (55). When Manischevitz decides to believe in Levine's divinity, he seems to invoke tautological rationalization, but his logical thinking is actually much more in line with Fidelman's spiritual awaking and the spirit of art suggested by "The Last Mohican." In "The Will to Believe," William James argues that under certain circumstances, it is rational to

believe propositions even if we have little or no evidence to support our beliefs. Accordingly, beliefs can be determined by "passional considerations" which include "fear and hope, prejudice and passion, imitation and partisanship, and the circumpressure of our caste and set" (n. pag.). This is not limited to religious beliefs, but also ethical and political belief systems, as well as those "born of an intellectual climate" (n. pag.). On most occasions "we find ourselves believing, we hardly know how or why," James notes (n. pag.). Thus James allows passional considerations a substantial role in determining the rationality of belief, arguing that it is rational to form beliefs without prior evidence of its truth (n. pag.).[49] It is in this way that Manischevitz discovers he is a Jew because he believes, and not that he believes, so he must be a Jew; in so doing, the story inverts the grounds of rational tautology and emphasizes the vitality of passional, sensual experiences.

As Malamud relies on fantasy to initiate his protagonists' awareness of reality, inter-ethnic dialogue complicates this trope. If fantasy is one way of making commensurate the inconceivable recognition between post-war American and European Jews, fantasy also allows Malamud to triangulate these experiences of ethnic suffering that resonate across an American historical context, the history of the Holocaust, and Jewish American experience. Positioning these stories together makes analogous intra-Jewish recognition (between American Jews and European Jews) and inter-ethnic recognition (Jews and African Americans; Jews and Native

[49]In his speech, James defends the rationality of religious faith even lacking sufficient evidence of religious truth: "I have brought with me tonight. . . an essay in justification of faith, a defense of our right to adopt a believing attitude in religious matters, in spite of the fact that our merely logical intellect may not have been coerced"; his logic turns on the idea that access to the evidence for whether or not certain beliefs are true depends crucially upon first adopting those beliefs without evidence (n. pag.).

Americans); by enabling increased awareness of their realities, fantasy allows for this analogy to materialize for the Jewish American protagonists.

CHAPTER 2

ENCHANTED OBJECTS: "VIBRANT MATTER" AND THE HISTORIOGRAPHY OF ABSENCE IN *GREAT HOUSE* AND *EVERYTHING IS ILLUMINATED*

The Impossible Possession of History: "Real things" and Fantasy Tropes

Reporting on the meticulous work of preservationists at the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum for the *New York Times*, Rachel Donadio writes that

> to visit Auschwitz is to find an unfathomable but strangely familiar place. After so many photographs and movies, books and personal testimonies, it is tempting to think of it as a movie-set death camp, the product of a gruesome cinematic imagination, and not the real thing.
> Alas, it is the real thing. (n. pag.)

What does it mean to say that Auschwitz is both "unfathomable" and "strangely familiar"—both unknowable and knowable? Donadio comments on the deluge of Holocaust representation in contemporary culture that has reached a critical reversal; no longer is "the real thing" immediately distinguishable from the imagination (n. pag.). In *Simulacra and Simulation*, Jean Baudrillard provides us with the concept of the simulacrum to explain this phenomenon, remarking on the way that in postmodern culture we have become acclimated to "substituting signs of the real for the real" (2). Or to quote the deceased philosopher Pinchas T of the European-set narrative in *Everything Is Illuminated*, "it would be possible, in theory, for life and art to be reversed" (Safran Foer 11). Baudrillard goes on to argue that ontological confusion is the norm in a historical period where there is no longer a clear boundary between the Real and its representation, between the original and its copy, between the metaphysical and the physical (*Simulacra* 2). In contemporary post-Holocaust narratives, ontological confusion and the play of

alienation remind the reader that "the real thing" is always already elusive (Donadio n. pag.). "The real thing" in Donadio's formulation refers to Holocaust as referent (n. pag.). Following material cultural history, constructed history in the form of texts, buildings, and archives, has thus come to stand in for the Real of history.[50] Pierre Nora refers to these symbolic elements of memory as *lieux de memoire* or "sites of memory," which have "no referents in reality; or, rather, they are their own referents—pure signs" (19). As the artifacts of cultural memory that arise in these texts, the signs of material culture of the past contextualize a key question at the center of my project: At what point does the unknowable of Holocaust representation become knowable—and not just knowable, but overly familiar, to the extent that evidence of historical experience is obscured?[51] Here knowability refers not only to the fact of history's constructedness, but also to those elements of personal and collective trauma that obscure representation and construction. To extend Donadio's sentiment, it is tempting to resist critical engagement with traumatic history once we think we know this history through "so many photographs and movies, books and personal testimonies" (n. pag.). But *how do we know what we think we know* of pre-Holocaust European life and its traumatic history?

This question frames my approach to enchanted objects in third generation literature, as I investigate the debris, the material fragments linked to history, that possesses material traces of the past and foregrounds questions of historical knowledge. While the symbolic weight of

---

[50]As Pierre Nora conceptualizes, "*Lieux de memoire*" or "sites of memory," exist because "there are no longer any *milieux de memoire*, settings in which memory is a real part of everyday experience" (1).

[51]Some have critiqued Holocaust museum emphasis on relics as "sites of memorial hyperreality engaged in the obviation of Western and capitalist views of history" (Edwards 261). In these terms, "the signifiers of loss are no longer connected to the event, but have been recreated as fetishes in a global memory market" (Edwards 261).

material objects are not necessarily new to Jewish-American literature (one needs only to think of the blanket in Cynthia Ozick's "The Shawl" or Vladek's glass eye in Art Spiegelman's *Maus*), the mode in which they are introduced through play, or embody fantastical qualities, is specific to their emergence in third-generation texts. These qualities entice the reader and substantiate my historiographical approach to these objects. This "stuff" floats to the surface of contemporary Jewish American literature and structures meaning both on a formal or aesthetic level and in relationship to history. From an analysis of objects in Nicole Krauss's *Great House* (2010), and Jonathan Safran Foer's *Everything Is Illuminated* (2003), we will come to see how the inanimate, material, and non-sentient structure indeterminacy and juxtapose the knowable and unknowable of Holocaust representation. As I use the term throughout my project, enchantment refers to the strange commensurability of the fantasy mode of storytelling and historical representation that delights and disturbs as it defamiliarizes historical events. In this chapter, enchanted objects indicate the strange ways in which the material or inanimate animates narrative and history. Presenting items otherwise lost to history, endowing them with agency that is both monstrous and extraordinary, these texts complicate Michael Saler's definition of enchantment[52] that signifies "both human delight in wonderful things and the potential to be placed under their spell, to be beguiled" (138). Saler's conceptualization intimates a critical reversal at the center of the interrelationship between knowledge, genre, and enchantment that I explore throughout this chapter. In realist modes of representation,[53] to possess an object or a

[52]Saler's definition of enchantment refers to Max Weber's Disenchantment hypothesis.
[53]The realist approach, explains Rothberg, characterizes the dominant scholarly methodology of historians and others who argue for an approach to the Holocaust through "scientific" means that may be inscribed within continuous historical narratives (versus the antirealist approach, which radically breaks from such historical narratives). It emphasizes what is nameable and what can be translated, within existing methodology, into the mimetic universe (Rothberg 4).

narrative is to know it. By enchanting objects (giving them agency; emphasizing their metaphysics; allowing them to signify) and making such objects incapable of being possessed, Krauss and Safran Foer underscore the impossibility for third generation writers to know and posess Holocaust history. The magical objects in *Great House* entice the reader, signaling aporetic moments in the text, and individual characters attempt to make sense of traumatic histories and circumstances to which they are not privy by way of experience. Nevertheless, there is an imperative to determine the limits of knowledge and representation by formulating new modes of storytelling that play with fantasy and reality; as *Great House* and *Everything is Illuminated* develop such practices, the texts become enchanted objects in and of themselves and frame the reader's attempts and inability to possess this history.

Even without the proximity to generic codes of fantasy, a genre wherein objects are expected to function beyond rationale explanation or vis-à-vis the miraculous, human-object discourse already invokes something of the fantastic. According to this field and the work of scholars like Jane Bennett and Bill Brown, objects have lives of their own, lives realized by and through literature when we take seriously "the secret life of things" and experience objects as "vibrant matter" ("Thing Theory" 5; *Vibrant Matter* xi). In addition, these texts maintain a proximal relationship to genres of fantasy. Part literary fantasy and part literary realism, *Great House* and *Everything Is Illuminated*, like Michael Chabon's *The Yiddish Policemen's Union* (2007), are estranged from clear-cut designations of genre. And thus, this already precarious material is made more precarious through the lack of generic codes and conventions; the material that is the subject of this chapter is animated by absence, which Brian McHale refers to as "legitimate grounds for fabulation" in a realist text, and in part by the texts' hybrid status and play with fantasy and realism (87). In the same way that objects function as magic talismans

within and in relation to fantasy genres, objects in *Great House* and *Everything Is Illuminated* illuminate historical absence. Just as the artifacts of science fiction or the magic amulets of fantasy function as plot devices and serve as sources of fascination and wonder, objects in these texts signal something beyond the material and temporal order of the present.[54] As the desk shapeshifts across chapters, it remains the same material object but is perceived so diversely by the different narrators that the reader questions its likeness as the same desk. Attention to the "thingness of things" in these novels reveals a wider exigency, outside the text, to engage with the material traces of history ("Thing Theory" 5). This structure of storytelling reveals the task of the third-generation writer's own relationship to history, one that becomes especially metafictional as these writers' relationship to the past is mediated by objects, texts, and material fragments. The fact that things are obtaining a new urgency in this literature and at the beginning of the twenty-first century thus responds to the loss of the aging population of direct witnesses.

Objects in these texts are enchanted because of the extraordinary, sacred sensibility invoked by their ordinary, inanimate materiality; they inhabit a strange realm in between presence and absence, life and death, fantasy and reality. Absent bodies become profoundly present in relation to these resurrected objects. As one protagonist of *Great House* remarks of his dedication to recovering lost furniture, "It's true, I can't bring the dead back to life . . . but I can bring back the chair they once sat in, the bed where they slept" (275). Work on objects in

[54]The artifacts of science fiction do not just refer to any manufactured object, "but rather (in the more popular archeological sense) as a manufactured object embedding evidence of some specific (usually remote) time and place, and invested with some indeterminate value—be it material, pedagogical, or spiritual—to those who receive or discover it in some other time or place" (Wolfe 84). Here, irreducible wonder refers to the sense of enchantment Tolkien explains in "On Fairy-Stories," which I discuss in the Introduction.

Polish culture has led Bożena Shallcross to the formulation that physical remains (jewelry, shoes, clothes, hair) have become the Holocaust's dominant metonymy and have come to stand in for human tragedy (1). "Piles, not people, are the legacy of the Holocaust," echoes Alison Landsberg (118). Shallcross explains that these objects provide material evidence for the Holocaust: "these surviving objects attest to the fact of genocide, if one respects their authenticity; ordinary and humble, these objects are endowed with unique representational power: pillaged or exchanged for the victim's life, they trigger numerous Holocaust narratives" (1). And thus, preserved in museums and memorial sites and arranged by professional curators, these objects "now stand out as the Holocaust's most persuasive and tangible reality" (1).

What does it mean that they have also come to clutter the pages of contemporary Jewish American literature? The turn to objects in these texts is significant for their relationship to historical representation. Like Holocaust history itself, ontological confusion in the narratives renders the material unstable and the terms of its interpolation uncertain. Thus, the preoccupation with objects reflects an impossible undertaking: the desire belatedly to understand what happened[55] by sorting out the "real" remains of the past from the chaos of representation, a notion increasingly complicated by the directional flip between life and art. The turn to objects also reflects the growing exigency and anxiety, both on and off the page, of the need to literally hold on to a past that is both heavily mediated and slipping away. "Every year, as more survivors die, the work becomes more important," Anna Lopuska, one of the conservators at the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum remarks (Donadio n. pag.). "Within 20 years, there will be only these objects speaking for this place" (Donadio n. pag.). Through a mix of fantasy and

[55]Amy Hungerford argues that Safran Foer finds himself belated in two ways: first, because the story of discovering the secrets of one's parents' history has been told, and secondly, because he is generationally distanced from the experience of the events in Europe ("How Jonathan" 611).

reality that calls into question modes of historical mediation, the texts themselves become another kind of enchanted Holocaust object that contain material traces of the past, illuminated through play and self-referentiality.

Thus, these texts confront the paradox that objects *cannot speak* and yet carry this metaphysical burden. The description of the "lost-articles room" in the basement of the Zamenhopf hotel in *The Yiddish Policemen's Union* is emblematic of the mixed debris that we see in the other novels I investigate in this chapter (10):

> At the bottom of the steps, he [Landsman] passes through the lost-articles room, lined with pegboard, furnished with shelves and cubbyholes that hold the thousand objects abandoned or forgotten in the hotel. Unmated shoes, fur hats, a trumpet, a windup zeppelin. A collection of wax gramophone cylinders featuring the entire recorded output of the Orchestra Orfeon of Istanbul. A logger's ax, two bicycles, a partial bridge in a hotel glass. Wigs, canes, a glass eye, display hands left behind by a mannequin salesman. Prayer books, prayer shawls in their velvet zipper pouches, an outlandish idol with the body of a fat baby and the head of an elephant. There is a wooden soft-drink crate filled with keys, another with the entire range and breadth of hairstyling tools, from irons to eyelash crimpers. (*Yiddish* 10)

What is striking is that the mixed detritus of all three novels contrasts with the meticulously constructed piles of *individual* objects on display in Holocaust museums and memorials. Such prosthetic limbs, eyeglasses, toothbrushes, suitcases, hair, etc., are what Alison Landsberg identifies as the "emerging iconography" of the Holocaust (118). But the messy clutter of objects in *The Yiddish Policemen's Union,* like the objects in *Great House* and *Everything Is Illuminated*, testifies to the inability to carefully curate history.

Through this diverse array of materials that we confront repeatedly in third-generation Jewish American literature, there is an unmistakable reference to both "the body" and "culture" in a piecemeal reflection of the holistic Jewish cultural body lost to history. As Shallcross writes, the Holocaust already exists at a temporal remove, its proximity diminishing into memory, where

"both its material vestiges and immaterial traces manifest their past immediacy mainly through metonymy, which allows these fragments to speak on behalf of past wholeness" (2). The items housed in the lost-articles room emphasize the prosthetic dimension of history and the importance of metonymic representation. Such prosthetic pieces, items like "wigs, canes, a glass eye, display hands left behind by a mannequin salesman" *already* signify bodies no longer present (*Yiddish* 10). In addition, they invoke a gruesome sense of fragmentation that resonates with Holocaust trauma. All are cultural artifacts, but the "trumpet," the collection of "the entire recorded output of the Orchestra Orfeon of Istanbul," the "prayer books, prayer shawls in their velvet zipper pouches" especially flesh out the rich textures and sounds of the cultural avant-garde silenced by the Holocaust (*Yiddish* 10). Embedded in prosthetic objects are the lost bodies and culture and structures of representation more broadly, those questions of how it is the third generation knows what they know about the past. I explore how stuff grounds meaning in these texts through aesthetics and history: both the objects *in* the texts and the objects *as* texts.

This example illustrates the way we experience, through the presence and proliferation of material objects, the profound absence of a community. Like the piles, these scenes of mixed debris invoke "a death world where only the objects remain" (Landsberg 71). But attempts to mix the objects, by reshuffling and reordering the "stuff" of piles, is also an attempt to restructure historical representation so what is on display is our inability to know, order, and sort history; these texts rely on objects to defamiliarize what we are accustomed to knowing about the Holocaust in order to perceive history in new ways. As Brown explains, literary texts resurrect the thingness of objects[56] via estrangement of routine reception (*How to Do Things* 937).

---

[56]For Brown, things and objects belong together in a dialectical relationship. It is important that Brown distinguishes "things" from the discursively contained "objects": "we look through

According to Brown, in literature, objects become things in the way that language and literary tropes bestow meaning on an object (now a thing) so that the meaning is no longer reducible to that object (937). As such, Brown explains, "literature might then serve as a mode of rehabilitative reification—a resignifying of the fixations and fixities of thing-ification that will grant us access to what remains obscure (or obscured) in the routines through which we (fail to) experience the material object world" (*How to Do Things* 937). Here what is obscured is not necessarily the Marxist "reification" that Brown is referring to, but the individual social, cultural, and historical context of the thing that we miss when the object is part of the pile. Because such objects have become so "iconic"[57] in relationship to history, these authors play with representation strategies and risk debasing Holocaust memory to forge their own authentic encounters with the past. "We might say that for the second generation, and more radically for the third, the only access to the Holocaust comes through objects, through the piles of objects left behind," Landsberg writes (71). The stakes of mixing debris and situating it in a play of ontological realities is humanization. Extracting fragments of history from their usual context allows for a deeper connection to the individual, just as the metal conservator Andrzej Jastrzebiowski explains of his work with eyeglasses (Donadio n. pag.). Jastrzebiowski spent three months cleaning all the eyeglasses in a vitrine to preserve their distressed state and prevent them from corroding further (n. pag.). "When I saw the eyeglasses in the exhibition, I saw it as one big pile," he said (n. pag.). But as Donadio writes, "in the lab, he began to examine them one

---

objects because there are codes by which our interpretation makes them meaningful, because there is a discourse of objectivity that allows us to use them as facts," Brown writes ("Thing Theory" 4). In contrast, things are tied to a specific ambiguity and refer to "the amorphousness out of which objects are materialized by the apperceiving subject" ("Thing Theory" 5).

[57]The separation of use-value from exchange-value that renders labor invisible to the worker and consumer.

by one. One had a screw replaced by a bent needle; another had a repaired temple. 'And then this enormous mass of glasses started becoming people,' Mr. Jastrzebiowski said. This 'search for the individual,' he said, helps ensure that the work does not become too routine" (n. pag.).

I begin from the vantage point that these texts are responding to the paradox Daniel Mendelsohn discovered while conducting interviews for his memoir. Mendelsohn describes the phenomenon of "people who were rich in memories but poor in keepsakes," whereas he "was so rich in the keepsakes but had no memories to go with them" (223). The stories we discover in *Great House* and *Everything Is Illuminated* confront both sides of this paradox. Furthermore, they suggest that even for those characters rich in both, the two exist in tension and struggle to tell different stories. In *Great House*, George Weisz spends his entire life obsessively tracking down the keepsakes to "go with" his memories (Mendelsohn 223). Other characters inherit objects without their full history; possessing the object, they find themselves entangled, often involuntarily, in quests to understand its origins. In *Great House,* a giant multidrawer writing desk with a mysterious aura passes between characters—strangers—to one another. As critics have commented of *Great House*, this desk that moves between characters who are also writers serves as a "symbol of the inescapable burden of a writer" (Berger and Milbauer 72). As the desk is "passed on or passed down from one character to another" in Krauss's own words, it implies the loss and inheritance that affects the second- and third-generations who grapple with traces of Holocaust history in their fiction (Uncertainty n. pag.). Dispossessed by one character and possessed by another, the desk structures connections between two characters who would otherwise remain estranged and forges new connections even as it symbolizes dispossession. In *Everything Is Illuminated*, Jonathan, the autobiographical protagonist, travels to Ukraine to learn the memory behind the photograph of his grandfather with Augustine, the woman presumed to

have saved his grandfather's life. Other characters, like Lista or "not Augustine," are rich in both memories *and* keepsakes but remain isolated from history. With no one to witness her story, Lista remains alienated from history and the objects that clutter her narrative remain outside of or lost to history. These objects hold a privileged kind of history, where incorporating the story of lost or dispossessed objects into narrative thus becomes a way to access and incorporate narratives otherwise lost to history.

Animating the Inanimate: Enchanted Objects in *Great House*

One such dispossessed object is the multidrawer writing desk at the center of *Great House*. Described as "the desk of a medieval sorcerer," it allegedly belonged to Federico García Lorca (*Great House* 83). An inanimate object that animates the story and connects otherwise disparate narrative threads, the desk structures impossible connections across history and the diaspora. Echoing the dislocation characteristic of postmodern aesthetics, *Great House* does not cohere around a single chronology or telling, but rather the desk provides narrative momentum to the fractured narratives of four narrators. In fact, a coherent sketch of the novel can only be achieved by placing the desk at the center; it functions much like a protagonist. The characters in *Great House* do not so much see the desk as an inanimate object as have vibrant, affective experiences of it and of themselves in relation to this piece of furniture. Bound up with the role of the writer, the desk anchors communication, literally, as the work space for the writers in the text (Weisz's father, Nadia, Lotte, and Daniel Varsky) and aesthetically, as each chapter is shaped around a storyteller and addressee.

The novel opens with a chapter entitled "All Rise" and its narrator, Nadia, explains how she came to possess and dispossess the desk. Nadia has traveled to Jerusalem in search of the desk, but she finds herself sitting in a hospital room at the bedside of an unconscious man—a

judge—whom she has just struck with her car. Punctuated by the direct address, "Your Honor," Nadia's story recounts the burden of writing in solitude at the monstrous desk from her New York apartment. Twenty-seven years earlier, Nadia had agreed to temporarily safeguard a few items of furniture for a new acquaintance while he, the talented poet named Daniel Varsky, returned to his native Chile. But years later, after she learns that Varsky was brutally tortured and murdered by the Pinochet regime, Nadia is forced to part with the last remaining piece of Varsky's belongings when Leah Weisz, a woman claiming to be Varsky's daughter, comes to collect the desk on his behalf. In "Lies Told by Children" and "Weisz," we learn that the desk once belonged to the father of George Weisz, who lost his parents to the Nazi invasion of Budapest in 1944. Weisz, who narrates the final chapter, is now a single father of the twins Yoav and Leah, who have grown up with both a cosmopolitan and sheltered existence as their father, an antiques furniture dealer, moved them around Europe tracking down the lost objects and possessions of the endless clients who request his services until he settles them in a home on Ha'Oren Street in Jerusalem. In a letter to Isabel, her brother's lover and the narrator of "Lies Told by Children," it is Leah who explains, "*For forty years my father labored to reassemble that lost room, just as it looked until that fateful day in 1944. As if putting all the pieces back together he might collapse time and erase regret*" (116).

In "Swimming Holes," Arthur Bender, a scholar of Romantic literature at Oxford, narrates his relationship with his wife Lotte Berg, also a writer, who was forced to leave her home in Nuremberg when she was seventeen and received a visa to chaperone children on one of the first Kinderstransports to England in 1939. For as long as he can remember, Arthur lived in perpetual fear of his wife's desk, "that monstrous thing" that he knows to be a gift from his wife's former lover, a subject of which she says nothing (103). Addressing the story first to his

friend Richard Gottlieb, Arthur confesses that he believes Lotte gave the desk to Daniel Varsky when the young poet begins to visit his wife, and believes that the two were having an affair. But as Lotte ages and develops Alzheimer's, she accidentally betrays the secrets that surround her past. Lotte had a child, Arthur learns, whom she gave up for adoption. This child would have been around the same age as the poet Daniel Varsky, the recipient of the desk and in whom Lotte must have seen something of her lost child. In "True Kindness," we listen to Aaron, an aging father in Jerusalem who has just lost his wife, speak to his estranged son Dov. A Judge who has returned home from London to attend his mother's funeral, Dov is presumably the same man to whom Nadia addresses her story.

Throughout the stories, the indirect, estranged mode of communication between characters (both those who are familiar and those who remain strangers) metafictionally reflects the way the story indirectly treats the Holocaust. Like the beholder in the Holocaust museum, the reader approaches the desk in *Great House* and confronts the material legacy of the Holocaust "to read its metonymic configurations and, in so doing, to pose questions about its graspable meaning" (Shallcross 2). As Berger and Milbauer note, "*Great House* is a meditation on post-Holocaust memory, the meaning of Jewish history after Auschwitz, and the impact of the catastrophe on Jewish identity" (75). While I agree with this assertion, it is important to note that uncertainty is part and parcel of what Berger and Milbauer refer to as this "meditation on post-Holocaust memory" (75). Objects are not the solution to a lack of "graspable meaning," but in fact foreground the extent to which the impact of this traumatic history is, to borrow from Krauss's novel, "and yet" unknown.

Unlike the mythical locale of Trachimbrod in *Everything Is Illuminated* or the Yiddish-speaking metropolis of Sitka, Alaska, in *The Yiddish Policemen's Union*, *Great House* is

anchored in "our world." In fact, the locations of the protagonists in New York, London, Jerusalem, and Chile stress the varied geography of diaspora Jews that matches the contemporary historical moment. Like Bernard Malamud's short fiction, *Great House* is part of the substratum of fantasy literature denoted by Todorov's fantastic; the text reveals the possibility of mystery and wonder that already exists in reality. In this world, seemingly implausible feats are made to feel plausible, while the plausible or real is made to feel strange. The magical appearance of a long-lost article of furniture or the intrusion of the seemingly unreal, like the ghostly apparition of Daniel Varsky that haunts Nadia in Israel, are made to feel unbelievable or strange not because the text is set in an "otherworld," but because of unknown historical circumstances—the fact that we will never know what happened to Daniel Varsky, for example. As a result, these "dark areas" of history become grounds for fabulation (McHale 87). In contrast to *Everything Is Illuminated*, *Great House* does not flip-flop between discrete narrative worlds, but rather, multiple ontological possibilities for explanation and meaning-making present themselves at once. This text is quintessentially fantastic in the way that Krauss inhabits and plays with the duration of uncertainty throughout the narrative (Todorov 25). As Brian Edwards suggests, "possibility and multiplicity" are correlatives to "uncertainty" in narrative (195). The horror of traumatic history renders present narrative events open-ended so that they inhabit a realm in between pure fantasy and realism[58] (Zamora and Faris 167). Because we don't know what happened to Varsky, he may or may not be a figment of Nadia's imagination, and the fantastic becomes an aesthetic response to mediate this unknown piece of traumatic history. *Great House* thus presents uncertainty as events exist at the border between the real (and may be explained

[58]In this way, events are both potentially explained by realism *and* "irreducible," in the sense that magic must account for their existence.

psychologically, for example) and the unreal (Varsky is a ghost). Todorov explains the premise of ontological duality that has come to define magic realism: "in a world which is indeed our world. . . there occurs an event which cannot be explained by the laws of this same familiar world" (25). As Wendy Faris elucidates, magic realist texts contain "'an irreducible element' of magic, something we cannot explain according to the laws of the universe as we know them" (Faris 167). But in *Great House,* we choose whether or not we wish to apply the laws of "this same familiar world," whether Leah and Yoav really have powers "borrowed from ghosts," or whether we want to believe that the ghost of Daniel Varsky follows Nadia around Israel (Todorov 25; *Great House* 139). With so many threads left untied, the magic of the novel is potentially resistant to rational explanation; *Great House* exists in a space between a realist and non-realist ontological worldview. The novel's ontological uncertainty is not a retreat from the historical but instead reflects that the novel's perception of history is unstable.

As Shallcross explains, in literature *of* the Holocaust and literature *about* the Holocaust, the relationship between humans and objects is already one in which these are not discrete realms as objects metonymically stand in for their lost possessors (11). Shallcross makes a strong case for this metonymic relationship, especially in her attention to museum exhibitions. Enchantment extends her work by calling attention to the impossibility of the metaphor and the fact that the exact substitution of the thing for the possessor is of course an impossible one. Because enchantment incorporates play within a fantastic space, it includes a sense of impossibility as it foregrounds the metonymy between object and body so that Weisz, who cannot "bring the dead back to life," can bring back the chair they once sat in, the bed where they slept" (275). Thus, the descriptions of the desk in *Great House* animate an otherwise inhuman, material object, and the desk inhabits a strange, liminal space between the blurred realms of

humans and objects. For as long as Arthur Bender has lived with his wife's desk, he has lived in perpetual fear of this object that he knows so little of—only that it was a gift from a former lover (103). "That is how she dealt with the past: in total silence," Arthur remarks (103). For Arthur, the desk "overshadowed everything else like some sort of grotesque, threatening monster, clinging to most of one wall and bullying the other pathetic bits of furniture to the far corner, where they seemed to cling together, as if under some sinister magnetic force" (83). The desk is not simply personified, but overshadows, clings, and bullies—the desk is surrounded by a discourse of both monstrosity and silence. "Grotesque" and "threatening," monstrous and unspeakable, the desk becomes a metonymic marker for Holocaust trauma and the mode of "antirealist" representation (Rothberg 3-4).[59]

Great House attunes the reader's perception to the qualities of the desk that exceed its functional purpose as a writing tool, thus illuminating its fantastic quality. Recounting how he described the desk to his friend Richard Gottlieb, who has not seen it, Arthur dismisses an object-oriented definition; rather, the desk constitutes a *thing* as it mediates characters' relationships to themselves, to others, and to history. Arthur notes, "to call it a desk is to say too little. The word conjures some homely, unassuming article of work or domesticity, a selfless and practical object that is always poised to offer its back for its owner to make use of, and which, when not in use, occupies its allotted space with humility. Well, I told Gottlieb, you can cancel that image immediately" (248). To call it an "object" or a desk "is to say too little" because the desk defies its material function and exceeds its status as object (248). Scholarship on object relations has already muddied the boundary between human and thing, and this boundary is

[59]Finally confronting the desk in the storage unit in New York City, Weisz finds that "the tremendous desk stood alone, mute and uncomprehending" (289).

further complicated by strange fictional worlds and the metonymic relationships between bodies and things specific to Holocaust discourse.

In order to contextualize the relationship between things and historiography, we must first consider the metaphysical properties of materiality itself. In theories of human-object relations, scholars theorize the animacy of the inanimate or the "presence" of things. As Jean Baudrillard has observed, "human beings and objects are indeed bound together in a collusion in which the objects take on a certain density, an emotional value—what might be a presence" (*System* 24). This density or "emotional value" is often defined vis-à-vis ownership, which Walter Benjamin considers the most important relationship among humans and their things (*System* 24). Benjamin theorizes this relationship through the intimacy of possession. As he writes while unpacking his library, possession is "the most intimate relationship that one can have to objects. . . not that they come alive in him; it is he who lives in them" (67). The fact that Benjamin is unpacking his sacred library is also key to the symbolic power latent in the concept of possession *as* knowledge, a relationship *Great House* undermines as possession of the desk always already signals its dispossession.

While Baudrillard and Benjamin do not differentiate between objects and things, discourses on materiality carefully distinguish the two. Noting the ways that things act upon us, W.J.T. Mitchell writes,

> objects are the way things appear to a subject—that is, with a name, and identity, a gestalt or stereotypical template. . . . Things, on the other hand, . . . [signal] the moment when the object becomes other, when the sardine can looks back, when the mute idol speaks, when the subject experiences the object as uncanny and feels the need for what Foucault calls 'a metaphysics of the object.' (qtd. in Bennett 2)

Defamiliarizing objects, making them feel strange or uncanny, is part of their transformation

from object-to-thing. And the strangeness of things—their otherness—across third-generation Jewish American literature is persistently on display in order to foreground that which eludes our grasp. Jane Bennett's thing-power directs our attention to this nonhuman vitality as it describes "the vitality intrinsic to materiality" that "refuses to dissolve completely into the milieu of human knowledge" (3). Things thus remain "out-side" our possession, functioning as an epistemological limit (Bennett 3).

Bill Brown's work, mentioned earlier, also analyzes the strange, metaphysical dimension of manufactured objects. In between "objects" and "things" are our own projections, subjectivities, and interpretations. Things, Brown reminds us, are "what is excessive in objects, as what exceeds their mere materialization as objects or their mere utilization as objects—their force as a sensuous presence or as a metaphysical presence, the *magic* by which objects become values, fetishes, items, and totems" ("Thing Theory" 5, emphasis mine). This "magic" is enacted in *Great House* through the aesthetics of the fantastic and reorients our relationship to what lies beyond the material—memory. As Isabel comments of the furniture cluttering the Weiszs' apartment, objects merely highlight the burden of human memory and the gap between the inanimate and the human: "all of those objects had no power of memory themselves, just standing and gathering dust" (138). In contrast, the fantastic things of history remind us that material traces sit at the center of signification.

Brown's work emphasizes that the discourse surrounding things is one of indirection and uncertainty: "*the thing seems to name the object just as it is even as it names some thing else*," he notes ("Thing Theory" 4). His schemata draws out the potential for the fantastic elements in the transition of objects to things as he connects things with excess and irreducibility; things are by necessity liminal in nature and exceed the boundaries of realism. Writing on the major features

of realist discourse, Phillippe Harmon argues, "realist discourse, always in search of transparency and the circulation of knowledge, will strive to reduce the imbalance that exists between the *being* and the *appearance* of objects or characters" (178). Rejecting this realist discourse, *Great House* magnifies the distance between the "being" and the "appearance" of the desk and registers a failure of realism as a failure to possess knowledge of the desk and its history (178). Realism, according to Marcel Proust, also fails to convey objects "truly" (113). While Proust is less interested in the fantastic than in the mnemonic functions of objects, his parsing of realism is instructive for the ways in which he argues that realist discourse is reductive when it comes to describing objects (113). He writes that mimesis "impoverishes and saddens us the most," isolating us from ourselves, past, present, and future:

> that literature which is satisfied to 'describe objects,' to give merely a miserable listing of lines and surfaces, is the very one which, while styling itself 'realist,' is the farthest removed from reality, the one that impoverishes and saddens us the most, for it sharply cuts off all communication of our present self with the past, the essence of which was preserved in those objects, or with the future, in which they stimulate us to enjoy the past anew. It is that essence which art worthy of the name must express and, if it fails to do this, one can even then draw a lesson from this failure (whereas one draws no lesson from even the successes of realism), namely, that this essence is in part subjective and cannot be communicated to others. (Proust 113)

Thus, Proust intimates that something other than realism is required to capture objects as they exist in reality and in our subjective relationship to them, and for Krauss, this essence is located in the in-between of fantastic tropes.

If the discourse on "thing theory" situates subject/object relations as interrelated and dialectical, then considering objects in the context of Holocaust studies further blurs the distinction between bodies and matter and reality and fantasy. The desk, already anachronistic by virtue of its hulking bourgeois presence and survival in the postmodern present, furthermore

functions outside the emerging iconography of Holocaust objects. As Shallcross explains, "at the point when the victims, forced to leave their homes, had to make quick and irrevocable decisions regarding what to take with them, their needs were indeed basic. One took warm clothes, food, and symbolic mementos such as family pictures, but left behind furniture" (Shallcross 2). But as a piece of furniture, the desk stands apart from the piles of discarded objects now central to the Holocaust's iconography; it functions as the *ur*-object left behind by historiography. This "left behind" status and the monstrous qualities that Arthur attributes to the desk draws out the abject qualities of the desk. Existing on the border of object and thing, Kristeva explains that the abject is "neither subject nor object," once again inciting the discussion of borders between the human and material that is central to both thing theory and the fantastic. Kristeva defines abjection[60] through that which is ultimately "cast off," the refuse or corpses that confront one with the borders of one's condition as a living being (Kristeva 3). Characterized as "what disturbs identity, system, order" and "what does not respect borders, positions, rules" the abject reveals the "fragility of the law," Kristeva explains, thus providing the basis for her reading of Auschwitz through an abject lens (4).

Similar to the objects of the lost-articles room, a bourgeois culture lost to history materializes through the "tremendous body" of the desk. Arthur describes his fear and "strange, inexplicable jealousy" that overtakes him when Lotte opens the door "and there, hovering behind her, threatening to swallow her up, was that tremendous body of furniture" (84). Furthermore, in comparison to its strength, the desk reveals only Arthur's helplessness and recourse to delusion.

[60]As a psychoanalytical concept, the abject delineates how social and cultural boundaries are constructed and maintained. What is abject is literally that which is "cast off," or that which disturbs identity; it is the human reaction of horror to a threatened breakdown in meaning caused by the loss of distinction between self and other (Kristeva 13).

Arthur remarks that the desk stood "pretending to be inanimate but, like a Venus flytrap, ready to pounce on them and digest them via one of its many little terrible drawers" (248). Facing an unknowable monster, he transfers his perception of his wife's deceit onto the properties of the desk itself as it "pretends" to be something that it is not.

The small fact of the desk's origins becomes the grounds for Arthur's fantasy and exposes his feelings of insecurity that overwhelm his relationship with Lotte. He experiences the desk's "thingness" as if it is a direct affront to his masculinity, even noting, "it was, I always thought, a very masculine desk" (83). Through Arthur's relationship to the desk, his resentment swells into a paranoia about Lotte's past that remains unchallenged (until his wife's Alzheimer's betrays her secret). The following remains concealed from both the reader and Arthur: Lotte's history, Lotte's relationship to Varsky, and Varsky's past. As a result, Arthur's desperation over not knowing spirals into fabulations that ultimately fill in the "dark spaces" of history (McHale 87). When Varsky appears on the Benders' doorstep, Lotte's silence morphs into Arthur's twisted delusion about an affair between his wife and the young, mysterious poet. So Arthur "began to form a plan," and fabricates a story about needing to attend a conference in Frankfurt in order to leave the couple alone together as a test: "I would remove myself, the tiresome obstacle in their way, and give Lotte every opportunity to betray me with this swaggering youth with his leather and his tight jeans and his lines from Neruda, which no doubt he tossed off breathlessly with his face inches from hers" (91).[61] In Frankfurt, Arthur tortures himself with daydreams of the affair, dreaming up scenarios replete with agonizing fantasies of their adultery. In addition, the chapter's title emphasizes the deep historical trauma at stake in the preset;

[61]By this time Arthur knows enough to see his fantasy clearly: "As I write this all these years later, in the long shadow of that boy's tragic fate, it sounds ridiculous, but at the time it felt real" (91).

"Swimming Holes" is a reminder of the uncertain depths of historical trauma that disturb the present. The title refers to the Benders' daily ritual of walking to the three ponds on the Heath where Lotte swims, momentarily disappearing into the dark water while Arthur holds his breath until she reappears. Describing how, "in a flash, she'd disappear into the blackness," Arthur wants to cry out but bites his tongue (77). Once, he asks Lotte "how deep does it go?" but "she claimed not to know" (77-8). The question of depth emphasizes measurement, highlighting Arthur's desire to know the extent to which Lotte suffers rather than the nature of the trauma itself.

As a *thing* with an animacy all its own, and irreducible to its status as "object," the desk invokes discourses surrounding the structure of impossibility in fantasy, that which remains irreducible and apart from rational explanation. It is not uncommon in fantasy for objects to serve a significant role as a plot device or character.[62] The desk has a force and presence that exceeds its structure or function; instead, it seems to have a life of its own that changes shape depending on the context and possessor. When Nadia first acquires the furniture from Daniel Varsky in the novel's opening chapter, she invests the materiality (iron, wood, upholstery), the simple materials that define its status as object, with "the chance to a new life" (8). Surveying

[62]Some of the relevant contexts surrounding object relations in fantasy include the "artifact" in SF studies, when a mysterious relic of the past is uncovered, usually one that harbors technological advantage or offers connections to previous (alien) population (see Wolfe's chapter, "The Artifact as Icon in Science Fiction," in *Evaporating Genres* 83-99). In fantasy texts, it is not uncommon for an object to structure the narratives, telepathically link characters, or provide passageways between narrative worlds. It is also interesting to point out that Philip K. Dick's science fiction is credited with the breakdown of subject/object relations. As Alexander Dunst comments, "more than any other US-American author in the twentieth century Dick broke down the boundaries between what we consider authentic and inauthentic, human or machine, what appears to be an object and what claims existence as a subject. What we have come to mean when we speak of Dick's science fiction is precisely this breakdown of subject and object as stable opposition" (Dunst 1).

what she can see of the pieces under a mess of papers, she perceives "a sofa, a large wooden desk with lots of drawers, some big and some small, a pair of bookshelves crammed with volumes in Spanish, French, and English, and the nicest piece, a kind of chest or trunk with iron braces that looked as if it had been rescued from a sunken ship and put to use as a coffee table" (8). Lonely, bereft of her ex-lover's companionship and his furniture, Nadia sees in Varsky's old furniture the opportunity to remake herself as she projects her emotional state—sad, in need of rescue—onto the exchange. She continues,

> He [Varsky] must have acquired everything secondhand, none of it looked new, but all the pieces shared a kind of sympathy, and the fact that they were suffocating under papers and books made them more attractive rather than less. Suddenly I felt awash in gratitude to their owner, as if he were handing down to me not just some wood and upholstery but the chance to a new life, leaving it up to me to rise to the occasion. (8)

Surely the desk, the aggressive bully ready to pounce like a Venus flytrap, is not one of these "sympathetic" secondhand pieces, now gendered feminine and rendered innocuous? This is the thing that Arthur describes as the "desk of a medieval sorcerer" (83)? A few weeks later, when the movers bring the desk to Nadia's apartment, she calls attention to its ability to shapeshift:[63] "It was so much larger than I remembered, as if it had grown or multiplied (had there been so many drawers?) since I'd seen it two weeks earlier in his apartment" (201). Embodying Nadia's contradictory subjectivity as a writer and her own uncertainty ("had there been so many drawers?"), the sight of the desk every morning both renews in her "a sense that a potential" had been acknowledged and emboldens her self-doubt, reminding her that "I was only an accidental caretaker who had foolishly imagined that she possessed something, an almost magical quality,

[63]Shapeshifting is a prominent motif of folklore, speculative fiction, and mythology more broadly.

which, in fact, she'd never had" (203). For Nadia, the "thingness" of the desk compounds her accidental role as history's caretaker with the writer's self-doubt, figured through her constant questioning of her special quality and the self-imposed emotional isolation that she privileges as its requisite way of life.

As I have explored, the mode of the fantastic often marks the objects' "thingness" in *Great House*, often effacing the boundary between inanimate and animate. Leah remembers hiding in fear of the long-lost pieces of furniture arriving at the house in Ha'Oren Street. She recalls a state of anxiety, describing the arrival of furniture as "tense and somber events that had terrified her so much that as a small child she would sometimes hide in the kitchen when the crates were pried open, in case what popped out were the blackened faces of her dead grandparents" (115). And when her friend Paul arrives to tell Nadia that Varsky had disappeared, "we both turned at the same time to stare at the towering desk, as if at any moment our tall, thin friend with the big nose might leap out, laughing, from one of the many drawers" (203). In a play of metaphysics, these pieces of furniture seem to "have lives" of their own. As Schwenger parses, "absorbing the psychic investments of their owners, things paradoxically possess something of their possessors" (Schwenger 75). In *Great House*, we see how "things paradoxically possess something of their possessors" as Nadia experiences the loss of Daniel Varsky through the desk (Schwenger 75). These objects signal the "potential to be placed under their spell," (Saler 138) where the strange play of fantastic tropes in a realist frame symbolizes loss and displacement constitutive of enchantment. The individual, subject experiences of the characters (here Leah and Nadia) in relation to the pieces of furniture reveals how, for these first-person narrators, enchantment is their mode of interacting with aporias of history. Reversing the logic of ownership, *Great House* thwarts characters' attempts to possess what remains outside

the bounds of history.

Like the circumstances of the pending reversion in *The Yiddish Policemen's Union*, strangeness and dispossession are tied together in *Great House*. In *The Yiddish Policemen's Union*, we are reminded of what happens when the Jews get "too comfortable," and the dangers when starting to "forget a little bit," feeling at home, leads to disaster: "Egypt. Spain. Germany," Landsman says, "I guess that's how it always goes" (*Yiddish* 380). The text presents the play of genre and aesthetic displacement as a narrative exploration of this predicament. The constant disruption of assimilation and alienation in both form and content questions the role of the Holocaust in relation to the Jewish state and diaspora, where discomfort and alienation serve as Jewish memorial practice. And in *Great House*, alongside the characters, the reader finds herself at once at home and alienated. Here too aesthetics become a mode of refracting historical experience. As it shapeshifts across distinct narratives, alters in gender, size, and perceived demeanor, the desk is perpetually caught in a series of defamiliarizations that privileges uncertainty and estrangement itself as a way of knowing and mediating historical circumstances. Always the same object, the desk is never the same *thing*. As such, its strange familiarity across unfamiliar circumstances asks the reader to consider the nature of its interpolation, how it has come to be possessed and dispossessed, and how it signifies in relation to its possessor.

The desk and the orphaned pieces of furniture in the Weiszs' apartment sit at the center of ways of knowing the past; reading the interaction of characters with the object world becomes a way to interpret relationships to historical knowledge more broadly. Yoav and Leah's purposeful ignorance, carelessness, and disrespect exist at one extreme, while Weisz's obsession with care and precision sits opposition his children's attitude. Problematic for Weisz and his family, the desire to amass evidence of traumatic history is not necessarily transferred from one

generation to the next. In comparison to their father's meticulous obsession with furniture, Isabel describes how different is her relationship to the furniture from Yoav and Leah's: "No matter how much I came to know, I could never master the grace and ease with which Yoav and Leah moved among all of those antiques, nor their strange combination of sensitivity and indifference" (138). Knowledge is not necessarily a strategy for mastery, Isabel expresses. Isabel's family has a different ontological relationshiop with furniture and circles around these objects at some remove; taught that she might inflict damage on her family's antiques, she expresses, "I was raised to move carefully around the furniture, not so much to live with it as to live alongside it, at a respectful distance" (139). In a symbolic gesture of American removal from Holocaust history, Isabel is instructed *not* to know the furniture in any intimate or familiar way, but to use physical space as a way to distance herself from the antiques. In contrast, Yoav and Leah's carelessness reveals their lack of desire, perhaps even respect, for knowledge of the past. The lack of physical space intimates a very different relationship with Holocaust history; for Europe or Israel, distance is not an option. When Isabel lives with the siblings in their apartment in London, she remarks on the way they live "with" the beautiful antiques that filled the apartment but remain uninterested: "they rested their bare feet and glasses of wine on Biedermeier coffee tables, left fingerprints on the vitrines, napped on the settees, ate off the Art Deco commodes, and occasionally even walked atop the long dining tables when it was the most convenient way of getting from one place to another in a room crowded with furniture" (139). For Yoav and Leah, marked by indifference, such pieces are reduced to the status of objects. While the activities of daily life, eating, sleeping, resting, and moving occur on or with the objects, the siblings have an uncanny ability to avoid leaving a physical trace—to live "alongside." Like their father, the siblings are described as having an otherworldly presence:

"but no matter how careless they were, they seemed never to leave behind a mark or trace. At first I took this to be the grace of those brought up to consider such furniture their natural habitat, but once I knew Yoav and Leah better I began to think of their talent, if one can call it that, as something borrowed from ghosts" (139). Always already haunted by the history of their family and the events of Kristallnacht, Yoav and Leah's ghostliness does not necessarily indicate their connection to these historical remains of the Holocaust; Yoav and Leah's daily and physical interaction with the furniture reveals their emotional isolation from the past and their treatment of such pieces as merely objects.

Weisz stakes his career on bridging past and present connections for his clients and himself. To the same degree that his children are indifferent, Weisz is obsessed with locating and retrieving his father's and his clients' lost objects. As Leah says, our father was "burdened with a sense of duty that commanded his whole life, and later ours" (115). In this context the act of creation is intimately bound up in the retrieval of lost objects: "maybe all exiles try to re-create the place they've lost out of their fear of dying in a strange place," Isabel contemplates (110). Re-creation by way of recovering lost furniture is tied to both historical and personal narratives. The missing objects provide a physical shape and space to the unrepresentable historical "dark areas" that threaten to swallow the characters (McHale 87), continuously signaled in the text thematically through holes. When Isabel is walking through Cloudenberg[64] at night, she stumbles upon a painting by Breughel of a man who had fallen through ice. In the scene depicted in the painting, no one notices the man except for a small boy offering him his stick

[64]Weisz sends Yoav, accompanied by Isabel, to Brussels to retrieve a chess table from a Mr. Leclercq, who bears a strange resemblance to Himmler. Cloudenberg mirrors the historical site *Coudenberg*, the remains of the residential palace in Brussels on Coudenberg hill that once served as a residence of Charles V and was destroyed by a fire in 1731.

(152). But the stick was offered and "not yet taken" Isabel perceives, and the "whole scene suddenly tilted toward that dark hole that waited to swallow it" (152). So too are the characters tilted towards "dark holes," including the "*gaping hole*" in the study on Ha 'Oren street where the elder Weisz's desk remains missing. As Leah writes to Isabel, "*the only thing missing in the study on Ha'Oren Street was my grandfather's desk—where it should have stood, there was a gaping hole. Without it, the study remained incomplete, a poor replica*" (116).

As they are found, these objects physically present the past. This act is also key to narrative creation, which is the purpose of the interactions that Weisz has with his clients when he miraculously retrieves and presents a piece of lost furniture for a client. In these business dealings Weisz functions more like a psychotherapist than an antiques dealer. The resurrected object allows the client to talk about his or her past and then breathe relief and let go of the pain the client has harbored. Interestingly, it doesn't matter if the furniture is the exact piece the client lost—it seems more important that the prosthetic piece stands in for the authentic in order to provide a structure for the client to tell her story and be witnessed or heard.

The nearness of Weisz's family to the Freud museum in London and the parallel trajectories of the two men corroborate Weisz's ad-hoc role as psychotherapist in his dealings with his clients. Like Sigmund Freud, Weisz obsessively reestablishes his father's study in the house on Ha 'Oren street. While in London Isabel frequents Freud's house, which is now a museum, and her reflections detail the similar ways in which their studies are reconstructed in exile. Isabel details, "when Freud fled Vienna almost all of his belongings were crated up and shipped to the new house in London, where his wife and daughter lovingly reassembled, down to the last possible detail, the study he'd been forced to abandon at 19 Bergasse. At the time I didn't know anything about Weisz's study in Jerusalem, and so the poetic symmetry of the

house's nearness to Freud's was lost on me" (110). The fact that the Freud family's pursuit is now preserved *as a museum* reveals the historian's impulse, its empiricism and exactitude, behind Weisz's meticulous undertaking that is aligned with the dominant scholarly methodology of the realist approach to Holocaust narratives (Rothberg 4). Weisz has inherited this approach from his own father, a scholar of history who taught Weisz "that the absence of things is more useful than their presence" (287). It is only at the end of his life that Weisz questions this approach: "Useful for what?," he wonders (287). The empty hole in Weisz's study reflects a failure of the historian's mode of inquiry, especially as it is linked to his tragic death. And as Emily Miller Budick argues, "so long as Weisz tries to physically repossess the literal desk, his children will remain 'prisoners. . . locked within the walls of their own family'" (287). The historian's method, like its antirealist counterpart, fails. Because the desk is locked in a storage unit in New York City, the study remains incomplete and Weisz's failure ends in suicide. Emulating the historian's quest for verisimilitude becomes impossible; re-creating the past through an exact assemblage of inanimate objects, perfectly reassembled in the Freud museum or Weisz's study, falls short.

In this way, *Great House* reveals the failure of the realist mode both narratively and historically. Brian Edwards summarizes the way that the social realist mode, relying on mimesis, traditionally privileged history (261). However, after poststructuralists began to challenge the mimetic contract underlying the texts of classic realism, the relationship between mimesis and fantasy itself became negotiable (Edwards 221). Extending this idea, J. Hillis Miller writes that after structural linguistics, we should not take for granted "the notion of a literary text which is validated by its one-to-one correspondence to some social, historical, or psychological reality"

(287).[65] As such, we should not take for granted the *inability* for a text to be validated by this correspondence; what *Great House* reflects is the way the realist framework, based on a "one-to-one correspondence to some social, historical, or psychological reality" becomes impossible when "gaping holes" characterize all aspects of that reality. Both the historical circumstances and the language utilized to render these events communicable are uncertain. As Edwards explains, "If what is usually held to be 'real and normal' is uncertain, and even more its representation in writing, so too are decisions about fantasy that depart from 'consensus reality,' or for which explanation is radically problematic" (221). On the narrative level, *Great House* attests to a yawning gap between objects and things; on a historical plane, there is a rift between knowledge and experience. And as the pairing of Weisz's and Freud's narratives indicates, their approaches to overcoming historical absence through meticulous re-creation lead to tragedy.

Late in the novel, Weisz commits suicide, thus presenting a series of questions about the relationship between temporality, things, and enchantment. In Weisz's final prophetic vision and the desk's implied futurity, the text presents alternatives to the realist mode and to chronological or empirical epistemologies. Weisz foresees that Isabel and Yoav will marry and have a child named David, a name that invokes the ultimate prophecy in Judaic tradition—that the messiah will descend from the Kingdom of David. This child, envisions Weisz, will inherit the key to the storage room in New York City that contains the desk (289). The privileging of prophecy and messianic time through the agency of Weisz's imagination signals a powerful contrast to the science of exactitude that has governed his career and his study. This beautiful

[65]According to Miller, this is especially important after structural linguistics because "meaning in language rises not from the reference of signs to something outside words but from differential relations among the words themselves," where "'referent' and 'meaning' must always be distinguished" (287).

prophecy comes not from the study's completed arrangement as the outcome of Weisz's fastidious globetrotting, with the desk finally back in its place, but out of its absence.

In these gaps, often signaled to the reader through moments of arrest and defamiliarization, enchantment takes shape. Only after Weisz commits suicide in June of 1999 does this time ironically "collapse." Leah writes to Isabel that the maid found him in his study on the day following his suicide. Weisz has obsessively tried to track and control the past, but he has failed. Weisz has maintained the small collection of watches that had belonged to his own father, winding them since his father's arrest in Budapest in 1944 (113). Leah notes, "while he was alive, the watches had accompanied Weisz wherever he traveled so that he would be able to wind them on schedule. *When the maid arrived*, Leah wrote, *all of the watches had stopped*" (113). All along Weisz has operated systematically, "*as if by putting all the pieces back together he might collapse time and erase regret*" (116). History, in the form of chronological time, is tied to the material; its function is contingent on Weisz's methodical winding. These "pieces" of the past—Weisz's client's objects, his family's furniture, and his father's collection of watches—are the enchanted objects that animate Weisz and his client's relationship to history, revealing that history is both contingent and material.

The Wreckage of History in *Everything Is Illuminated*

"Memory is the mantra of all the institutions that reckon with the Holocaust, but memory is an inaccurate term. For anyone who wasn't there, on either side of the barbed wire, Jew or German, thinking about the Holocaust is really an act of imagination. All we know is how little we know" –Melvin Jules Bukiet (qtd. in Floreani 140)

"The complete absence I found in Ukraine gave my imagination total freedom" –Jonathan Safran Foer

If the social realist mode is one that traditionally privileges history (Edwards 261), then it should come as no surprise that Krauss and Safran Foer rely on the fantastic and fantasy,

respectively, to call attention to historical absences. As I have been arguing through the discourse of enchantment, for the third-generation writer or reader, any Holocaust genre—testimony, novel, history—is to a certain degree already a fantasy text. As writer Melvin Jules Bukiet iterates, imagination in third generation literature structures our relationship to "how little we know" (qtd. in Floreani 140). The title of *Everything is Illuminated* provides the reader with her first indication of the impossible logic of the text,[66] one that constantly works to revise and critique itself by way of the conflicting impulse to undermine and illuminate its narrative. Given what we know now about the troubling and traumatic constructions of knowledge in Holocaust narratives, for "*Everything*" to be illuminated is not just impossible, but an absurd undertaking, encapsulating the impulse of the absurd that I will explore in Nathan Englander's work. "And yet," to borrow a frequent phrase from *Great House*, the text self-consciously attempts to do just that.

Like *Great House,* the novel unfolds across distinct narrative strands and narrators, but unlike the former, it transgresses the bounds of "this world" to transport us to the fictional wonder of an eighteenth-century *shtetl*, Trachimbrod. The novel opens with the awkward albeit charming and funny voice of Alex, a teenager who serves as the protagonist's tour guide and clumsy interpreter along with his grandfather and "seeking-eye bitch." The author's fictionalized protagonist, Jonathan, a young Jewish American writer, has arrived in Ukraine on a typical "heritage tour" (the name of his grandfather's company) searching for the German woman named Augustine who helped his grandfather Safran escape from the German massacre of the Jews in his village. But the trip does not occur in real time on the page; rather, the story

[66]This is reinforced by the author's dedication, which reads: "Simply and impossibly: FOR MY FAMILY"

unfurls after the trip when Jonathan and Alex exchange letters and together reconstruct the events. Thus, the novel contains three narrative strands: the quest narrative, the Trachimbrod story, and Alex's letters.

Alex has chronicled Jonathan's trip in his broken English and has sent excerpts to Jonathan seeking his input; these pieces of text detail what I will refer to as the journey or quest narrative. Thus, while we are not privy to Jonathan's letters we infer his suggestions via Alex's own reflections on Jonathan's comments. Jonathan's narrative concerns what critics like Jenni Adams, Tracy Floreani, and Irmtraud Huber have commonly deemed the novel's "magical realist" strand, or what I will refer to as the Trachimbrod narrative. The story of Jonathan's ancestry begins in the eighteenth century and details the extraordinary events that befall the Jewish community until the destruction of Trachimbrod within the fantasy story collides with the historical reality of the German massacre. Like *Great House*, the novel circles around a poetics of indirection and estrangement that foregrounds questions of knowing and communicating. Grandfather, Jonathan, and Alex set off to locate Augustine, but instead, meet Lista (the woman the three men refer to as "not Augustine") and discover the secret history of grandfather; absences and gaps in historical knowledge, the absence of Augustine, for example, are not meant to be overwritten but signal meaning and serve as a source of imaginative creation. In addition to indicating historical gaps, fantasy pinpoints the contemporary generation's estrangement from history; the text's aesthetics of enchantment illuminate multiple levels of historical alienation. Similar to the function of the disparate narrative threads in *The Yiddish Policemen's Union*, the distinct narratives of *Everything is Illuminated* operate in relation to different narrative ontologies of estrangement—while we are naturalized into the wonder and impossibility of the

Trachimbrod story without question, the very purpose of the quest narrative (narrated and translated by Alex) is to question possibility and determine with exactitude what can be known.

Objects, too, sit at the center of *Everything is Illuminated*, propelling the plot and inhabiting a space between narratives. As in *Great House*, objects take on a precarious sensibility because of their symbolic and metaphysical weight for the storyteller and reader. Critics like Irmtraud Huber argue that the novel doesn't deconstruct certainties with the aim of revealing an underlying absence (118). Rather, Huber notes, "such absence becomes the origin of narrative" (118). Building on this concept, I place the material traces of such absence at the fore of the text's construction. Like Krauss's text, Safran Foer's novel is a meditation on making meaning through material traces as a third-generation writer. In a text that obsessively interrogates its own origins, one suspicious of claims to beginnings and ends, there is a clear, material marker of inspiration for the Trachimbrod narrative: the box of items marked "IN CASE" that Jonathan receives from Lista are the same items that spill from the wagon onto the page[67] as the Trachimbrod narrative begins, interpolating a lost history in their wake. Across the fantasy and mimetic narrative worlds of the text, enchanted objects that signify meaning in all possible worlds reveal the interrelationship between both modes as valuable to historical interpolation.

Many critics have commented on the fact the magical feats of the novel are confined to the Trachimbrod narrative, meaning that the potential for fabulation does not encroach on knowable history. Jenni Adams, for example, suggests that because the Trachimbrod narrative occupies a gap in the historical record, since all traces of the shtetl were destroyed during the war, this narrative occupies a historical dark area and as such, legitimate grounds for fabulation (30).

[67]These material traces that structure the narrative are also symbolically depicted on the page by the small graphic that opens the chapter.

Trachimbrod has literally been wiped out without a trace, evinced in Jonathan's bags of earth collected at the site. Alex describes of this moment,

> I implore myself to paint Trachimbrod, so you will know why we were so overawed. There was nothing except for two houses, and some wood on the ground, and pieces of glass, and children's toys, and photographs. When I utter that there was nothing, what I intend is that there was not any of these things, or any other things. [. . .] 'How could anything have ever existed here?' (184)

Thus, Adams contrasts the fabulation with those elements of the past that, in contrast, *are* accessible as objects of knowledge: the personal histories of Alex, Jonathan, and Grandfather. Adams argues that the novel draws a clear distinction between the two forms, "in this sense affirming the existence of a realm of knowable history by refusing to allow magical or transgressive elements to exceed the elaboration of historical 'dark areas'" (30). Irmtraud Huber echoes this kind of reading as she notes, "the past is indeed opened to creative interpretation, but only as long as the latter remains within the self-declared bounds of fiction" (117). These critics contend that fantasy risks imagining history only where there are gaps, thus adding a caveat to Bernard Malamud's contention that "Fantasy, since it is out of bounds of the ordinary, invites the writer to take chances, . . . to play with fire and magic. . . safely because controlled by art" (50). What these critics draw attention to is that to take chances "safely" means to do so only outside the boundaries of knowable history. But how do we approach the actual material objects of history, those pearls, strings, rings, books, papers, and maps that exist across narrative ontologies and storylines?

Those items in the "IN CASE" box cross the disparate narrative threads and question the confinement or "safety" of both modes of mediation—mimetic and fantastic. Meaning is created in the narrative interplay; objects become enchanted because of their relationship to both the "made-up" and "authentic" narrative strands. In *Everything Is Illuminated,* the functions of

fantasy and mimesis are not as neatly confined to the individual chapters as Adams and Huber make them out to be. In the Trachimbrod narrative, for example, the twins Chana and Hannah, just like the *Book of Dreams* and *The Book of Antecedents*, or the Slouchers and the Uprighters, are a pair that plays with notions of fantasy tropes and mimetic tropes. And in the journey narrative, Grandfather, Alex, and Jonathan are wedded to the delusion that Lista is Augustine, even though they *know* this is impossible. In this way fantasy tropes function as a kind of metafiction. Like the materiality of *Great House,* the novel and its distinct narrative modes becomes the *thing* that mediates the "middle ground" between history and reality, fantasy and realism, the affective and unemotional. As Landsberg attests, "for the event to become meaningful enough to retain as part of our intellectual and emotional archive—the archive on which our future actions might be based—it must be significant on a cognitive level and palpable in an individual, affective way" (138). Part of this work occurs as the thingness of the text as a whole comes into focus. Structural metaphors embedded in the title of *Great House*—a house of the mind, Jewish learning, temple worship, family—provide a material scaffolding for the novel. In *Everything Is Illuminated*, textuality itself signifies material presence. By including language, notes, charts, translation, ellipses, silences, names, books-within-books, letters, maps, and labels, different typographies, etc., the novel objectifies language and emphasizes its material representation. Alex's translations also reflect the way that language has a tangible, traceable quality. In this way, the novel's self-reflexivity draws attention to the materiality of various textual discourses and the intellectual and emotional threads that are required for memory and meaning. The purpose is not to construct an alternative history but to suggest various modes of knowing that are already intertwined and essential to accessing the past.

The juxtaposition of the Trachimbrod and journey narratives coupled with their mediation through Alex's letters enchants the historical record; they reflect the strange ability of *both* the fantasy and mimetic modes to mediate historical representation. While the narrative worlds are separated by their relationship to reality indicate, their construction is significantly interdependent and messier than critics like Adams and Huber suggest. Alex initially resists Jonathan's description of the Ukrainians "who were known for being terrible to the Jews" because "it does not say this in the history books," but by reading the Trachimbrod story Alex comes to acknowledge a different version of the historical record and confesses that he is both "angry" and "grateful" for Jonathan's imaginative diary (62; 160). Neither narrative is thus sufficient on its own terms; moving back and forth creates the "*unheimlich* (uncanny) feeling of being disrupted out of one's default sensory psychic-intellectual disposition" central to enchantment (Bennett 5).

Throughout the novel excavating the past occurs primarily through a play of objects and origins. As soon as the Trachimbrod narrative opens with the tumble of Trachim B's double-axle wagon into the river, ways of accounting for the accident multiply and undermine their own authenticity. Simultaneously, debris that spills from the wagon both accumulates on the surface and sinks to the bottom of the murky "deep green water" (10). As the reader orients herself to this fantasy shtetl and lost world, we must also orient ourselves to uncertainty about knowing; even as events unfold right before our eyes, we are not privileged to know or not know, but rather, we inhabit an uncertain, imaginary space where the wagon "either did or did not pin him [Trachim B] against the bottom of the Brod River" (10). The proliferation of things that rise and those that sink cannot be determined from the murky water, and neither can Yankel's death. Much of the accident remains shrouded in mystery. When Shloim dives in to recover Yankel's

body, the narrator remarks, "the rising wreckage became increasingly dense, until he couldn't see his hands in front of him. *Where? Where?*" (11). The citizenry are not even sure if Trachim B had a wife, nor if there were any witnesses to the event. Instead, the narrator introduces what becomes a familiar structure of meaning throughout the Trachimbrod narrative, a chain of linguistic signifiers that obscure origins and privilege deferral and distance. The young twins, Chana and Hannah, are silenced because of their age: "*Did the girls see anything*? Asked Avrum R" (12). Sofiowka responds, "*The girls saw nothing. I saw that they saw nothing*" (12). "*I saw that they saw*" creates an analogous structure to Safran Foer's role as a writer removed from direct witness in an already ambiguous accident set in a marvelous narrative frame (12).[68] And it is out of this wreckage that Brod, Jonathan's great-great-great-great-great-grandmother, is miraculously born: "In the middle of the string and feathers, surrounded by candles and soaked matches, prawns, pawns, and silk tassles that curtsied like jellyfish, was a baby girl, still mucus-glazed, still pink as the inside of the plum" (13). Brod is born from a womb of lost culture and into a play of genealogy. There is no single origin story privileged and presented in this chapter; rather, Brod is one item among the wreckage of material traces to which the Trachimbrod narrative gives life.

Impossibility in this space that is already removed from *our world* and set in a secondary world (or otherworld) becomes double-coded as it also refers to epistemologies; the usual marker of the fantasy mode to which we are accustomed as narrative ontology—impossibility—makes a comment about historical knowability. The narrator describes,

---

[68]In this way, my reading tends to agree with that of Katrim Amiam, who argues that the text "re-opens the past to a Pynchonesque realm of creative guesswork and endless (re-) interpretation, severely shaking what referential foundations the culture of Holocaust remembrance may continue to cherish" (156).

> It was March 18, 1791, when Trachim B's double-axle wagon either did or did not pin him against the bottom of the Brod River. The young W twins were the first to see the curious flotsam rising to the surface: wandering snakes of white string, a crushed-velvet glove with outstretched fingers, barren spools, schmootzy pince-nez, rasp-and boysenberries, feces, frillwork, the shards of a shattered atomizer, the bleeding red-ink script of a resolution: *I will. . . I will. . .* (8)

As an introduction to a Yiddish culture lost to history, these objects are imprinted with traces of former human life; the "outstretched fingers" of the glove, the spools barren with use, the pince-nez "schmootzy" with handling, literal human waste, all seem to have been snatched from bodies in motion and moments of utilization as they proliferate as evidence of the bodies of the past (8). Like the discarded things left behind in the lost-articles room of the Zamenhopf hotel, these objects point to the threads and highly textured fabric of a collective cultural body. Figured through the abject and random waste that spills from the illustration of Trachim B's wagon and onto the page, traces of this community as one of a larger community "beyond" mark a transcendent quality of Trachimbrod and connect the objects to history as well as the diaspora.

The objects amass alongside interpretations of what happened, thus their "thingness" in Brown's terms is enabled through their relationship to epistemologies. Chana, "the younger and less cautious twin," is delighted: "*It's turning up the most unusual things!* Chana laughed, splashing at the mass that grew like a garden around her. She picked up the hands of a baby doll, and those of a grandfather clock. Umbrella ribs. A skeleton key. The articles rose on the crowns of bubbles that burst when they reached the surface" (9). She exclaims, ". . . *Look at this! . . . And this!* Chana shrieked with joy, holding up a faded map of the universe" (9). But her sister Hannah, the "older and more cautious" one, "watched from the shore and cried" (9). Chana and Hannah's twinned reactions present two contradictory responses to the question, what do we do with the wreckage of the past? Respond with joy and openness in an all-out embrace?

Or do we remain wary, trapped in mourning and sadness? Here the age difference of the sisters, the older, cautious Hannah in contrast to the younger, ebullient Chana, reflects the generational divide as they present two extremes: a wary vigilance and its opposite, a boundless optimism in all things.

The floating debris of the first chapter foreshadows the bodies that float to the surface of the river at the end of the novel when Trachimbrod is bombed and destroyed by the Nazis (273). The scene has already been prophesied by Brod and chronicled in *The Book of Recurrent Dreams*. As a young soldier tosses the volumes onto the bonfire, one of the pages detailing her premonition comes loose: ". . . hundreds of bodies poured into the brod that river with my name. . . and it was not the explosions or scattering shrapnel that would be our death not the heckling cinders not the laughing debris but all of the bodies flailing and grabbing hold of one another. . ." (273). It is amidst this chaos that Safran and Zosha's child is born, but pulled under and trapped by its umbilical cord, the child dies attached to Zosha (273). Like Brod, Safran is born from tragedy and amidst the clutter of debris. The connection of these two scenes makes manifest the presence of absence attached to the object-world of text. As Shallcross reminds us, it is the piles and objects that have become the "dominant metonymy" of the Holocaust, where these things in the text indicate not actual memories but the *structure* of metonymic remembrance that dictates our relationship to the past.

While we may not have access to the central event in the novel, we do have access to its material traces, and figuring out how to make meaning from such traces structures the narrative, drives its plot, and intimates its overarching message (117). Shallcross describes the process through which victims were divested of belongings, noting that things "have served as material evidence that the Holocaust was not a figment of some collective imagination"; things provide

material evidence of the impossible (Shallcross 2). The debris that spills onto the first pages of the novel refers to those items that Alex, Grandfather, and Jonathan receive from the "IN CASE" box when they visit Lista or not Augustine. Like George Weisz, Lista is mired in mystery. As the three men struggle to determine whether or not the beautiful old woman they meet is Augustine, Alex writes, "she was so beautiful, like someone who you will never meet, but always dream of meeting, like someone who is too good for you" (149). The mysterious and uncertain sensibility surrounding Lista is one way to consider the "fantasy" and "mimetic" narratives as uncannily similar rather than distinct, complicating the basis for critical arguments proposed by Adams and Huber.

The objects in the "IN CASE" box, which they remark are similar to the "REMAINS" box in Augustine's house, also thread together these distinct worlds. The labeling of "IN CASE" also reflects, similar to Weisz's father's watch collection, the notion of history that is contingent upon the material—whether that take the form of texts or objects. When the three men arrive at Lista's house and she pulls out the boxes, Alex describes how "she moved her hands through the things in the box, like the things were water," collapsing the distance between the debris of the Brod river pictured in the opening scene of Jonathan's story and the substance of the present (152). As they reach their hands in, the men excavate the same items that inspire Jonathan's writing and spill across the opening pages: the pearl necklace, "the map of the world," the piece of white string, *The Book of Past Occurrences*, and the photograph of Jonathan's grandparents with Herschel and Grandfather. Jonathan comments that the necklace seems dirty, like it had been buried. Alex inquires, "what does it mean buried?" and Jonathan responds, collapsing the distinction between bodies and things, "put in the ground, like a dead body" (222).

As they rummage through the box, each takes a turn choosing an item. Alex declares, "I should choose something," because he desires "to discover how he would answer to the notion that Grandfather and I had the same privilege as he did to investigate the box" (222). Alex's reference to privilege and the conscientious effort made to take turns raises the question of who owns the past and the requisite consciousness involved in overcoming privilege. The scene comments on, and subsequently deconstructs, the hierarchy of access to Holocaust history, turning it into shared, communal play as the scene transforms into a game with unwritten rules: "we did not say it, but it was part of our game that you could not view in the box when you were selecting the thing to excavate" (223). In this memory game, we are reminded of the importance of play to contemporary historiography: "In consideration of the problematics of position and selection, together with the slippages in language itself, history is seen as an always divided construct and not a seamless record of the actual" (Edwards 261). Alex comments on an experiential knowledge he gleans from feeling the outlines, textures, and shapes of the past; while this is a knowledge that is not witnessed (the men "could not view in the box when you were selecting the thing to excavate" [223]), it is knowledge nonetheless: "some of the things that my hand touched were smooth, like marble or stones from the beach. Other things that my hand touched were cold, like metal, or warm, like fur. There were many pieces of paper. I could be certain of that without witnessing them" (223). Instead, Alex notes, "I was witnessing Jonathan while my hand investigated. A soft thing. A round thing" (225). "There are so many things," Grandfather comments, that they don't know how or what to choose. Sometimes the thing is grasped because of size and proximity ("I excavated what I excavated because it was the largest thing in the box" [223]), and once excavated, examined even out of boredom: Jonathan looks at the photograph "not because he was an interested person, but because there was nothing

else to do at the moment while I searched the box" (225). Yet others are excavated because of a preconceived relationship with the thing. Grandfather is disappointed when he chooses the photograph, for example: "ah a simple one," he says, "too unfortunate. I thought it felt like something different" (224-5).

It is this haphazard experience that unearths the critical narrative of Herschel's murder. There are two key photographic objects that, like the desk in *Great House,* both drive the plot and trigger memory—the first is the photograph of Augustine that motivates the fictional Jonathan's journey to Ukraine, the second is the found photo of grandfather as a young man with his family and his friend Herschel. As Marianne Hirsch describes the way the motif of photographs functions in Art Speigelman's *Maus*, she reveals that these visual relics share with Holocaust objects the same quality of "in-betweenness": "It is precisely the indexical nature of the photo, its status as relic, or trace, or fetish—its 'direct' connection with the material presence of the photographed person—that intensifies its status as harbinger of death and, at the same time and concomitantly, its capacity to signify life" (qtd. in Floreani 141). It is in this way that we can think of the objects, alongside the photographs, as both memorial and postmemorial objects. Hirsch continues, family photos related directly or indirectly to the Holocaust "connect . . . the past and the present, . . . because these family photographs are documents both of memory (the survivor's) and of what I would like to call postmemory (that of the child of the survivor whose life is dominated by memories of what preceded his/her birth)" (qtd. in Floreani 141). The impact of the postmemorial photograph can be seen in the narrative shift of Alex's translation. It is the photograph in the box marked "IN CASE" that propels grandfather to tell the story of

Herschel's murder.[69] At first, Alex narrates Grandfather's narrative; however, Alex switches to directly translating grandfather's story—Alex's "I" becomes the "I" of grandfather as generational distance collapses. The intergenerational transfer of objects begets the intergenerational transfer of narrative; or, as the Trachimbroders comment during the memory plague, "memory begat memory" (258).

As we have seen, these novels use objects to invoke the presence of absence in the intergenerational transfer of memory. As Landsberg's work reminds us, "we experience the objects as the sensuous trace of an absence" (135). When Alex, Grandfather, and Jonathan visit Augustine's house, the boxes "overflowing with items" trigger a profound, overwhelming presence of absence (Foer 147). Noting the piles of shoes and clothing of various sizes and fashions stacked from floor to ceiling, Alex describes, "all of the clothing and shoes and pictures made me to reason that there must have been at least one hundred people living in that room. The other room was also very populous" (147). Given Alex's propensity for mistranslation, the reference to "populous" conflates both the definition of "full of people; having many inhabitants; densely populated" with the more literal description of the boxes and items as "numerous" or "abundant" (OED). In the play of language made manifest through objects, the scene's boxes and labels[70] conjure the lost presence of the Trachimbrod inhabitants and their livelihood. As

---

[69]Reading photographs-as-objects through the lens of Bill Brown's "thing theory," Julia Breitbach highlights the strange, mythical power embedded in this enchanted materiality. She comments that "endowed with such mythical prowess, photos—especially those that are very dear or disturbing to their beholder—then radiate with a haunting, uncanny presence. A sense of transcendence or enchantment becomes oddly concrete when looking at such images, with the photograph indeed evoking some 'balmy elsewhere'" (58).

[70]The labels are also invested in a sense of play: "WEDDINGS AND OTHER CELEBRATIONS," "PRIVATES: JOURNALS/DIARIES/SKETCHBOOKS/UNDERWEAR," "SILVER/PERFUME/PINWHEELS," "WATCHES/WINTER,"

there are no longer people to care for, Lista cares for their objects with the same obsessiveness that Weisz shows for his clients and their lost items. As Landsberg explains of the piles of debris in the Holocaust Museum, these objects offer an "unmediated proximity" to the past precisely because of the strange interrelationship of the material with the immaterial trace (119). Landsberg writes, "if the experience of the Holocaust is precisely the experience of the loss or absence of people, then the objects stand in for this absence" (Landsberg 119). One's relationship to them becomes uncertain as one develops an "odd sense of spatial intimacy with those people who are at an unbridgeable distance, who are conspicuously absent" (Landsberg 133). Set in the realist frame of the novel, the objects initiate the experience of the "duration of uncertainty" characteristic of Todorov's fantastic, where the strange, otherworldy circumstances of historical trauma animate this aesthetic mode (25).

The objects in this scene, while part of the mimetic narrative frame, are no less enchanted. One such object is Rivka's ring, which is endowed with a sense of agency in order to remind the reader that relics of history provide the meaning out of which narrative is constructed. Jonathan assumes that Rivka, one of the murdered Trachimbroders, hid the ring as proof of her existence. Alex translates Lista's response in this strange and enchanted moment: "'No,' she said. 'The ring does not exist for you. You exist for the ring. The ring is not in case of you. You are in case of the ring'" (192). Jonathan falsely assumes that the past exists for us to create meaning, but Augustine corrects him: the ring does not exist for us to discover it, to use it to signify meaning and memory as Jonathan presumes, but rather, the ring and material fragments of history *create* meaning for us—they have the agency, and in this way they are enchanted as humans are de-

---

"HYGIENE/SPOOLS/CANDLES," "FIGURINES/SPECTACLES," "DARKNESS," and "DEATH OF THE FIRSTBORN" (147).

centered and the "REMAINS"[71] of history signify. The "You" exists to retrieve and receive the material traces of the past, where a sense of inevitability is built into the intergenerational transfer of objects and memories. Jonathan's narrative is not a way to impose meaning on the past but to testify to these objects' own ability to signify. The enchanted object in this scene testifies to the unbearable—what Jonathan cannot experience; the passing of the ring between Lista and Jonathan is the passing of a history that does not belong or "exist for" Jonathan but that he must nonetheless grasp and witness.

The Novel as Enchanted Object

Like the objects within the texts, the novels themselves are a kind of *thing* whose poetics of indirection constantly elude our possession. In this section I will focus on metafiction in *Great House* in order to consider those elements that contribute to the novel's thingness, and I will gesture to the presence of absence in both texts that in part accounts for this materiality. In *Great House,* metafictional attention to writers, the narrative framing of individual chapters, and the overall aesthetic structure highlight textuality and pose questions of how to objectify history that reflect Krauss's larger concerns. The "thingness" of writing is also emphasized through the metafiction of *Everything Is Illuminated,* especially the process of writing and revising that occurs in Jonathan and Alex's exchange of letters. While they do not depict Holocaust trauma directly, Krauss's narrators often refer to fragmented pieces of Holocaust history and thus, a series of Holocaust-adjacent narratives indirectly unfolds. The use of indirection or substitution of authenticity as a means to access or express the authentic is a theme of the novel *and* of writing in the text. In this way, the text relies on indirection as a mode of authentic communication. Driving across Europe with Yoav, Isabel relays the value of indirect

[71]A name of another box in Lista's apartment.

communication in their relationship: "it was impossible to talk to Yoav directly about anything to do with our relationship, whereas indirectly he could talk about the most raw and intimate things, the most dangerous things, the most painful and inconsolable but also the most hopeful" (145). Indirection in this description is a form of vital, authentic communication punctuated by the "most" or deepest emotional integrities, even though Isabel and Yoav are not discussing "anything to do with our relationship" (145). Isabel's reflection on the relationship between intimacy and indirection is also a comment on how the aesthetics of *Great House* rely on indirection to communicate Holocaust trauma; In Isabel's meditation on Yoav's ability to access emotional authenticity by indirect means, she suggests the way that the emotional inheritance of traumatic experience may be communicated obliquely. Jenni Adams reads the indirect communication of Holocaust survivors depicted in third-generation literature as a means of expressing "the truth of one's own inarticulable experience," and it is this mode that is inherited by Leah and Yoav (46). Curiously, indirection also offers the most hopeful outlook, a theme that relates not only to Yoav and Leah's communication but to the way the end of the novel closes around a hopeful, forward-looking moment through the prophecy of Yoav and Isabel's child (145). Only in the most in-between or indirect spaces does traumatic destruction intertwine with creation and redemption, reminding us of Malamud's first use of fantasy as a way to explore Holocaust trauma "safely because controlled by art" (*Talking Horse* 50).

The larger context of Krauss's role as author is reflected in her characters' struggle to communicate and complicated by questions of how to make another's story one's own. In a metanarrative gesture, for example, Nadia's doubt about her abilities as a writer is coupled with a moral doubt (203). She borrows the stories of others, like the story she hears the dancer (whom she barely knows) tell at a dinner party of the murder of his childhood friends, but questions her

culpability when she runs into him years later and the interaction is tinged with the dancer's condescension (30). Moving outward to Nadia's narrative framing signifies deeper historical questions surrounding guilt and storytelling. Looming in the background of Nadia's relationship to the desk, to herself, and to writing are questions of Nadia's complicity in relation to other traumas. As Nadia addresses her story to an unknown judge—"your honor"—her story embodies a confessional nature.[72] "*Talk to him,"* float the nurse's words, italicized, through the chapter. But to whom is she speaking? To Dov? To God? To the reader? And what exactly is the nature of her confession?

The story of Nadia's relationship to the desk and to Daniel Varsky, relayed through the confessional poetics of "All Rise," mimics the indirection of Malamud's stories as Nadia too invokes the structure of multidirectional memory to reframe Holocaust trauma. This "other" history of 20th century violence surrounds Varsky's disappearance, torture, and murder, presenting the question of how to mourn a man Nadia barely knew, but whose objects and story she has literally come to possess. The metatext makes analogous Krauss's task as an inheritor of traumatic history who constructs a *Great House* in its wake. In this way the desk—alongside the novel—symbolizes the strange paradox of "possession" and "dispossession": what is it like to own something that carries with it the mark of dispossession of an entire population? What does it mean to "possess"—by writing—a story that is not your own? By way of indirection, *Great House* reveals the self-doubt and moral confusion of Krauss's own burden as a writer in possession of and possessed by fragments of Holocaust history.

Conceptualizing the novel-as-object also undermines a purely realist orientation

[72]By the end of the novel, we presume Nadia is speaking to Dov, the judge and son of Aaron (the narrator of "True Kindness"), who has just returned to Israel after his mother's death.

towards the historical. This occurs through a dark sense of play in the form of a riddle that, like the desk, connects the disparate narratives. In addition to a quandary, there is also something innocent about the structure of a riddle, as it is commonly associated with children's games and wordplay. As a form of play, the riddle reflects the text's poetics of uncertainty more broadly. Brian Edwards offers a preliminary definition of play as "the principle of energy and difference which unsettles arrangements, promotes change and resists closure" (xiii). He continues, play "affirms freedom and possibility against restriction, resignation and closure, thus blurring distinctions between observation and participation, and between spectators and collaborators, distinctions which are far from clear" (Edwards 17). Alongside the desk, play structures the interrelation of disparate narrative threads, historical events, and otherwise disconnected characters. The desk, too, is implicated in riddles. Looking around the room at Varsky's furniture, Nadia contemplates, "I would be filled with a crushing despair, and sometimes just an oblique sadness, and sometimes I would look at it all and become convinced that it amounted to a riddle, a riddle he had left me that I was supposed to crack" (13). Involving Nadia without her consent, the riddle presumes a dialectical relationship that ends in a solution. And extending to the reader, play implicates those outside the novel's immediate frame as they, too, become accidental caretakers of history.

The central riddle opens the very last chapter of the novel, which is also significant as the first chapter narrated by Weisz. He begins by posing the following:

> A Riddle:[73] A stone is thrown in Budapest on a winter night in 1944. It sails through the air toward the illuminated window of a house where a father is writing a letter at his desk, a mother is reading, and a boy is daydreaming about an ice-skating race on the frozen Danube. The glass shatters, the boy covers his head,

[73]Riddles were a popular form of amusement for the early Hebrews, and the Talmud contains many riddles, some which have never been settled.

> the mother screams. At that moment the life they know ceases to exist. *Where does the stone land*? (283)

Opening the final chapter, the riddle invokes the unnamed event of Kristallnacht and indirectly communicates the essence of Weisz's childhood trauma and his own inarticulable history. Like the riddle of the furniture that implicates Nadia's story in a larger historical context, the riddle and the question "*Where does the stone land?*" implicates the reader as the narrative frame of enchantment entangles the reader in the uncertain poetics and events of the novel as a whole. Later in the chapter Weisz offers additional context for solving the riddle by delivering the prophecy narrative in the context of this play. "One day a child will be born," he declares, "A child whose provenance is the union of a woman and a riddle," meaning Isabel and Yoav, who has inherited this riddle from his father (289).

Calling attention to the riddle as a mode of play, Hasan-Rokem and Shulmam parse how the enigmatic form of the riddle is both disruptive and transformative:

> the riddle's form is dialogic, requiring the interaction of self and other. Two levels are joined in the question, only to be disentangled in the answer. The process involved is inherently enigmatic and also transformative: the transition effected leaves reality changed, restricted, its basic categories restated, recognized, affirmed. This is no less true for the inner reality of consciousness than for any external, 'objectified' world.' (30)

In *Great House,* what is transformed in this dialogic interplay? The story of the riddle itself emphasizes the intersection of realist and antirealist approaches to the Holocaust. The riddle centralizes the trajectories of the desk and the stone to connect characters across temporalities, gaps, and historical narratives; it is through this materiality that the text itself metafictionally becomes a "great house." Using the stone, the reader links the destruction of the first Temple in Jerusalem to the events of Kristallnacht and the broken window scene in Arthur's apartment (which I will turn to shortly), where it lands, finally, in the otherworldly space of David's

bedroom as prophesied by Weisz. And relying on the desk, the reader develops a chronology that begins in Budapest, 1944, when the Nazis confiscate the desk from the Weiszs' apartment. As Arthur notes, Lotte Berg then receives it as a gift from a former lover sometime before she gifts it to Daniel Varsky in 1970, who then places it in Nadia's care in 1972. Nadia watches over the desk for twenty-seven years, until Leah collects it from Nadia in 1999 and secures it in a New York storage facility. Across these trajectories, the novel's play with realist and antirealist modes draws the reader into its already dialogic frame. As Rothberg explains, traumatic realist texts "search for a form of documentation beyond direct reference and coherent narrative but do not fully abandon the possibility for some kind of reference and some kind of narrative" (100-1). Attempting to solve the riddle, the reader is drawn into this dialogic frame and enters into a textual covenant with the "great house" of the novel itself.

Riddles have an ancient history in the context of Jewish textuality. The first Jewish riddle is attributed to the biblical narrative about Samson, in which the answer reveals an unbridgeable distance between the personal experience of Samson and the Philistines, who have no way of knowing the answer except by bribery. Samson poses the following to thirty Philistine guests at his wedding-feast, promising thirty sheets and thirty changes of clothing if they could answer: "Out of the eater came forth food, and out of the strong came forth sweetness" (Judges 14.14). The Philistines bribe Samson's wife (also a Philistine) for the answer, and she tells them that he is describing his personal experience slaying a lion and discovering a honeycomb inside. The solution is something the Philistines never could have known by way of logic—they would have had to actually go out and find the lion. Knowledge of the answer is thus divorced from experience. Echoing through Weisz's riddle, the Samson story reflects the

impossibility of fully knowing—by experience—even if we are already implicated in locating the origin of the stone and following its historical trajectory.

The riddle immediately conjures the scene of the broken window in Arthur's apartment, affirming the already strange suspicion that the stone thrown through Arthur's window is not innocent of historical weight and exists in relation to other characters and narratives. After Arthur has gone to visit Mrs. Fiske, the woman who adopted Lotte's child, he returns to London to find that the front window of his house has been smashed. It is not merely coincidence that this event occurs directly after Arthur's attempt to make sense of his and Lotte's past, as enchantment—for the first person narrator—mediates uncertainty. Arthur describes,

> From the large hole a magnificent, delicate web of cracks radiated outwards. It was something to behold, and a feeling of awe came over me. On the floor inside, lying among the broken glass, I found a rock the size of a fist. Cold air filled the living room. It was the special stillness of the scene that shook me, the kind that comes only in the wake of violence. (271)[74]

For the reader, the bizarre description of the broken glass at once signifies a clue to solving the riddle and indirectly invokes the horror of Kristallnacht. The language of this scene immediately shifts to a different register as if to catapult the reader out of her "default sensory-psychic-intellectual disposition" (Bennett 5). From the cracks radiating outward the reader senses the vectors of history that continue to influence the present, and at its core—the gaping hole—Arthur perceives something "magnificent" and experiences "awe"; he describes being transfixed under a

[74]As Berger and Milbauer argue, Krauss's novels "avoid the realities of concentration camps with crematoria chimneys belching out human ashes; or ghettos encircled by barbed wire and high walls to reinstate and reinforce the millennia-old practice of separating Jews from the rest of humanity. . ." (65). In other words, the experiences and iconography, such as the concentration camp universe, that have come to define first-generation authors and the literature of survivors are absent from Krauss's novels. What Krauss does, however, is embed archetypal events and symbols of the Holocaust into her stories.

"spell" that breaks only when he sees a spider crawling across the wall (271). Thus, for Arthur, the moment of enchantment occurs through defamiliarization; the awe stops time before the presence of the spider breaks the spell and jolts Arthur back into the present. Emphasizing an emotional inheritance divorced of experience, this strange description that indirectly refers to Holocaust trauma is couched in the language of wonder and enchantment. The "broken glass" both refers to Kristallnacht and does not; the transfixed, magnificent description of such a violent event as "something to behold" attaches an experience of wonder, in the present, to an imagined history of atrocity (271). Enchantment marks the loss of authentic experience that registers an unconscious emotional inheritance of trauma, thus becoming a stand-in or substitute for lived memory that invokes that strange combination of delight and disturbance.

The narrative's fixation with the window continues after it has been repaired; that is, the window may show no damage cosmetically but arrests Weisz's attention nonetheless. When Weisz knocks on Arthur's door a few days later, the glazier has fixed the window but there is a strange sense of recognition of something larger that transpires. Arthur describes,

> We sat in silence. That window, he said at last, gazing behind me. How did it break? I was surprised. How did you know? I asked. For a moment I wondered whether there was not something sinister I'd missed in him. The glass is new, he said, and the caulking is fresh. Someone threw a stone through it, I told him. His sharp features became softened by a thoughtful expression, as if my words had awakened a memory in him. (275)

While history remains shattered, broken, and unfixable, this moment of resonance attempts repair alongside the glazier's handiwork. In the late 1980s and early 1990s Jean-François Lyotard objected to coherent narrative modes of representation; instead he favored "allusive,

oblique, and broken models" (5).[75] Similarly, Geoffrey Hartman warns, "popular representations emerge that are uncomfortably close to fantasies that may have played their part in the genocide" (qtd. in Kaplan 5). Both Lyotard and Hartman argue that "to avoid forgetting one must always allow the rumble of the past to persist through fragmentation and disruption" (qtd. in Kaplan 5). In this scene that serves as an oblique reference to Kristallnacht, the mode of enchantment encourages the reader, alongside Arthur, to grapple with the question of what and how we perceive the past, a question that illuminates the distance and displacement of the original event. Weisz's awareness is just barely perceived across his face, and the reader is further alienated from his direct memory through our perception of Weisz's recognition. The scene does not provide an oblique or broken model of the original event, but rather, it frames Weisz's perceptions and implicates the reader's own unstable recognition of pieces of history in the process.

The key to solving the riddle is located in the story of ben Zakkai and one of the meanings of the "Great House," that is, the transformation of Jewish material sacrifice into intellectual study and the world of ideas. Just as Yoav will inherit this riddle from his father, Weisz has inherited one from his own. "Great house" refers to the name of the school that the great first-century rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai constructed in Yavne after the Romans besieged Jerusalem. As Weisz tells Arthur, in return for his prophecy of Roman victory ben Zakkai was permitted to go to Yavne to open a school:

> Later, in that small town, he received the news that Jerusalem had burned. The Temple was destroyed. Those that survived were sent into exile. In his agony, he

[75]Lyotard insists that "it cannot be represented without being missed, being forgotten anew, since it defies images and words. . . It is to be feared that word representations (books, interviews) and thing representations (films, photographs) of the extermination of the Jews and of 'the jews,' by the Nazis bring back the very thing against which they work unceasingly" (qtd. in Kaplan 5).

> thought: What is a Jew without Jerusalem? How can you be a Jew without a nation? How can you make a sacrifice to God if you don't know where to find him? In the torn clothes of the mourner, ben Zakkai returned to his school. He announced that the court of law that had burned in Jerusalem would be resurrected there, in the sleepy town of Yavne. That instead of making sacrifices to God, from then on Jews would pray to Him. He instructed his students to begin assembling more than a thousand years of oral law.
>
> Day and night the scholars argued about the laws, and their arguments became the Talmud, Weisz continued. What is a Jew without Jerusalem? Scholars forgot about this question until, after he died, his answer slowly revealed itself: Turn Jerusalem into an idea. Turn the Temple into a book, a book as vast and holy and intricate as the city itself. Bend a people around the shape of what they lost, and let everything mirror its absent form. Later his school became known as the Great House, after the phrase in Book of Kings: *He burned the house of God, the king's house, and all the houses of Jerusalem; every great house he burned with fire.* (279)

In order to resurrect the presence of Jerusalem and the Temple, ben Zakkai rebuilt what was lost by turning places into ideas and arguments so that Jewishness becomes embedded in thoughts, aesthetics, and textuality.[76] The proliferation of the text's holes, the stories around which the characters "bend," deepen to include the first destruction. The temple is not immediately resurrected with the meticulousness of a historian or architect, but rather, an ontological shift marks the movement of a world centered around the material and sacrificial to one that revolves around the theoretical and textual. It is the novel's poetics of uncertainty that ultimately register this shift. But neither can we exist in the realm of ideas without any conception of its origins in

[76]In Kabbalistic teachings, the idea of the void or emptiness is linked to creation. Krauss reflects on this idea that regeneration or "enhancement" comes out of nothing in interviews: "I think these abysses that they find themselves in give up this opportunity for revelation, for transcendence, I think, for transformation. I'm attracted to them not for their darkness, ultimately, at all. I think everything I write, strange to say this, but I feel hopeful about all the potential. I feel hopeful about the magnitude of life and all we're given to feel. I'm not shy about touching and talking about how painful it is. But I have this hope that somehow, in dwelling in all that, there's this opportunity for some kind of enhancement" ("Interview" n. pag.).

the material; meanings of *Great House* thus bring full circle the relationships between materiality and metaphysics, objects and things. Signifying both a physical/material and spiritual/immaterial presence, the title "Great House"[77] immediately indicates a slippage between what is knowable and unknowable.

In *Everything Is Illuminated*, objects and letters also signal a slippage between stable ways of knowing as they undermine the title's fantastical implication that "everything" is capable of illumination and gesture towards the text itself as an object. In a pivotal scene from the Trachimbrod narrative, which is of course aligned with the mode of fantasy, Brod converses with her surroundings as she objects to the inability of these items to signal meaning beyond themselves. In the fantasy realm, objects customarily perform in wondrous capacities and are performative in the Tolkinian sense as they cast spells and enable magical feats (60). However, objects in Brod's life actively resist signification, failing to embody the same kind of agency as we saw Rivka's ring perform in the journey narrative. As such, the narrative realms reveal inconsistencies over ways of knowing and interpolation. In this particular scene, Brod yearns for magic and release but feels stymied by the world "that was not for her" (83). The narrator describes:

> She felt as if she were brimming, always producing and hoarding more love inside her. But there was no release. Table, ivory, elephant charm, rainbow, onion, hairdo, mollusk, Shabbos, violence, cuticle, melodrama, ditch, honey, doily. . . None of it moved her [. . .] to each she would have to say, *I don't love you.* Bark-brown fence post: *I don't love you*. Poems too long: *I don't love you*. Nothing felt

[77]There are a proliferation of meanings implied by the title that I would also like to connect to this slippage. In biblical Hebrew, words often had multiple meanings and house or "baayit" refers to family as well as a dwelling, so the "family" that makes up the novel's "great house" gestures to communal history rather than a family connected by blood ties. The title also implies the "great house" of the mind, and the novel references Freud to solidify this definition. In some of the first conceptualizations of how memory works, the idea of the mind as a house is also referenced.

> like anything more than what it actually was. Everything was just a thing, mired completely in its thingness. (80)

Here thingness is not, as it appears in Brown's formulation, a metaphysical property but rather what Brown would actually classify in terms of objects. Unlike Weisz's clients who feel a sense of release when they come in contact with the objects of the past (or rather, their surrogates), Brod does not feel any connection or release in relation to the objects that make up her world, the "table, ivory, elephant charm, rainbow," etc. (80). Where is the hidden otherness in these objects, that metaphysical excess that constitute "thingness" in Brown's terms and the way that *things* are made to feel strange and unfamiliar in the opening scene as similar objects spill into the river? This dimensionality emerges from "a particular subject-object relation" ("Thing Theory" 4), but here that subject-object relation is inaccessible; Brod's love literally has no object and she declares "*I don't love you*" to the various items (80). The prose's exactitude accounts for the items exactly as they present themselves to Brod; that is, in failing to account for the presence of absence, which is crucial to meaning-making throughout the novel, no love transpires.

Brod and Yankel reveal the paradox underlying this lack of connection as they "reciprocated the great and saving lie—that our love of things is greater than our love for our love of things" (83). Their attachment to their "love for our love [of things]" (83) privileges the endless chain of signifiers central to Baudrillard's formulation that opens this chapter—the concept that "substituting signs of the real for the real" prevails in postmodern culture (2). Thus, this kind of meaning-making comes at a cost and one that implicates and undermines the recourse to the fantasy elements in the novel as a whole: Brod lives in isolation, "in a world once-removed from the one in which everyone else seemed to exist" (80).

Structuring narratives around enchanted objects or attesting to the material traces of history through leftover debris directly addresses the historical gaps and the legacy of loss that haunt third-generation writers. Things, precisely because they have been "deprived of their ability to speak," address the emotional inheritance of absence and loss (Landsberg 139). As Landsberg suggests, if an iconography of the Holocaust is emerging, "an iconography that is all about objects and the disembodied and the dispossessed, about things that have been deprived of their ability to speak, then it might help us find ways to address our local traumas, our national *différend*" (139). Attending to things as narrative structure and locations of affective experience mediates cataclysmic loss. As Adorno writes, these *things* attest to what has been left out of the historical register:

> If Benjamin said that history had hitherto been written from the standpoint of the victor, and needed to be written from that of the vanquished, we might add that knowledge must indeed present the fatally rectilinear succession of victory and defeat, but should also address itself to those *things* which were not embraced by this dynamic, which fell by the wayside—what might be called the waste products and blind spots that have escaped the dialectic. It is in the nature of the defeated to appear, in their impotence, irrelevant, eccentric, derisory. What transcends the ruling society is not only the potentiality it develops but also all that which did not fit properly into the laws of historical movement. Theory must deal with cross-gained [*sic*], opaque, unassimilated material, which as such admittedly has from the start an anachronistic quality, but which is not wholly obsolete since it has outwitted the historical dynamic. This can most readily be seen in art. (151, emphasis mine)

Remarking on the role of the "defeated" in history, Adorno argues that it is art that sees into the blind-spot of written history. Furthermore, he remarks that it is the "*things*. . . which fell by the wayside" that even the "dialectic" has ignored—the "impotent, irrelevant, eccentric, derisory"—that should interest the theorist (Adorno 151, emphasis mine). There is a strategy of resistance embedded in the object iconography that spans these texts. A conservator who oversees the long-term master plan for preserving the site of the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum remarks,

"We are doing something against the initial idea of the Nazis who built this camp. . . They didn't want it to last. We're making it last" (Donadio n. pag.).

Great House takes as its subject the "waste products" that are not waste or refuse as we might commonly think, but waste that in that sense that for Adorno has escaped the dialectic. The objects that Weisz devotes his life to repossessing are some of those that were loaded on to the Nazi Gold Train the SS used to evacuate Jewish possessions as the Soviet troops advanced toward Hungary (114). The "hulking mass" (22) that is the multidrawer writing desk is a symbol of bourgeois solidity that was not supposed to have survived, just as the objects of Trachim B's wagon were intended to remain buried alongside the village of Trachimbrod. Invoking both the monstrous and unspeakable, the desk signifies the larger impossibility of knowing and representing the Holocaust; at the same time, as the protagonist and metonymic marker of Holocaust trauma, it necessitates such knowing. And the refuse that gives rise to the narrative creation in *Everything Is Illuminated* are those would-be buried objects of the Trachimbroders, unearthed by chance and imagination. As a protagonist or origin of narrative creation, these fictionalized objects defy the historical trajectory intended by the Final Solution that aimed to destroy the physical and cultural presence of European Jewry.

CHAPTER 3

"STRANGE TIMES TO BE A JEW": THE REDEMPTION OF MEYER LANDSMAN IN *THE YIDDISH POLICEMEN'S UNION*

In the first edited volume devoted wholly to Michael Chabon's oeuvre, the editors note that in comparison to his contemporaries (David Foster Wallace, Junot Díaz, or Jonathan Franzen), Chabon has been overlooked (Kavadlo ix). In comparison to his contemporaries, he is considered a less serious writer (Kavadlo ix).[78] This belief betrays the characteristically un-serious genres (SF, fantasy, detective fiction, romance) Chabon mixes into his novels. Critics like Ruth Wisse use playfulness as a way to deride the political nature of Chabon's work, calling his political opinions about the state of Israel "frequently sophomoric" and genre-mixing a poor cover-up for a "limp human drama" ("Yiddish" n. pag.). As we have seen, as early as Malamud, Jewish writers turned to fantasy as a means of illuminating reality. The playful code-switching of *The Yiddish Policemen's Union* raises serious questions about the construction of history, specific historical narratives, and perceptions of reality. In this space, genre-mixing is not

[78]Academic scholars who attend to *The Yiddish Policemen's Union* do so by positioning it alongside another of a similar genre. These scholars look to Chabon to explore new avenues of allohistorical or detective fiction and consider Chabon's language almost as an afterthought. Very few published essays on Chabon's work centralize his prose. For example, the excellent essay by Adam Rovner, "Alternate History: The Case of Nava Semel's *IsraIsland* and Michael Chabon's *The Yiddish Policemen's Union*" (2011) beautifully theorizes the novel, but it is ultimately Rovner's concept of allohistory that is on display. Or, more recently, Theodore Martin's "The Long Wait: Timely Secrets of the Contemporary Detective Novel" (2012) turns to *The Yiddish Policemen's Union* and Vikram Chandra's *Sacred Games* (2006) to show how the novel revises temporality at work in the detective genre. In these instances, the text itself is subjugated to the loftier aims of scholarship that refashions generic codes.

merely additive, but rather, the intersections of generic codes constitute a space in between genre and history. As Chabon attests, "many of the most-interesting writers of the past seventy-five years or so have, like Trickster, found themselves drawn, inexorably, to the borderlands," by which he means "the spaces between genres, in the no man's lands" (*Maps and Legends* 13).[79] For a Jewish American writer, these no man's lands resonate in stories of biblical exile and dispersal.

The strange premise of the novel has roots in allohistory,[80] a genre that posits a changed outcome for a historical event and uses narrative techniques to speculate on the aftereffects (Ransom 60). The genre shares with science fiction or fantasy the secondary world-making of these dystopian or utopian literatures (Ransom 60). Allohistory is itself a genre blurred at the edges, one suspended between imaginary and actual historical experience. In Chabon's particular scenario, the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki never happened; instead, they are replaced by a single strategic atomic bombing of Berlin to end the war quickly. The U.S. Government, sobered by the slaughter of two [*sic*] million Jews in Europe and the plight of the refugees of Palestine and Europe, grants the Sitka Settlement "interim" status as a federal district (29). Subsequently, the immigrant Jews set up a semi-autonomous republic amidst the indigenous Tinglit tribe, creating enormous cultural conflict; despite that conflict, Sitka develops

---

[79]In his essay "Trickster in a Suit of Lights: Thoughts on the Modern Short Story" published in his first book of essays *Maps and Legends* (2008), Chabon remarks on the affinities between the writer and the Trickster of mythology, dazzlingly distilled in his view by Lewis Hyde's *Trickster Makes This World* (1997). As summarized by Chabon, Hyde's work concerns the trickster of mythology—Hermes among the Greeks, the Northmen's Loki, the Native Americans' Coyote and Raven and Rabbit, the Africans' Eshu and Legba and Anansi, Krishna, the peach-stealing Monkey of the Chinese, and Satan (*Maps and Legends* 12).

[80]Also referred to as counterhistories, alternative histories, uchronias, counterfactuals, parahistories, or *what-ifs* (Rovner 132).

into a major Yiddish-speaking metropolis with five million residents who now face the upcoming Reversion. *The Yiddish Policemen's Union* is set in late 2007 in the chaotic last few weeks before the Reversion, the date when the American government will reclaim possession of Sitka, Alaska and the second-generation Jewish settlers will be dumped once again into the sea of diaspora.

"Strange times to be a Jew," the narrator refrains throughout Michael Chabon's *The Yiddish Policemen's Union* (2007). So if these are strange times for Landsman and the Jews of Sitka, they are stranger still for the reader who finds herself navigating a mashup of generic codes run amok. Additional feats of genre-bending accentuate the strangeness of the allohistorical premise. Embracing the pulpy style of the hard-boiled detective genre, the story opens with a murder of a young, unknown Jew who has been shot in the head in the same flophouse hotel where Landsman has been living. If there is a central narrative momentum to the story, it is organized around Landsman and his half-Tinglit, half-Jewish partner and cousin Berko Shemets's search for the killer as they investigate the case. Landsman and Shemets soon discover that the dead yid is Mendel Shpilman, son of the corrupt mafioso-esque Villain, Orthodox Verbovor Rabbi Hesker Shpilman. Mendel Shpilman was a genius child, a chess prodigy and scholar who could read Hebrew, Aramaic, Judeo-Spanish, Latin, and Greek by the time he was eight or nine. He was thought to be the Tzaddik Ha-Dor, the righteous man of his generation, the messiah sent to redeem the world.

As the narratives unfold, so too does the ancient story of biblical belief that the sacrifice of a red heifer will bring about the coming of the messiah. But in this version, biblical narratives are intertwined with a terrorist plot orchestrated by the Verbover Jews and backed by U.S. interests to blow up the sacred Muslim shrine in Jerusalem *Qubbat As-Sakhrah* (the Dome of the

Rock) and reclaim Eretz Yisrael. Forcing their American-backed hand into history, the Verbover Jews have engineered a red cow to compel the coming of the messiah. In this unstable landscape, affixing meaning leads to dangerous repercussions. When Landsman cracks the case, he finds his own Uncle guilty of murder; but here the reader uncovers a slippery sign designed to entice and elude. Even the murder is not a murder, but a "mercy killing," carried out at Mendel's request: "He didn't want to be what he wasn't, he didn't know how to be what he was" (404). And all along, romance unfolds. Landsman ruminates on his failed marriage, the still-tender loss he suffers for his aborted child, and his lingering feelings for his ex-wife Bina, who has just returned to Sitka as his new supervisor to oversee the closing of any outstanding cases before the bureau will shut down in just a few weeks.

"Nothing is clear about the upcoming Reversion, and that is why these are strange times to be a Jew," clarifies the novel's protagonist, Meyer Landsman, a hard-boiled, down-and-out detective who has just arrived at the scene of a crime (6). In Sitka, times are strange because the future of the Jews is uncertain. But Sitka is *already* a strange non-reality, a fictional space made possible only in the map of Chabon's imagination. What if, Chabon posits, Anthony Dimond, the Alaskan Delegate to the House of Representatives—who was on his way to killing the Alaskan Settlement Act—was himself accidentally killed by a drunk taxi-driver? (27). In this antireality,[81] the Alaskan Federal District of Sitka Islands becomes an asylum for the large number of Jewish Holocaust refugees after the newly-formed Republic of Israel is invaded by Arab armies in 1948 and collapses (29).

There are many ways that strangeness bears meaning and carries interpretive weight throughout the novel, and this chapter examines why strangeness sits at the center of Chabon's

[81]Antireality is a term I use to describe the purposive function of secondary-world fiction.

project. Strangeness in part describes the exceptional experiences of the Sitkaites given their uncertain circumstances. But also, strangeness describes the idea of genre, and its governing rules, as estranged from itself;[82] genre-bending also foregrounds the strange, unfamiliar space of the novel's textuality suspended between romance, allohistory, high fantasy, and detective fiction. This chapter illustrates what it means to estrange the strange, by which I mean to upend the characteristics of narrative estrangement as they customarily exist in distinct domains of genre. As Simon Spiegel explains, "to *truly see* things again we must overcome our 'blind' perception, and this is only possible when they are made strange again" (369). Here we return to Shklovsky's concept of defamiliarization, except that it is history made to appear strange by dismantling the established habits of perception (779).

Postmodernism presses questions of ontology and estrangement to the fore; questions already embedded in secondary-world fiction and allohistory become doubly significant in a narrative environment whose premise is instability and fractured histories. As such, the reader is dislodged from expectations—regarding defamiliarization, Holocaust literature, and historical narratives—as she must navigate the total instability of the novel. In *Great House*, Krauss embeds archetypal events and symbols of the Holocaust into her stories to highlight the burden of emotional inheritance for the third-generation. Chabon's text similarly draws on known historical narratives, but to different ends. The strange commensurability of fantasy genres combines to shatter the predictability of historical narratives, thus creating space for marginalized histories that are either long forgotten, overwritten, or marginal to mainstream

[82]Following Fredric Jameson, I refer to genre as a tacit agreement or contract that describes the expectation between reader and text. In the mid-seventies Jameson began to detect a resurgence in plot and subsequently turned to the history of the romance genre in order to formulate this position. He writes that genres have customarily been described as "contracts" between a writer and his reader.

accounts. These narratives are integrated into the novel's hybrid form alongside familiar narratives of the establishment of the state of Israel in 1948, the trauma of two million [*sic*] Jewish victims, and the context of diaspora. In turn, the surprising combinations "delight and disturb" the present, offering alternatives (sometimes correctives) to familiar tropes of international politics, ethnic and national identities, and the broader interpolation of histories. For example, the long-forgotten story of the King-Havenner bill reveals the self-interest of a U.S. wartime government with little interest in offering humanitarian support to European Jewish refugees (Berman 271-2). The plot of Zionist terrorists unmasks the need to remember narratives of Jewish violence carried out by Jewish extremists alongside narratives of Holocaust trauma, revealing that such memories are not mutually exclusive but multidirectional.

As I will go on to explore, genre-mixing in the novel results in ontological strangeness: the reading experience and the characters inhabit a hybrid or liminal zone between genre, reality, history, and time open to enchantment. Chabon plays with the meaning of estrangement as he blends what are usually distinct ontologies of genre: the function of a detective plot is to *detect* the strange; the function of the sf/fantasy genre is to *normalize* the strange; the function of allohistory is to *estrange* history. In this borderland, tropes of the detective novel invested in epistemological questions (how we know what we know) "tip over"[83] into ontological questions central to postmodernism and fantasy genres (what is a world?) and vice versa. Throughout this chapter I will show how estrangement and enchantment are much more aligned than dissimilar in nature, and how this alignment mediates the reader's relationship to the past. In the mashup of

[83]McHale writes, "push epistemological questions far enough, and they 'tip over' into ontological questions. By the same token, push ontological questions far enough and they tip over into epistemological questions—the sequence is not linear and unidirectional, but bidirectional and reversible" (11).

allohistory and detective fiction, the reader is estranged from the globalized, normalizing function of estrangement that usually occurs in secondary-world fiction.

Etymologically, "strange" refers both to persons, language, or customs that are foreign or alien and to the "unfamiliar, abnormal, or exceptional to a degree that excites wonder or astonishment" (OED). In the concept of "strange times" used throughout *The Yiddish Policemen's Union*, Chabon collapses the derivation of strange as foreigner (someone who is alienated or does not belong) and wonder (in the sense of amazement and astonishment). Foreignness and alienation beget wonder and astonishment, so that what results is the transformation of an alienated, unfeeling detective to an almost-romantic hero. In its mashup of strangeness and reality, religion and detection, wonder and incredulity, the "slipstream" nature of Chabon's text foregrounds aesthetic enchantment to defamiliarize historical narratives.

As I have described earlier, Malamud turns to fantasy to reveal reality as it really is, upending rationality as a privileged mode of meaning-making, "making strange" the worlds of the protagonists, and blurring the boundary between the "real" psychological responses of the protagonists and the "fantastic" nature of the ghosts and apparitions. Here I relied on the model of defamiliarization that describes the way perception and defamiliarization work in Tolstoy's fiction (also Todorov's fantastic), which Shklovsky turns to as an example. But *ostranenie* does not remain stable across genre. In high fantasy, for example, entire worlds like Narnia or Middle-earth are built out of the fabric of strangeness.[84] In secondary-world fiction governed by

[84]The concept of estrangement has been significant for fantasy and science fiction ever since Darko Suvin defined SF as the "genre of cognitive estrangement" in his *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction* (1979), based on earlier theories of *ostranenie* developed by the Russian formalist Victor Shklovsky and German author Bertolt Brecht's concept of the estranging effect that he called *Verfremdungs Effekt* (Spiegel 369). See Darko Suvin *Metamorphosis of Science Fiction* (1979).

the laws of fantasy (science fiction, fantasy), strangeness is normalized; that is, given the fantastic premise of Middle-earth, the reader remains open to the ontology of fantasy, comes to expect the appearance of hobbits, elves, and a magic ring, and needs not question their existence. This is essentially the reverse in the narrative world of detective fiction, where ordinary objects take on extraordinary significance as the reader, alongside the detective, canvasses the storyworld for hidden and potential meaning. Strangeness is supposed to be normalized (fantasy, sf) *and* on full display (detective, mystery); thus, because the novel inhabits realms of both sf and detective fiction, Chabon's play with "strangeness" results in a constant narrative tension between the strange and the familiar.

For example, the heightened display of strangeness characteristic of the detective genre describes how meaning is made in a story where a detective surveys the narrative world for anything out of place; in this world that is characteristic of *The Yiddish Policemen's Union,* all items in the victim's room are "made strange" as potential clues. Take Landsman's initial inspection of Shpilman's room: he identifies the chess set, the creased copy of *Three Hundred Chess Games,* and of course, the tefillin that served as Shpilman's "tourniquet of choice" when shooting up as valuable clues (23).[85] Regarding the world of detective fiction, Peter Hühn explains, "the assumption of, and the search for, a hidden story inscribed in everyday reality has the effect of transforming the world of the novel into a conglomeration of potential signs" (454). This means that "all phenomena may lose their usual automatically ascribed meanings and

[85]Tefillin are Jewish phylacteries, a set of small black leather boxes containing scrolls of parchment inscribed with verses from the Torah. They are worn by observant Jews during weekday morning prayers and are affixed and bound tightly to the body on the head and arm with leather straps.

signify something else: a curried dish for supper might be a cover for a poison" (455). Hühn continues, "by effectively deautomatizing signification and making things 'strange,' the enigma of the murder endows the everyday world with a rich potentiality of unsuspected meanings" (455). However, in the *Yiddish Policemen's Union,* the sf genre, the historical circumstances of Reversion (these are "strange times"), the ethnic particularity of the novel ("strange times *to be a Jew*"), has already cued the reader's expectation of uncertainty. In the mashup of allohistory and detective fiction, thematic and generic estrangement, the text obscures the origins of strangeness and privileges uncertainty.

In addition to being the constant reminder of "strange times," the detective function of the text precludes the imaginary and imaginable histories from becoming fully naturalized into the framework of the story. The atmosphere when the story begins is self-consciously, deliberately attuned to strangeness. As he leads Landsman to the dead yid in room 208, the night manager of the Hotel Zamenhof twice admits that he had a "funny feeling" when he first met Lasker. A few moments later, when Landsman calls Shemets to relay the news, his partner remarks, "You sound a little off, Meyer . . . " (7). Amidst this off-kilter mood Landsman and Shpringer, his number two, check out the hotel basement and the room for any valuable clues. Looking around, Landsman discovers Lasker's tefillin, which the detectives deduce from the marks on Lasker's arm was his preferred strap for tying off his heroin habit (23). The story stages a moment of *ostranenie* as Shpringer, inspecting the tefillin, "pulls it out of the zip and holds it up between two fingers as if it might bite" (23). Chabon takes great care in presenting the object as one out of place with its surroundings; Shpringer's tentative grasp, its suspension in mid-air, and teeth-like quality all present the object at an unwelcome distance from the downtrodden, secular space of the murder scene.

As it takes on new significance in the detective plot, the tefillin becomes doubly estranged: it is an important clue, *and* a sign of religious devotion made odd as it is divorced from its context as a commandment binding Jews to God. It is a signifier made extraordinary through its absence of religious significance (in this particular context) and distance from its original, signified meaning. Tefillin house small slips of paper on which a scribe has carefully copied four passages from the Torah, "but there is nothing inside the box on Emanuel Lasker's prayer strap. It's just the thing he chose to dilate the vein in his arm" (23). As a "valuable clue," it signifies Lasker's former ties to the Verbovers and propels Landsman's discovery of Lasker's identity as Mendel Shpilman (21). Like the enchanted objects in Krauss's and Safran Foer's narratives, the tefillin also functions as an inanimate object that animates narratives (the detective plot, for one; the role of Orthodox Jewry in Sitka, for another).

This play of familiar meanings in strange contexts would not be possible if it were not for the weird and already off-beat surroundings of Sitka as a hybrid space of secular and orthodox worship, fantastic and imagined histories; that is, the tefillin would not register as a significant object in an undoubtedly orthodox narrative. The tension between distinct modes of strangeness reveals Landsman's detached, sardonic disbelief, one always seeking rational explanations, in comparison to a religious orthodoxy whose belief in God is all the logic one requires. That is, tucked away within the tefillin is belief in the divine and the possibility of enchantment, a mode of meaning-making foreign to Landsman's nature. Relayed through the third-person indirect discourse of the narrator, Landsman considers the practice of wearing tefillin silly, if not outright ridiculous, because of its symbolic relationship to blind faith: "Each morning the pious Jew twines one of these doodads along his left arm, ties another to his forehead, and prays for understanding of the kind of God Who obliges somebody to do something like that every damn

day of his life" (23). Landsman has little patience for such implausible behaviors and irrational religious affairs.

This dramatic tension attached to objects also moves beyond the text. As strangers in a strange land, the Jews face Reversion and an exile to be continued somewhere else. The omniscient narrator describes this feeling as part and parcel of Jewish history when he notes, "Nineteen forty-eight: Strange times to be a Jew. In August the defense of Jerusalem collapsed and the outnumbered Jews of the three-month-old republic of Israel were routed, massacred, and driven into the sea" (29). "Strange times" within the text make for a familiar history of exile and diaspora without, thus confusing the ontology of reality and fantasy both internal and external to the text. If it is "strange" to be a Jew even in the fictional antireality where strangeness is expected and built into the premise of the world itself, then when is it ever *not* "strange times to be a Jew"? Thematizing strangeness in an ontological framework constructed out of the strange means that the Jews of Sitka are denied a permanent status in Sitka *and* genre, as the text's aesthetics raise question about the status of Jews. "Strange times" refuse the Sitka Jews a narrative status where they might be free *not* to question their own right to exist. Their own alien status is far from naturalized in this otherworldly reality, and in fact, this is further dramatized by their quest to secure green cards. The novel presents itself as a rhetorical exercise on Jewish survival, working out over the course of its pages the question of how to live in uncertain times in an uncertain space as a Jew.

Unsettling the Strange Space of Sitka: Slipstream Storytelling

Such strange and surprising encounters between genres mimics the mood of engagement that Jane Bennett discusses in *The Enchantment of Modern Life*, one that proposes a view of the contemporary world awash with wonder, surprise, and affective attachments. Bennett explains,

> the mood I'm calling enchantment involves, in the first instance, a surprising encounter, a meeting with something that you did not expect and are not fully prepared to engage. Contained within this surprise state are (1) a pleasurable feeling of being charmed by the novel and as yet unprocessed encounter and (2) a more *unheimlich* (uncanny) feeling of being disrupted out of one's default sensory psychic-intellectual disposition. The overall effect of enchantment is a mood of fullness, plenitude, or liveliness, a sense of having had one's nerves or circulation or concentration powers tuned up or recharged—a shot in the arm, a fleeting return to childlike excitement about life. (5)

In the novel, these surprising encounters are enabled by the proliferation of strangeness across genres and historical circumstances. The interrelationship between strangeness, fantasy tropes, and genre play result in the aesthetics of enchantment in Chabon's novel.[86]

In its attention to the *unheimlich,* Bennett's work foregrounds an aesthetics of defamiliarization central to what I am calling enchantment. In his project on the uncanny in twentieth-century thought, Nicholas Royle writes that the uncanny (as we think of it developed by Freud) haunts and is haunted by innumerable other texts, including those by the Russian formalists like Victor Shklovsky and German theorist Bertolt Brecht.[87] Shklovksy's

---

[86]According to Bennett, ethics are at stake in the "fleeting return to a childlike excitement about life" (5). Michael Saler's work also underlines the ethical parameters of in-between fictional universes. Saler pinpoints the ethical stakes of working at the intersection of literature and enchantment. He writes that imaginary worlds "challenge their inhabitants to see the real world as being, to some degree, an imaginary construct amenable to revision. As a result of collectively inhabiting and elaborating virtual worlds, many become more adept at accepting difference, contingency, and pluralism: at envisioning life not in essentialist, 'just so' terms but rather in provisional, 'as if' perspectives" (7).

[87]According to Royle, the uncanny has been a focus of critical, literary, philosophical and political reflection from at least the mid-nineteenth century to the present (3). He counts among these thinkers: Karl Marx, Friedrich Nietzsche, Martin Heidegger, Ludwig Wittengstein, Jacques Derrida, Victor Shklovsky, and Bertolt Brecht (40).

defamiliarization or Brecht's alienation effect (or A effect)[88] do not specifically pair *ostranenie* and uncanny, but all of these concepts overlap with the ways in which they forge "new alienations" (Royle 5). As we have seen in *A Serious Man*, political potential resides in this liminal space. As Brecht explains, "new alienations are only designed to free socially conditioned phenomena from that stamp of familiarity which protects them against our grasp today" (qtd. in Royle 5). Reading and writing practices that foster "new alienations" allow us to comprehend the already-familiar as if it is not so; they jostle us into otherwise untapped awareness of new potentiality. Brecht was interested in the experience of the unhomely or sudden homelessness, and like Shklovsky's formalist interest in defamiliarization, his concern lay in political, transformational, and revolutionary possibilities of making the familiar strange (Royle 5).

This freedom that comes from loosening the grasp of familiarity is further extended by the in-between status of the Sitka Jews who find themselves in between historical predicaments, belonging to an in-between geographic space, and literally expressed in-between language, all as Landsman serves as arbiter in between the religious and secular communities in order to solve an ongoing case of an in-between status. On one hand, the premise of "you never know" (13) connotes the uncertain future of the Sitka Jews—what will happen after Reversion? Where will they go? But on the other, the closing down of certainty opens the possibility that anything can happen in the present—and this is where, through the play of genre, Chabon's text makes room for wonder and enchantment. In a text as "slipstream" as Chabon's, this occurs through the

[88]Brecht's term "alienation-effect" is derived from Shklovksy's idea of the "device for making strange" (Royle n. 17 28).

crossed wires of genre and what is generated at the thresholds, borderland, or the "the spaces between genres, in the no mans lands" ("Trickster" 13).

In their introduction to a slipstream anthology aptly titled *Feeling Very Strange* (2006), James Patrick Kelly and John Kessel build on the term first introduced by Bruce Sterling in 1989.[89] They characterize slipstream as a renunciation of specific genre identity and above all the quality of "feeling very strange" (xiii).[90] While labeled a genre by some, slipstream is more clearly defined as a set of literary effects that violate the tenets of realism, and it is as a set of effects rather than a distinct genre that I refer to it here (Kessel xiii). As Kelly and Kessel point out, slipstream is a playfully postmodern form: "the stories often acknowledge their existence as fictions, and play against the genres they evoke. They have a tendency to bend or break narrative rules" (xiii). This postmodern play that Kelly and Kessel are struggling to describe seems to me the play of estrangement that results from genre-mixing when genres already have

---

[89]The term was originally coined by Bruce Sterling in a 1989 column he wrote for a fanzine called *Science Fiction Eye* and has been used to describe the way that literary or "mainstream" fiction and genre elements have begun to merge. Sterling was attempting to understand a kind of fiction that he saw increasingly in science fiction publications and as he wrote in the original article, "This genre is not category SF; it is not even 'genre' SF. Instead, it is a contemporary

> kind of writing which has set its face against consensus reality. It is fantastic, surreal sometimes, speculative on occasion, but not rigorously so. It does not aim to provoke a "sense of wonder" or to systematically extrapolate in the manner of classic science fiction. Instead, this is a kind of writing *which simply makes you feel very strange*; the way that living in the late twentieth century makes you feel, if you are a person of a certain sensibility. We could call this kind of fiction Novels of a Postmodern Sensibility…for the sake of convenience and argument, we will call these books 'slipstream.' (emphasis mine, viii)

[90]Kelly and Kessel's anthology includes work by Bruce Sterling, Aimee Bender, Kelly Link, Jonathan Lethem, George Saunders, and Michael Chabon, among others. Slipstream is described as an effect rather than a genre in the same way that Junot Diaz has discussed magical realism as a narrative effect.

distinct relationships to the ontology of estrangement.[91] Kelly and Kessel explain, "the hardest thing to put a finger on is the strangeness that Sterling identifies as the essence of slipstream, but that all commentators have been at pains to define. It has been called a matter of making the familiar strange or the strange familiar" (xiii). What these literary critics are "at pains to define" refers to the fact that in a slipstream text, making the familiar strange is possible alongside making the strange familiar; that is, genre-mixing does not necessitate a structure of either/or but both/and.

Slipstream texts use many techniques to estrange us and unsettle our expectations of genre, but they do so in a mode of serious play that Victor Turner theorizes is key to liminality. In anthropological terms, the seriousness of human play refers to the chaotic interlude or in-between space that marks the period between an individual's separation from a group and before her reincorporation; according to Turner, these natural occurring processes of separation, limen, and reincorporation make up a series of initiation rites (232). For example, we are reminded of Larry Gopnik's pre-tenure state of liminality, or his son Danny's bar mitzvah. In Chabon's novel, the concept of the *limen* applies to both the formal aspects of slipstream and the situation of the Sitka Jews. Turner writes, "'meaning' in culture tends to be generated at the interfaces between established cultural subsystems," and in this way we can think analogously about the in-betweenness of genre, or the way meanings are mapped on or through a play of genres, as a way the text generates meaning (41). Benjamin Rosenbaum has praised slipstream for "playing with tropes such that the reader's awareness that you are playing, but playing seriously, is part of the

[91]As I mention earlier, Chabon plays with the meaning of estrangement as he blends what are usually distinct ontologies of genre: the function of a detective plot is to *detect* the strange; the function of the sf/fantasy genre is to *normalize* the strange; the function of allohistory is to *estrange* history.

story's joy. . . ." (qtd. in Kelly and Kessel xiii).[92] When play turns to the seriousness of traumatic histories, narratives of displacement, and violence, as it does in Chabon's novel, the story also reveals the notion of dark malaise as part of enchantment.

In the unfamiliar framework of Chabon's genre and the precarious Jewish condition in the novel, the uncertain present is reanimated with possibility. Consider the epigraph to the text, "And they went to sea in a Sieve," excerpted from "The Jumblies," a mock epic by Victorian poet Edward Lear.[93] "The Jumblies" tells of a brazen and absurd group of voyagers (the Jumblies) who ignore their friends' common-sense warnings—"You'll all be drowned!"—and set out to sea in a flimsy sieve-boat (Poetry Foundation). At the end of the poem, everyone is amazed to learn that the Jumblies returned after twenty years at sea and with knowledge of the world. The text is of course the sieve-boat in the reader's hands that will journey through the fantastic. As a nonsense poem, "The Jumblies" outlines the unstable passageway into what lies ahead, however untrustworthy or flimsy it may appear, and the imaginative work required of the reader. Requesting this kind of faith in the uncertain future of the text highlights the reward for this kind of imaginative risk. When the Jumblies return, everyone remarks on their worldliness and maturation: "How tall they've grown!", those who have remained behind exclaim (Poetry Foundation). In *The Yiddish Policemen's Union*, the stakes are similarly invested in rewarding the reader's imaginative risk.

The text's in-betweenness signifies across genres; the play of the in-between is also

---

[92]Kelly explains this concept of play through the following characteristics: "they use allegory, borrow forms from nonliterary sources, literalize metaphor, inject genre elements into decidedly nongenre milieus, play metafictional games, invent faux-autobiography, incorporate pastiche, parody, or collage, or externalize psychological and ontological distress; they play with older genre forms" (xiii).

[93]The trend was later extended most famously by Lewis Carroll.

invoked metaphorically by the detectives' recurring references to "middle game," the mystery of the unsolved chessboard Landsman discovers in the hotel room next to the body of Mendel Shpilman. Surveying the room, Landsman comments that "it looks like he had a game going, a messy-looking middle game. . ." and remarks,

> "I'm weak. . .I have no feel for the middle game."
> "In my experience, Detective,' Tenenboym says, 'it's all middle game."
> "Don't I know it," Landsman says. (5)

As Landsman eventually divines, the solution to Shpilman's murder is bound up in his realization that Shpilman was not playing an ongoing game of chess with an opponent when he died. Rather, Shpilman staged an unsolvable chess problem called *Zugzwang*, which describes the condition of being "forced to move" when a player is stuck in between two moves that both lead to checkmate.[94] In other words, because neither option is preferable, *Zugzwang* reveals a paradox: choice is an illusion and a certain outcome is already inevitable. The attention to the "middle game" of chess highlights the waiting, calculating, and decision-making of chess strategy. It is not the checkmate that wins the game, but the strategic play of middle game. It is only when Landsman is able to view the state of "middle game" laid out on the board anew, when he successfully cedes his grasp on the familiar, that he solves the murder. In this way *Zugzwang* becomes an apt metaphor for the way that textuality here is all invested in the play of middles in order to generate meaning and enchantment. The *Zugzwang* paradox in *The Yiddish Policemen's Union* dovetails with the state of the schlemiel's uncertainty in the Coen brothers' *A Serious Man*. In this way, revisiting historical narratives like the founding of the state of Israel in 1948; the failed U.S. bill that would have resettled European Jews to Alaska; terrorist attacks

[94]For more on the function of *Zugzwang* as it relates to the text, see Kravitz.

on a global scale, and upending the logics upon which they are constructed (genre-mixing) revises a historical trajectory where such events are inevitable. Instead, the novel reveals a series of "superpositional crux points" to indicate that like the events in Gopnik's life, at each point in this story, things could have gone differently.

The detective genre doubly reinforces the emphasis on "middle game." Rather than the end (the solution to the crime), Theodore Martin argues that the sense of the wait is the real point of detective fiction: "the genre of the detective novel is thus shaped not by the assurance of the end but by the uncertain distance between expectation and fulfillment, the persistent gap that makes waiting—and reading—take place" (168). Martin's argument is valuable for the way in which he aligns the reading structure of detective fiction and Jewish religious experience or cultural belief. He explains that in Chabon's novel the disappointment that accompanies the solving of the crime is a built-in element of religious belief itself (172 n. 7). Landsman asks Berko if he believes what Zimbalist the boundary maven told them about Mendel—that he had the power to perform wonders and miracles:

> "That stuff the maven was just telling us about Mendel. The wonders and miracles. Berko, you believe any of that?"
>
> "You know it's not about believing for me, Meyer. It never has been."
>
> "But do you—I'm curious—do you really feel like you're waiting for Messiah?"
>
> Berko shrugs, uninterested in the question, keeping his eyes on the track of the black galoshes in the snow. "It's messiah," he says. "What else can you do but wait?" (127)

Here Martin comments that Jewish messianism is defined by deferral and it is the wait rather than an imagined arrival that defines Jewish faith (172 n. 7): "the principle, thinks Landsman, that every Jew has a personal Messiah who never comes" (331). Disappointment would reside in the fulfillment of this messianic hope. Landsman considers, "a Messiah who actually arrives is

no good to anybody. A hope fulfilled is already a disappointment" (349).[95] Jameson reiterates, "the non-Jews imagine that Jews think of Messiah as a promise and a future certainty: nothing could be farther from the truth" (qtd. in Martin n. 7).

I find myself in agreement with Martin's reevaluation of the temporal structure of reading detective fiction. However, in his approach to the novel, Martin emphasizes the detective genre and thus ignores the strange ontological confusion that accompanies the mixed-genre narrative.[96] Instead of emphasizing the "wait" and the temporal structure of the detective genre, an emphasis on the "middle game"—the play with multiple genres—makes for multiple "solutions" to the plots. While Berko's father is revealed to be the murderer, the criss-crossing of narratives creates meaning in additional generic frames essential to the outcome of the story—like Bina and Landsman's reconciliation and the fulfillment of the romance genre, for example.

This sense of play is already built into the world of detective fiction inasmuch as the genre has been singled out for its unique treatment of fabula (story) and sujet (plot), and for the way that stories narrated in detective novels are already imbued with a sense of metafictional play.[97] Of the metafictional quality that characterizes this environment, Hühn writes: "the stories that are narrated in detective novels can profitably be described as stories of writing and reading insofar

---

[95]As Litvak writes, "*every Messiah fails. . . The moment he tries to redeem himself"* (335).

[96]In the introduction to their slipstream anthology, Kelly and Kessel argue that slipstream is the literature of cognitive dissonance and of strangeness *triumphant* (xi). By cognitive dissonance, Kelly and Kessel mean that literature creates competing and contradictory cognitions for the reader, which can take the form of assumptions, emotions, values, etc. The difference is that in non-slipstream genres, the narrative creates psychic dissonance that we want to reduce, but slipstream embraces cognitive dissonance rather than trying to reduce it (xi).

[97]Originating in Russian Formalism, the terms fabula and sujet describe two different aspects of narrative events. The fabula is the sequence of events as the characters experience them, while the sujet describes the sequence of events as they are presented to the reader (Schmid 184).

as they are concerned with authoring and deciphering 'plots'" (451). Tzvetan Todorov writes of fabula and sujet that "detective fiction manages to make both of them present, to put them side by side" (46). In "The Typology of Detective Fiction," Todorov explains the dual structure of the classic detective story, which has become known as double narration by Peter Hühn. This means that the plot of the classical detective story superimposes temporally distinct narratives: the *first story* (the crime) happened in the past and is hidden or absent from the present, while the *second story* (the investigation) occurs in the present and consists of uncovering the first story. In terms of double narration, Todorov explains, "we might further characterize these two stories by saying that the first—the story of the crime—tells 'what really happened,' whereas the second—the story of the investigation—explains 'how the reader (or the narrator) has come to know about it'" (45). The two-story structure also signals relationships important to historiography: the first story thus details the event of the crime, or the historical event itself, whereas the second story becomes analogous to historical narrative.

Because the story of the crime has *already* been written, the temporal juxtaposition of double narration means that the reader must work backwards (alongside the detective) from effects to their causes. For Bina, the ability do this kind of detective work is likened to being a good storyteller: "Bina will never lose her detective's appetite for people's stories, Landsman thinks, of puzzling her way back through them from the final burst of violence to the first mistake" (168). Bina "does not solve cases so much as tell the stories of them," Landsman muses (158). The attention to "puzzling" invokes the classical sub-genre of detective fiction that "presents crime as a puzzle to be solved through a 'who-why-how-when-where' chain of questions that the detective poses," otherwise known as the "whodunit" (Routledge 103). But in detective story the rules governing this sub-genre fail to apply; the nineteenth-century

antecedents of detective fiction invested in the new technology of forensic science and calculation are dismissed (Thomas 3-4).[98] The way in which Bina approaches these plots is distinct from the more analytical modes of "solving" that emphasize the solution. With her "detective's appetite," Bina has a physiological need for relaying people's histories; her approach centers on a hunger for the process, on the "middle game" of "puzzling her way back" from end to origin (168). Bina's mode of epistemological inquiry (she *solves*) is rooted in the colloquial, oral tradition of storytelling; there is a serious element to the artistic or folk tradition attributed to Bina's experience of navigating and explaining her world through storytelling. In part because she is aligned with the position of the writer, creator, or originator of the events, Bina embodies the role of author; for Bina, detective work is personal and the story serves as her mode of puzzling and exploring her way through the uncertainty of plots.[99]

If Bina is associated with storytelling, aligned with a personal investment in authorship, then Landsman is significantly detached from agency and authorship. In fact, his relationship to the crime is presented as that of a reader struggling to piece together the facts of the case; unlike Bina, Landsman's approach has nothing to do with a physiological need to tell stories. When Landsman and Berko go to the Einstein Chess Club to investigate, "Landsman reads the story," because it is his job (88). As a detective, Landsman has been trained to read for details and abnormalities, a process that for him is articulated through rote, automated reliance on memory;

---

[98]As Stephen Bernstein explains, the genre, and its concern with reading social detail, arose at a time of mass urban growth during the nineteenth century (138).

[99]In his metafictional detective novel, *City of Glass*, Paul Auster has written that the writer and the detective are involved in a similar project: "The detective is the one who looks, who listens, who moves through this morass of objects and events in search of the thought, the idea that will pull all of these things together and make sense of them. In effect, the writer and the detective are interchangeable. The reader sees the world through the detective's eyes, experiencing the proliferation of its details as if for the first time" (qtd. in Malmgren 2).

Landsman is aligned with reading and remembering in a way that allows him to detach from the personal aspect of the story—he is hard-boiled, after all. His ability to detect and catalogue reality's abnormalities is the job of a detective, an area in which he excels. Landsman "rarely forgets a detail of physical description" and has an impressive "gift for recollection" (3). And while physicians, psychologists, and his former spouse warn that alcohol will diminish his memory, "his vision of the past remains unimpaired," he professes (4). Because memory is Landsman's mode of detection, the act of remembering estranges (in the way that the detective fiction is supposed to work, by "deautomatizing signification and making things 'strange'") and alienates him from that world. He keeps his memories sealed apart from himself in symbolic "plastic bags," and engages them at voluntary intervals when he can control his emotional distance from the past (Hühn 454). Retiring to his room after he first learns about Shpilman's murder, Landsman undresses, showers, and lies down,

> for half an hour with his eyes wide open, taking memories—of his little sister in her Super Cub, of Bina in the summer of 1986—out of their plastic bags. He studies them as if they are transcriptions, in a dusty book stolen from the library, of bygone checkmates and brilliancies. After half an hour of that useful pursuit, he gets up and puts on a clean shirt and tie, and goes down to Sitka Central to file his report. (25)

The "useful" nature of this activity is of course ironic for Landsman. Landsman surveys his own past in the same forensic, detached mode of discovery usually reserved for detective work, except here it is Landsman' broken life in need of solving. He deliberately handles these relics in the present but distances himself from their emotional significance. They too, are clues, keys, codes, redolent with affective significance and potential meaning—brilliancies or illuminations—that remain untapped, untold, and sealed up in plastic.

This self-regulating detachment estranges Landsman from his own history; he does not allow himself to feel *too* comfortable in the present lest he forget *or* succumb to the

overwhelming emotion of the past. But as Bina and Landsman acknowledge, it is human to forget. The modus operandi of detective work for Landsman is emotional alienation, which serves a particular social function for the Jews of Sitka: survival. As Bina and Landsman crawl through the underground tunnels from the Zamenhof to the Blackpool hotels where they suspect Alter Litvak is hiding out (Litvak is a key suspect in the case and hired by the Verbovers to mastermind the terrorist plot), they discuss what it means for the Sitka Jews to forget. Landsman laments the sad fate of the Holocaust survivors like his father who arrived in Sitka and fought for control of the District only to be betrayed (by their hope in the future, U.S. Operatives, or one of Uncle Hertz's endless schemes) (380). But Bina remarks that "not all of them," meaning the first generation Jews of Sitka, felt betrayed:

> "Some of them just got comfortable here. They started to forget a little bit. They felt at home."
> "I guess that's how it always goes," Landsman says. "Egypt. Spain. Germany."
> "They weakened. It's human to weaken. They had their lives. Come on." (380)

Landsman and Bina acknowledge a feeling of resignation among the Sitkaites who started to feel "at home" (380). The *heimlich* quality of settling into a temporary status by forgetting its temporariness, or feeling at home in the present by forgetting history, is cause for concern as much as it remains inevitable; in other words, there is a double-bind inherent to this desirable/undesirable *heimlich* orientation as diaspora becomes the condition for remembering.

Moreover, getting comfortable and forgetting one's impermanent status, and by extension the history behind that status, leads to a betrayal of history, albeit unintentional. The names of countries—"Egypt. Spain. Germany"—invoke histories of persecution (380). The curt list invokes narratives of trauma and suffering without their stories, revealing how a dictum like "never again" could become known yet divorced from historical specificity. These are not Landsman's own memories, or even the collective memory of the Sitkaites who fled persecution

in Europe; rather, they are historical fragments. In this way they are similar to Shimon Susskind's response to Fidelman in "The Last Mohican": "I'm always running," Susskind says, where else but from "Germany, Hungary, Poland" (*Magic Barrel* 156). In *The Yiddish Policemen's Union,* the text draws on a broader history to distill the succinct and deliberate succession of periods of Jewish exile, slavery, and torture from Biblical times through the Spanish Inquisition to the more recent history of the Holocaust.

Feeling at home draws on the ideas both of being naturalized (as citizens) and of succumbing to a textual universe where *ostranenie* is no longer the norm. Literally *feeling* at home in a geographic and historical moment describes an affective process of becoming absorbed (here: weakening) into the present with dangerous repercussions: the recapitulation of Exile, Inquisition, and Holocaust. Not remembering the details of the crime for Landsman, becoming too comfortable at home or in the narrative, positions Landsman and his fellow Jews at great risk. The *heimlich* experience also blocks the *unheimlich* (uncanny) feeling of being disrupted out of one's default sensory psychic-intellectual disposition" (Bennett 5). The lesson here seems to be that Jews, historically, textually, must not get too comfortable; however, an alienated, *unheimlich* sensibility leaves open the possibility of enchantment. One must remain sufficiently alienated from the past in order to view it through a constantly refreshed, estranged perspective, but become too alienated—like Landsman at this point in the story—and one risks what Bennett refers to as an anesthetized relationship to experience characteristic of disenchantment. The goal is to locate that space of the middle game where Landsman remains estranged enough to remember but still capable of reading the clues of history with a fresh perspective. One must be sufficiently alienated (textually, geographically, historically) or experience *not feeling at home* in order to be open to enchantment.

In addition to the threat of a recurring traumatic history, sinking in to the homeliness of the present situates forgetting as a loss of imaginative potential. There is a sense in which forgetting the past precludes any future imaginative investment. Landsman notes that Berko tells stories about life in the Indianer-Lands, but he never tells stories of his (Indian) mother, who he later discovered was murdered in a massacre probably instigated by his (Jewish) father: "He [Landsman] supposes that he always knew there had to be some kind of cost to Berko in turning himself inside out the way he did, some kind of heroic feat of forgetting. He just never bothered to think of it as a loss. A failure of imagination, a worse sin in a shammes than going into a hot place with no backup. Or maybe it was the same sin in a different form" (357). The cost of conscientiously forgetting in order to block the pain of the past is the logical equivalent of a failed imagination and a thwarted detective career. This is especially problematic for a *Jewish* detective. The idea that there is no "worse sin in a shammes"[100] than a failure of imagination knits together the tropes of memory and storytelling into the fabric of successful detective work, where the religious and Yiddish inflections of "sin" and "shammes" connote that this loss is particularly shameful for a *Jew*. Thus, the text's enchanted aesthetics engage with Jewish memory; affectively disengaging from the past, forgetting, registers as the failure of Jewish imagination.

Landsman's own journey is defined through his affective orientation towards his imagination. When Cashdollar, the evangelical U.S. Federal agent and facilitator of the terrorist plot, arrives in Sitka to interrogate Landsman, he signifies a singular history of U.S.-backed terrorist intervention abroad with no room for narrative revision. He has arrived to interrogate

[100]A shammes refers to a sexton in a synagogue or the candle used to light the menorah during Hannukah. Part of his own creation of *yiddishkeit*, Chabon uses it as slang for cop.

Landsman, and in doing so, Cashdollar recounts how his old supervisor used to say to him, "'We are telling a story, Cashdollar. That's what we do. . . Tell them a story, Cashdollar. That's all the poor suckers want.' Only he didn't say 'suckers'" (364). But this is not the same story that Bina hungers for as she carefully, affectively performs her role as detective. Through this conversation, "story" is corrupted and becomes a slippery concept (mirroring slipstream itself) in relation to the narrative as a whole; in this context "story" becomes a stand-in for coercive narrative tactics, and given the broader terrorist agenda, manipulated histories.

Thus, Cashdollar claims no responsibility for Mendel Shpilman's death. But after Cashdollar apologizes for Landsman's sister Naomi's death, one that came at the cost of aiding Shpilman,

> he gives his head a gentle shake.
> "But we aren't telling a story."
> "No?"
> "Huh-uh. The story, Detective Landsman, is telling us. Just like it has done from the beginning. We're part of the story. You. Me." (365)

And just then, Cashdollar lights a cigarette, flashing a book of matches from a place in Washington, D.C. with the name of Hogate's Seafood, "the very restaurant, if he [Landsman] remembers his history, in front of which Delegate Anthony Dimond, prime opponent of the Alaskan Settlement Act, was run down by a taxicab . . ." (365). When Cashdollar asserts that "the story. . . is telling us," he invokes the idea of a grand teleology with no room for himself, or Landsman, to insert their own telling (365). Landsman and Cashdollar are trapped together in Jewish and Christian eschatology; historical teleology; rote historical narratives; and even this novel. When Cashdollar refers to "this story," he indicates the evangelical belief in messianic redemption prophesied by the Book. Of course, the reader is aware that this "prophecy" has been manipulated by a US covert operation that sent one million dollars to Verbover scientists to

genetically modify a red heifer and orchestrate the terrorist plot (295). Laying bare the constructedness of international politics, as Cashdollar attests, the authors of this "story" have specific agendas tied to their military backgrounds or business training (364). The only possibility for authenticity resides in the space between such narratives that quickly turn fantasies into historical realities. Landsman summarizes that Cashdollar wants him to keep his mouth shut, to not reveal anything about the evangelical-backed plot to blow up the Dome of the Rock. Landsman avers, "just until you lay these facts down on Jerusalem. Move some Arabs out and some Verbovers in. Rename a few streets" (366). Cashdollar agrees, adding ". . .And then get busy, you know. Fulfilling what is written" (366).

From this perspective inside the narratives, the characters cannot see reality for what it really is. But at the same time, Cashdollar flashes a sign of historical contingency—the lighter—and reminds the reader of the very event that set in motion the telos of this *counter*historical mythology. It is Landsman's recollection of the name on the matchbook that unsettles the ideological premise that the story is telling "us" (365). For Landsman, these signs are all part of the detective's discovery, and as such, part and parcel of the detective plot. While the events register to the reader as allohistory, to Landsman they are part of a crime story; the mixing of genres thus defamiliarizes historical crimes alongside Mendel's murder. As one of the perpetrators who "sponsor[s] terrorist attacks on Muslim holy places," Cashdollar is triply guilty of killing Landsman's sister, Mendel Shpilman, and innocent Muslims. Landsman's memory never fails him, but only when detective and allohistory cede space to romance does Landsman become his story's own *teller*. Even with all of these pre-set tropes, the fact that "the story is telling us," there are moments of interruption and transcendence to unsettle predetermined genres. In fact, the novel closes as he calls Brennan, the journalist who has been nagging him all

along for a story, and says, "I have a story for you" (411).[101] How does he get here?

Plotting Histories: The Grim Reality of Jewish Terrorism

Ever hard-boiled and a critic of Verbover religiosity, Landsman is a tough guy who has been called "hard-boiled and foolhardy, a momzer, a crazy son of a bitch" (10); a man who spites himself, "because spiting himself, spiting others, spiting the world is the pastime and only patrimony of Landsman and his people" (11). Landsman embodies the rough nature of his generic trope and the familiar discourse of the self-hating Jew; in addition to the former, the latter serves as another way in which pre-determined tropes and genres direct Landsman's character. By aligning the two tropes Chabon obscures their origins—is Landsman a self-hating Jew because he is so callous and hard-boiled? Or is he so callous and hard-boiled because he is a self-hating Jew? Crafted out of layers of caricatures, at this point in the story Landsman is a stand-in for himself. Colloquially he could be any fellow Jew, as his name indicates, but not until the overlapping generic codes reach their pitch does Landsman have the freedom to narrate his own story and attach to his own history.

Landsman lives in a world where everything is potentially made strange by Shpilman's murder, yet simultaneously, his orientation is rooted in those seemingly disenchanted forms of rationalism and forensics that explain away any pretense of wonder or belief. Landsman's attitude towards victims is much like his attitude towards religion: detached. When feelings do crop up, they are quickly dismissed. About victims, he muses, "sometimes he can't help feeling sorry for them, but it's better not to get into the habit" (6). He keeps his memories sealed away, and for good reason—the past is painful. So much of the unexpected and the unfathomable has

[101]"I have a story for you" implies that Landsman will tell all and not stick to the grounds of the contract he made with Cashdollar—that he would keep quiet in exchange for getting to stay in Sitka after Reversion (411).

occurred in this antireality that "nowadays one never knows," remarks the narrator, distilling the present state of uncertainty that leaves Landsman increasingly jaded, disconnected, and unmoved (13).

Anger, disbelief, uncertainty, and incredulity overrun Sitka after the Verbovers hatch the terrorist plot, bringing to fruition the idea that nothing is too extreme or too dangerous to be inconceivable for Jewish history or futurity. The Verbover terrorism plot is rooted in a number of real historical narratives linked to Jewish terrorism: the King David Hotel bombing of 1946, carried out by the Zionist paramilitary group Irgun; the Jewish Underground, a group of violent, pro-settlement extremists who developed a plot to blow up the Dome of the Rock in the 1980s; and the contemporary Temple Mount Faithful movement, whose objective is to rebuild the Third Temple on the Temple Mount and reinstate ritual sacrifice. If enchantment refers to the strange commensurability of the fantasy mode of storytelling and historical representation that "delights and disturbs," the mixing of these historical narratives collapses distinctions between ontological realities within and outside the text.[102] And through the mixing of narratives, the grim realism of the terrorist becomes available to the reader.

In Chabon's universe, this newfound clarity orients us toward the ugliness in our own world and points to the limits of enchantment in the text precisely because it is intertwined with historical reality outside the text. In so doing, enchantment that closes the gap between fantasy and reality suggests that autonomous imaginary worlds may be a relic of the past. After the

[102]As Tolkien suggested, fantasy aspires to enchantment, and "enchantment produces a Secondary World into which both designer and spectator can enter, to the satisfaction of their senses while they are inside; but in its purity it is artistic in desire and purpose" ("On Fairy-Stories" 45).

Verbovers bomb *Qubbat As-Sakhrah* (the Dome of the Rock) in Jerusalem, Ester-Malke describes the chaos ricocheting around the world:

> All those people rioting on the television in Syria, Baghdad, Egypt? In London? Burning cars. Setting fire to embassies. Up in Yakovy, did you see what happened, they were dancing, those fucking maniacs, they were so happy about all this craziness, the whole floor collapses right onto the apartment underneath. A couple of little girls sleeping in their beds, they got crushed to death. That's the kind of shit we have to look forward to now. Burning cars and homicidal dancing. I have no idea where this baby is going to be born. . . (406)

The attention to Zionist fanaticism literally crushes Jewish children and puts the fate of Bina's baby at risk. With Jewish futurity in jeopardy, Ester-Malke refers to Syria, Baghdad, Egypt, and London to invoke the potential apocalypse latent in the ongoing Arab-Jewish struggle, one that is fundamentally real regardless of the narrative world we choose to inhabit.

Of course, as the Jews terrorize Muslims, we may also read a reversal of the historical premise of 9/11. The fantastical narrative reveals an uncomfortable similarity in the real world outside the text: the fact that some Jews share violent ideologies with radical Islamic terrorists. This is not a restoration of wonder that is typical for fantasy literature, but more so, an indication of the limits of enchantment in our twenty-first-century present. If we read enchantment as a representation of the way that Sitka is "inextricable from ordinary life and interpersonal engagements" (Saler 7), and we note that the strange is now familiar across text (Chabon's universe) and reality (reader's universe) and in fact, cannot be made strange, then in this way the ontological premise of Chabon's secondary world approaches that of a reality-oriented text and indicates the way that the dark, traumatic historical premise resists enchantment.

Cashdollar's scheming-as-storytelling manifests the creation of historical narratives publically produced to control the narrative of the Jewish-Arab world. When Tenenboym asks Landsman if he has heard about what happened, Landsman responds somewhat uncertainly, "I

saw it on the television," but the narrator qualifies, "though the memory feels secondhand, fogged-over, a construct that his interrogators implanted through persistent questioning" (370). This is the story that will be soon be captured on television, immediately memorialized by the media as an "image that will soon be splashed across the front page of every newspaper in the world" (358). The image of the "hilltop in Jerusalem . . . the broad empty mesa of paving stone. The jagged jawbone of burnt teeth. The magnificent plume of black smoke" simultaneously conjures the image of the twin towers on 9/11 (358). Margaret Scanlon remarks of this moment, "Not only does this icon [magnificent plume of black smoke] evoke the famous shot of the second plane hitting the South Tower, but Sitka's triumphant Jews dance in the street, just as Palestinians were alleged to have done on 9/11" (523). And in the novel, the narrator describes how just after the attack, the US president immediately pledges to send in support in response to "some Arabs making bombs in a tunnel under the Temple Mount" (370). The reversal of the 9/11 narrative reveals the uncomfortable proximity between Jewish extremism and Arab extremism, on the one hand, and on the other, situates narratives of Jewish terrorism alongside the innocence of lost-and-recovered *yiddishkeit* and the invocation of the Holocaust. As these narratives de-essentialize the framework for Jewish terrorism within the novel, they work against the grain of an essentialist framework for Islamic terrorism outside of it.

The Evolution of Meyer Landsman: Romancing the Hard-boiled

As the plots cede their ground to romance, the tropes of the hard-boiled and narratives of the past begin to change shape. The integration of the romance plot into the novel liberates the fixed temporality of the *already* told stories of allohistory and the detective plot and turns the story's orientation toward the as-yet-untold future. In so doing, they make room for fantasy tropes linked to transcendence and the otherworldly—to the presence of the dead Yid Mendel

Shpilman's impossible communication with Landsman.

What is it that Landsman feels near the end of the novel in the marvelous, unreal, magical touch of Shpilman? In this exchange, what is communicated through Mendel's presence? When Landsman and Berko first visit the Rabbi's house to inform him of Shpilman's murder, Landsman feels something in the air that begins to challenge his disaffected worldview. Zimbalist the boundary maven cries out with anger and grief, "Idiots. . . They're here about Mendele!" to get the attention of Rabbi Shpilman's handlers. The sound of "Mendele" reverberates:

> The air seems to shatter like a world of tiny windows with a tinkling sound. And Landsman feels something that makes him want to put a hand to the back of his neck. He is a dealer in entropy and a disbeliever by trade and inclination. To Landsman, heaven is kitsch, God a word, and the soul, at most, the charge on your battery. But in the three-second lull that follows Zimbalist's crying out the name of the rebbe's lost son, Landsman has the feeling that something comes fluttering among them. Dipping down over the crowd of men, brushing them with its wing. Maybe it's just the knowledge, leaping from man to man, of why these two homicide detectives must have come at this hour. Or maybe it's the old power to conjure of a name in which their fondest hope once resided. Or maybe Landsman just needs a good night's sleep in a hotel with no dead Jews in it. (Chabon 131)

As Landsman apprehends an atmospheric change in the air, he reels off a flurry of associations, mantras that leave little room for feeling and sensing. Landsman deals in entropy, meaning that he has no say or control in the automatized, systematic degradation of the universe.[103] He discounts the mystical meaning embedded in the soul, rendering it through the mechanized, electrochemical "charge on your battery" (131). And noting that "God" is equivalent to a word, Landsman flattens out the enchantment-bearing capacities of language and reduces them to their

[103]Entropy concerns the irreversibility of the laws of systems of thermodynamics (OED).

crudest version of random semiotics.

Historically, in both biblical belief and fantasy texts, language and magic were one and the same.[104] Ancient Jews refused to speak God's name out of fear and awe of its power.[105] It is this narrative of disenchanting language that Chabon draws on when Landsman reduces the conception of God to "a word"—a random amalgam of letters, not performative in the way in which enchanted language customarily functions (131). In contrast, the grief-stricken cry of Mendele's name invokes just a performance of enchantment on par with narratives of belief. Feeling the brush of a wing, Landsman wonders if maybe it is this "old power to conjure of a name" which still bears the possibility for hope (131). Or maybe Landsman is just exhausted, so jaded and overworked that he's begun to unravel. At the moment this possibility arises, Landsman questions its existence and attempts to explain it away, but fails.

Wolfe explains that contemporary fantasy "must engage in an implied compact between

---

[104]For Tolkien and the fantasy writers who followed, language and magic are one and the same. It is in the original enchanted language of genesis that the world is created through a word: "And God said, 'Let there be light,' and there was light. God saw that the light was good, and he separated the light from the darkness. God called the light 'day' and the darkness he called 'night.' And there was evening and there was morning—the first day" (Gen. 1:3-5). The creation of light is also the first act of naming in the Garden of Eden, where naming is an action that calls light into being.

[105]Foucault describes the disenchantment of language in *The Order of Things*. In the beginning, when given to men by God, language was "an absolutely certain and transparent sign for things, because it resembled them. The names of things were lodged in the things they designated, just as strength is written in the body of the lion, regality in the eye of the eagle, just as the influence of the planets is marked upon the brows of men: by the form of similitude" (36). But in the early twentieth century Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure emptied language of the final traces of enchantment by splitting the concept of the sign into signifier + signified, and then by assigning to words the powerless attributes of arbitrary and differential meaning. Beginning in the 17th century, when the sign is thought to be understood to be the union of a *significant* and a *signified*, the sign is linked to the object through either representation or signification and thus leads Foucault to state that "the profound kinship of language with the world was thus dissolved" (43).

author and reader—an agreement that whatever impossibilities we encounter will be made significant to us, but will retain enough of their idiosyncratic nature that we still recognize them to be impossible" (70).[106] When Landsman feels Mendel's spirit through the brush of a wing, regardless of its impossibility or Landsman's own doubts, we believe it to be true; it is in this way that despite the limits of fantasy's ontological wonder-bearing capacity in the present, Chabon privileges belief over knowledge. For Wolfe, "belief is what enables genuine emotions to be aroused from impossible circumstance" (77). In doing so, Wolfe also indicates another way in which the seriousness of play enables emotional sincerity. This holds true for both the reader in her investment in the allohistorical premise of *The Yiddish Policeman's Union* and Landsman's character. Wolfe asserts, "affect and tone transform such ideational constructs into events and beings that are fully consistent with the author's created universe" (77). Similarly, Simon Spiegel writes, "in the world where the irrational is made plausible, we have no problem at all identifying which 'magical' disappearance belongs to the world of the fairy tale and sf" (Spiegel 372). A witch is unquestionably part of the fairy tale iconography, for example, just as a time machine is assuredly part of the universe of science fiction. But what about a chess prodigy and child genius with a messianic gift of healing? It is easy to dismiss Mendel Shpilman's supernatural abilities as subject to the whims of the ultra-Orthodox Verbover fanaticism and explained away by extreme desires to believe. But Mendel's spirit does not reach Landsman because Verbover fanaticism forced him to believe; instead, the clash of narratives creates a space where a workaholic, depressed, drunk, spiritless, and lonely Landsman begins to see the world anew.

---

[106]Because we are already situated in the secondary-world, this notion of belief is distinct from Coleridge's "willing suspension of disbelief" (Wolfe 77).

It is not the world of Sitka that changes throughout the course of the novel, but rather, Landsman's perception of it. Through the play of *ostranenie* in the narrative, Landsman becomes open to modes of sensing and seeing that are free from detached, impersonal irony and distinct from his past modes of perceiving. How, then, do we characterize Landsman's renewed feeling and the way that he begins to disidentify with hard-boiled tropes that have defined his character? This transformation is in part due to the Romance genre built into the slipstream world and the ways in which through the liminal and the space between genres, Landsman becomes open to joyful attachment in the present. It is only through the unsettling of plots, the criss-crossing of detectives and romancers, that serious play gives rise to surprise. Bennett describes the extraordinary that exists amidst the everyday as part and parcel of the project of enchantment, which begins from the assumption that "the world has become neither inert nor devoid of surprise but continues to inspire deep and powerful attachments" (4). Landsman's own inspired thinking, evinced through his redemptive and magical turn of thought, is made possible through love.[107]

With the integration of romance and the ascension of the marriage plot, the affective detachment of the hard-boiled becomes unsettled from itself. Although *The Yiddish Policemen's Union* embodies a down-and-out detective of the Chandler-esque variety, the text also embraces

---

[107]Caroline Rody's work on magical realism in contemporary Jewish American fiction has begun to highlight this trend in Jewish American Literature, although she focuses on the thematization of love rather than the way it functions in the narrative. Still, her direction is one to note, and she writes that in Jonathan Safran Foer's *Everything is Illuminated*, the book within-a-book structure helps "effect a profound movement in the narrative from historical grief to a communion of love" (55). In Rody's reading, love is positioned as the essence of the Jewish culture and tradition that grieving descendants claim to recover (55). Love is the second thing, after writing, that can overcome time and death in the text, Rody claims (55). She explains, "the essential act that magical writing is imagined to perform is the recovery of transcendent love from a history of violence" (55). I more fully explain Rody's argument in my introduction, including where our projects diverge and converge.

the essential elements of the romance genre. It is within this hybrid narrative space that Landsman's hard-boiled nature softens as the possibility of reconciliation with Bina grows. Historically, romance has roots in the bringing together of both fantasy and emotion. In fact, discussions of the romance genre centralize the role of fantasy and emotion alongside narrative structures like love and the happy ending (Regis 20). Here, the romance genre also serves a function in relation to historiography: genre-mixing allows for any sentimentalism to be attributed to the romance plot rather than nostalgia for a lost Jewish world.

In *A Natural History of the Romance Genre* (2007), Pamela Regis dates "romance" in the broadest sense to the Greeks in the fourth century who told stories of passionate love, separation, and triumph (20). According to Northrop Frye, the conventions of the romance are stable and have not changed since its advent in Grecian times. Regis explains that for Frye, the essence of romance is the "idealized world" it embodies in its texts (qtd. in Regis 20). She writes, "all popular genres—mysteries, thrillers, horror, science fiction, and, of course, the romance novel itself—are romances in this broader sense" (20). Jean Radford thus refers to romance in this general sense when she defines the romance as "a non-mimetic prose narrative focusing on emotion" (qtd. in Regis 20). Lastly, Regis quotes Kathleen Gilles Seidel, who refers not to the text but to the reader, writer, and their experience. Seidel claims that "fantasy is the most important element in the appeal of popular fiction" (qtd. in Regis 159). Combining these definitions, Regis summarizes, "we have the romance presenting an ideal world, whose representation takes considerable liberties with verisimilitude (mimesis) and focuses on emotion" (20). Furthermore, incorporating Seidel, Regis writes, "the idealized world, the non-mimetic representation, combined with the focus on emotion, becomes 'fantasy'" (20). These definitions of romance in the most generalized sense focus on the depiction of an idealized world and its

status as fantasy in the minds of authors and readers (20).[108] It is when critics consider "romance" alongside "novel" that they begin to focus on the characteristics most associated with the popular romance novel: love and the happy ending (Regis 21). Defining the romance novel along these lines, John Cowelti explains, "the crucial defining characteristic of romance is not that it stars a female but that its organizing action is the development of a love relationship, usually between a man and a woman. . . . The *moral fantasy* of the romance is that love is triumphant and permanent, overcoming all obstacles and difficulties" (*Adventure* 41-2; emphasis mine). In Regis's definition, she departs slightly to centralize narrative rather than thematic elements: "a romance novel is a work of prose fiction that tells the story of the courtship and betrothal of one or more heroines," and further explains that without the happy ending, there is an incomplete rendering of genre (22). Heroines and heroes in love conduct a courtship (action of love) and this action of love leads to the universally happy ending that always promises betrothal, even if the wedding is omitted (22). Thus, "if the narrative elements are present, a given work is a romance novel" (22).

Considering romance as part and parcel of Chabon's slipstream text, I wish to emphasize the sincerity of emotion within the text as Landsman and Bina reconcile. As Landsman and Bina prepare to leave the Shemets' apartment, Ester-Malke notes that the pair is leaving *together,* an event so "strange" it appears on par with the global unrest erupting from Yakovy to London, the uncertainty of her family's future, her murdering, suicidal father-in-law asleep in the other room (406). Turning to Bina and Landsman, she remarks, "meanwhile, I'm getting this very strange vibration from the two of you. So let me just say that if you and Bina are planning to get back

[108]"This ancient, ideal, non-mimetic fantasy world can be represented in verse, either dramatic or narrative, or in prose," Regis writes (20).

together, excuse me, but that's all I need" (406). For the first time in the text, Landsman seems open to a present awash with possibility; in a moment of transcendent thought, Landsman contemplates his own alternative realities:

> Landsman considers this. Any kind of wonder seems likely. That the Jews will pick up and set sail for the promised land to feast on giant grapes and toss their beards in the desert wind. That the temple will be rebuilt, speedily and in our day. War will cease, ease and plenty and righteousness will be universal, and humankind will be treated to the regular spectacle of lions and lambs and cohabiting. Every man will be a rabbi, every woman a holy book, and every suit will come with two pairs of pants. Meyer's seed, even now, may be wandering through darkness toward redemption, striking at the membrane that separates the legacy of the yids who made him from that of the yids whose errors, griefs, hopes, and calamities went into the production of Bina Gelbfish. (406-7)

The wonders of the bearded Jews feasting on giant grapes are certainly exaggerated in Landsman's imagination, and the "goodness" of humankind too far-reaching and universal to be real, obtainable constructs. But what does not feel exaggerated is the sentiment of entertaining the possibilities—better, impossibilities—of a present awash with hope and a future so porous that it is open to the chance Bina could be pregnant. (Django had a fifty percent chance of genetic abnormalities, an outcome so fearful that Landsman and Bina decided to abort their unborn child, leaving Landsman full of sorrow and grief). If we think about the novel as a whole, we can consider this as analogous to how Chabon refuses to foreclose the potential of multiple genres through a slipstream text. In this superpositional crux point of Bina and Landsman's romance, there is an unfolding and still undetermined sense of possibility. Allohistory for Chabon does not require the privilege of an alternative, fantastic teleology over another. Nor does it entail the privilege of one generic, guiding interpretive mode over another. Through Landsman's contemplation of wonders, we see Chabon layering alternative histories within the larger frame of allohistory; the premise of an alternative history is defined through the

uncertain, shifting circumstances of the present.

In the juxtaposition of Landsman and Bina's marriage—their fallout, its reconciliation—alongside the "strange times," one sees that each and every future is an uncertain one. But characters like Bina have found a much easier time feeling at home in the unknown uncertainty of life in Sitka. Bina has always believed in Landsman and in this way it was her faith in Landsman, or in their marriage, that remained unrequited rather than love:

> Once Bina Gelbfish believed in Meyer Landsman. Or she believed, from the moment she met him, that there was a sense in that meeting, that some detectable intention lay behind their marriage. They were twisted like a pair of chromosomes, of course they were, but where Landsman saw in that twisting together only a tangle, a chance snarling of lines, Bina saw the hand of the Maker of Knots. And for her faith, Landsman repaid her with his faith in Nothing itself. (170)

When Bina visits Landsman to bar him from the case, he is overwhelmed by self-pity and attached to meaninglessness; here the narrator intuits Landsman's preference for an existential faith in nothing itself: "He is off duty today, but duty means nothing, today means nothing, nothing means anything but a clean suit, three fresh Broadways, the wobble of the hangover just behind his eyes, the murmur of the brush against the whiskey-brown felt of his hat. And, all right, maybe a trace in his hotel room of the smell of Bina, of the sour collar of her shirt, her verbena soap, the marjoram smell of her armpit" (172). Landsman struggles to maintain his distance from sensing the present, wanting only to hold on to the thought that "today means nothing" (172). But Landsman fails to protect himself from the sensory experience that is the trace of Bina, a failure that over the course of the novel amounts to a sincere restoration of his own emotions rather than those that belong to predetermined tropes of the hard-boiled detective. Landsman cannot help but notice the familiar scent of Bina, and through his memory of Bina, he begins to reconnect to himself. Out of resignation—"And, all right, maybe," he submits—

Landsman allows himself to connect to the intimate knowledge of her smell. Through submitting to this experience, Landsman allows himself a momentary respite in *heimlich* territory. Landsman, in fact, has never felt at home in divorce: "she is getting old, and he is getting old, right on schedule, and yet as time ruins them, they are not, strangely enough, married to each other" (59).

The more estranged Landsman becomes from the hard-boiled tropes, the more connected he feels to himself and to Bina. And it is not only romantic love, but also familial that enchants Landsman's experience. Landsman becomes flooded with feeling after a night of sleeping in the Shemets' home and sharing a bed with the two children. Asleep in the Shemets's family bed, Landsman struggles to remain unaware of Ester-Malke's tenderness towards him: "He doesn't care. Why should he care? At last Landsman realizes that he has lost his struggle not to care about anything lie the paradoxical seeds of defeat: So, all right, he cares" (193). Landsman's apathy fails him because he has been thrust into the Shemets' family bed and forced to perceive and see his own dejected isolation in its wake. The next morning, Landsman observes his wounds, aches, and moods, sits up and "feels oddly settled. More present, somehow, in his limbs and skin and senses. Somehow, maybe, a little more real. He has not shared a bed with another human being in over two years" (193). Taking stock of his newly recharged emotional register, Landsman exudes a "mood of fullness, plenitude, or liveliness, a sense of having had one's nerves or circulation or concentration powers tuned up or recharged" that for Bennett characterizes enchantment (5). As I mentioned earlier, Bennett writes that contained within this state of wonder are "(1) a pleasurable feeling of being charmed by the novel and as yet unprocessed encounter and (2) a more *unheimlich* (uncanny) feeling of being disrupted or torn out of one's default sensory-psychic-intellectual disposition" (5). Landsman's default sensory-

psychic-intellectual disposition, the estranged, hard-boiled, momzer, begins to connect to himself: "so all right, he cares" (193). Moreover, the phrase "paradoxical seeds of defeat" registers this failure of *not* caring at the same time that it gestures toward Meyer's own "seed" and his complicated struggle with Django's death. Soon, his seed will be perceived again, and Landsman will marvel at his own possibility for procreation in that "Meyer's seed, even now, may be wandering through darkness toward redemption" (407). What is a child if not the ultimate sign of hope for the future?

In this novel, what it means to estrange strangeness, to inhabit the in-between or liminal zones between genre, reality, history, time, results in enchantment. When *unheimlich*, estranged isolation is the norm, feeling at home and returning to oneself constitutes enchantment. Saler explains, "In its use from the middle ages, enchantment signified 'delight' in wonderful things and the potential to be placed under their spell, to be beguiled. It was not either/or, but both/and: the price of living with enchantment was the possibility of being captivated by it, an outcome that might be prevented precisely through being aware of this possibility" (138). The experience of being "placed under their spell," the potential "to be beguiled" can be dangerous for the Jews of Sitka because it carries with it the potential of forgetting, embodied by the historical trajectory, "Egypt. Spain. Germany" (380). But being awakened from one's *unheimlich* state is not equivalent to forgetting, getting too comfortable in the present so that one forgets, "Egypt. Spain. Germany" (380); it is not "either/or" but the potential for "both/and" (Saler 138). When Landsman finds himself once again in Bina's bedroom, a place he has not been for some time—since before they were married,

> Landsman begins to drift across the surface of her bed and of the susurration of Bina's breath. In her arms, in the scent of her on the bed linens—a strong but pleasant smell like new leather gloves—Landsman feels safe for the first time in ages. Drowsy and content. Here you go, Landsman, he thinks. Here is the smell and

> the hand on your belly that you traded for a lifetime of silence. (397)

Landsman takes refuge in the rhythm of Bina's breath, her scent, the presence of her hand on his belly; he finds safety and comfort in her companionship, in his faith not in "nothing" but in the tactile pleasure of the sensory experience that is knowing Bina.

It is the space between genres—detective, romance, allohistory—where meaning is made. In this moment of enchantment, the detective-cum-romancer decodes the case. Suddenly, amidst the infantile dream-state in Bina's childhood bedroom, "he sits up. . .discontentment gathers like ball lightning around the chessboard in the pocket of his coat" (397). Landsman begins to circle through the details of Shpilman's room, his thoughts like a "tornado," re-creating the scene in his imagination (397-8). He thinks,

> maybe it's the context *at once familiar and strange*, the painted bedstead, the daisy lamp, the daisies on the wallpaper, the dresser in which top drawer she used to keep her diaphragm. Or maybe it's the lingering traces of endorphin in his bloodstream. But as Landsman stares at the chessboard, staring at a chessboard, for the first time in his life, feels good. . . Moving the pieces in his mind, seems to slow or at least to dislodge the needle inking over the black spot in his brain. (emphasis mine, 398)

"At once familiar and strange" is of course the *unheimlich* feeling of Landsman's return to Bina's childhood bedroom, but it is simultaneously the overall effect of enchantment that constitutes the break in the murder case—Shpilman must have had an opponent, a visitor, Landsman realizes (398). As Landsman solves the case and feels "the touch of Mendel Shpilman," aesthetic enchantment and affective enchantment intertwine.[109] As he gets up to

---

[109]Mendel allowed others to realize their self-worth. The rebbe tells Landsman,

> Mendel had a remarkable nature as a boy. I'm not talking about miracles. Miracles are a burden for a tzaddik, not the proof of one. Miracles prove nothing

leave, "Landsman feels it then. A hand laid on his legs, two degrees warmer than normal. A quickening, an unfurling like a banner in his thoughts. Before and after. The touch of Mendel Shpilman, moist, electric, conveying some kind of strange blessing on Landsman. And then nothing but the cold air of Bina Gelbfish's childhood bedroom" (399). Again, the ineffable, strange presence of Shpilman enters Landsman's purview and charges his sensory experience—Landsman is attuned to heat, air particles, his own experience of time; Landsman's default mode of seeing is tuned up, shaken, and present-oriented as he receives "some kind of strange blessing" (399). "Nothing but the cold air" signals the distance from Landsman's earlier faith in "nothing"; rather, the "touch of Mendel Shpilman" cements Landsman's faith in possibility as "nothing" is proof of the now-evacuated trace of Shpilman's presence.

Landsman may have an automated mechanism for cataloguing reality and archiving memory, but unlike Bina, he has had no need, no desire to tell stories. When we meet Landsman again, after he has spent the night with Bina, felt the touch of the Shemets' children, when his suspicions of Mendel Shpilman and Verbover fanaticism have all been disrupted, amidst all of these challenges to Landsman's default "sensory-psychic-intellectual disposition," he experiences the wonder of possibility (Bennett 5). In these liminal spaces, Landsman locates the freedom to construct his own narratives; he is no longer limited by what has been proscribed through genre that relies on tropes, formulas, and plots, or even narrative writ large—"the book"

> except to those whose faith is bought very cheap, sir. There was something *in* Mendele. There was a fire. This is a cold, dark place, Detectives. A gray, wet place. Mendele gave off light and warmth. You wanted to stand close to him. To warm your hands, to melt the ice on your beard. To banish the darkness of a minute or two. But then when you left Mendele, you *stayed* warm, and it seemed like there was a little more light, maybe one candle's worth, in the world. And that was when you realized the fire was inside of you all the time. And that was the miracle. Just that. (141)

of God, of corrupt American governance, of religious extremism. With a indignant sense of urgency,

> 'Fuck what is written,' Landsman says. 'You know what?' All at once he feels weary of ganefs and prophets, guns and sacrifices and the infinite gangster weight of God. He's tired of hearing about the promised land and the inevitable bloodshot required for its redemption. 'I don't care what is written. I don't care what supposedly got promised to some sandal-wearing idiot whose claim to fame is that he was ready to cut his own son's throat for the sake of a hare-brained idea. I don't care about red heifers and patriarchs and locusts. A bunch of old bones in the sand. My homeland is in my hat. It's in my ex-wife's tote bag.' (368)

"Fuck what is written," Landsman says, rejecting perhaps the *grandest* teleological premise the text offers: God's covenant with Abraham, enmeshed in the story of messianic redemption. "Fuck what is written" blasphemes Jewish textuality, Jewish belief, and the Jewish covenant with God. Red heifers and guns, gangsters and God—these are proof of the forced hand of Verbover extremism and of a life taken too soon from Mendel Shpilman. Some are clues to solving the murder of Mendel Shpilman (the red heifer) and as such, these signs are simultaneously imprinted with Jewish history, made meaningful in this story through a twisted, extreme rendering of four thousand years of Jewish belief. But Landsman turns away from this narrative that supposedly dictates his fate. "Fuck what is written" is a metafictional cry that crassly, resoundingly rejects what Cashdollar has already told Landsman regarding the outcome of Sitka: "The story, Detective Landsman, is telling us. Just like it has done from the beginning. We're part of the story. You. Me" (364). But a space of sincerity opens up between genres and narratives and the blasphemous cry, "fuck what is written," so much so that Landsman picks up the phone in the last line of the text and begins to tell his own story: "I have a story for you," Landsman says into the receiver (368).

When the hard-boiled detective Meyer Landsman *senses* Mendel's presence and *feels* at

home in the space of his ex-wife's tote bag, Chabon deliberatively problematizes narrative iconographies and obviously subverts the hard-boiled plot. Amidst the play of fantasy and the imagination, there is a turn toward sincerity, materiality, and objects. Landsman's homeland is in his hat, his ex-wife's tote bag (368). Landsman's is a faith dictated not by some "sandal wearing idiot," but rather, through his connection to materiality in the present. Landsman's process of reconnecting is one of becoming at home with a narrative of uncertainty. All of the promises of redemption, whether religious, historical, or political in nature are red herrings and empty signifiers, stirred up by the Verbovers' hubris that they can usurp the place of God and wield the coming of the messiah. But for Landsman the narrative is much less grand—it is about his connection to the here and now, to finding self-acceptance and being at home in the conditions of the unknown. Remarking on Landsman's realizations, the narrator explains,

> But there is no Messiah of Sitka. Landsman has no home, no future, no fate but Bina. The land that he and she were promised was bounded only by the fringes of their wedding canopy, by the dog-eared corners of their cards of membership in an international fraternity whose members carry their patrimony in a tote bag, their world on the tip of the tongue. (411)

Here Jewish homeland is considered apart from geopolitics, constructed entirely through the present of personal relationships, and determined through the materiality of objects with known, delimited borders—a turn to the real and the present amidst layers of fictionality. While the reader knows that the Verbovers successfully carried out their attack, she does not know if they will otherwise succeed, return to the promised land, etc. Even in a fantasy space, the future is uncertain; the only stability is offered through meaningful relationships with personal objects.

Enchantment in *The Yiddish Policemen's Union* is not simply a return to a pre-modern belief system characterized by wonder or the privileging of religious zeal couched in marvel and mystery. In other words, the narrative does not simply reenchant a disenchanted modernity, a

premise that my overall project challenges. *The Yiddish Policemen's Union* is about finding the middle ground between *heimlich* and *unheimlich* orientation toward life, where one is agitated enough to remember but not awash in suffering or the flip-side, comfort, so that one forgets. It also reorients the reader toward objects over and above textuality. Through Meyer's recharged perception he has become estranged from the most reductive version of himself: "Look at Landsman," the text requests,

> one shirt-tail hanging out, snow-dusted pork pie knocked to the left, coat hooked to a thumb over his shoulder. Hanging on to a sky-blue cafeteria ticket as it's the strap keeping him on his feet. His cheek needs the razor. His back is killing him. For reasons he doesn't understand – or maybe for no reason – he hasn't had a drink of alcohol since nine-thirty in the morning. (146)

Here Chabon invokes the reader and directs us to our own perception. But one looks only to discover a clichéd version of the hard-boiled detective; in this space one fails to perceive the significance of the "snow-dusted pork pie," the mark of his connection to his detective brethren that binds Landsman to himself, his community, and Bina. The narrative instructs that finding meaning in Bina's tote bag and Landsman's pork-pie hat is crucial to Jewish futurity, to survival in a narrative of "strange times" and uncertain futures.

CHAPTER 4

STORIES FROM A POSTMODERN CHELM: THE ABSURD LOGIC OF HISTORY IN THE COEN BROTHERS' *A SERIOUS MAN* AND NATHAN ENGLANDER'S "THE TUMBLERS"

"The films of the Coen brothers seem to take place in a postmodern Chelm, displaced chronologically and geographically"—Lee Weston Sabo, film critic

"Laughter and trembling are so curiously mingled that it is not easy to determine the relations between the two. At times the laughter seems simply to restore the equilibrium of sanity; at times the figures of the story, or parable, appear to invite or encourage the trembling with the secret aim of overcoming it by means of laughter"—Saul Bellow, introduction to *Great Jewish Short Stories* (12)

Nathan Englander's "The Tumblers" (1999) and the Coen brothers' A Serious Man (2009) may initially seem like strange bedfellows—their genres, content, and approach to narrating history could not be more distinct. But the ways in which these two texts yoke together humor and the grotesque to achieve a Kafkaesque sensibility, play with narrative conventions of diverse genres, and rely on the Yiddish trope of the schlemiel[110] to question a cosmic presence in a post-Holocaust world, provide substantial common ground to consider their rich intersections and how the schlemiel survives when confronted with evil. Of all the texts in this project, *A*

[110]Now part of American vernacular and defined in English-language dictionaries as "an awkward, clumsy person, a blunderer; a 'born loser'; a 'dope' or 'drip,'" the Yiddish schlemiel was thought to originate in the Talmud before becoming a stock character of nineteenth-century Yiddish literature (such as Menahem Mendl of Sholem Aleichem's stories), migrating to America through the fiction of Isaac Bashevis Singer and popularized by his short story, "Gimpel the Fool" (1953). Typically, the schlemiel is naïve, weak, and bungling, but shows inner strength and when confronting the worst, he retains an uncanny belief that good will triumph over evil (Wise 5). As Wisse notes, "the schlemiel is neither saintly nor pure, but only weak. The sleight of hand of his comedy is intended to persuade us that this weakness is strength" (5).

Serious Man is least obviously connected to Holocaust representation, while "The Tumblers" forges a direct representational link, yet both play with the Yiddish trope of the schlemiel to problematize historical narratives. Extending my analysis of narrative ontology in *The Yiddish Policemen's Union* (2007), and objects in *Great House* (2010) and *Everything Is Illuminated* (2002), this chapter turns to the open-endedness of uncertainty specifically in relationship to Jewish literary tropes as genre-mixing continues to disrupt historical narratives.

In the invocation of the Chelm story and its symbols, this play *with play* is important to both the trope of the schlemiel and the genre-mixing in each text. These texts explore how, in a world deprived of order and meaning, play becomes increasingly important as a mode of narrative as well as life. I will continue to rely on the definition proposed by Brian Edwards, who argues that play is "the principle of energy and difference which unsettles arrangements, promotes change and resists closure" (xiii). Play "affirms freedom and possibility against restriction, resignation and closure," characterizing *A Serious Man's* refusal to privilege certainty and "The Tumblers'" carnivalesque sensibility (Edwards 17).

This pair of texts shares a connection to the logic of absurdity. In the opening to Nathan Englander's short story "The Tumblers," (2000) the narrator tells us that this story is "an absurd undertaking. But then again. . . No more unbelievable than the reality from which they'd escaped, no more unfathomable than the magic of disappearing Jews" (99). Similarly, Larry Gopnik of *A Serious Man* searches for meaning only to discover that we live in an absurdist universe. The film questions how we are to "be good" in a world flipped inside-out, where, thanks to the instructive lyrics of Jefferson Airplane that come to stand in for Talmudic wisdom, all that we believe to be true is found to be lies. This is a world in which the lecherous, hypocritical character in the image of Abel—Sy Abelman—steals the wife of a duped Cain in the

form of Larry Gopnik. In life and death Abelman is honored as "a serious man," while the dutiful, kind husband is mocked.

As critic Mark Conard summarizes, this is a world in which there is "no reliable relationship between good actions and good fortune or wickedness and punishment" (291). The attempt to make sense of Larry Gopnik's universe proves just as futile to understanding the "magic of the disappearing Jews" in "The Tumblers" (43): the nature of cosmic uncertainty is at stake in both texts. What is it all for? Why are we here? What are our choices? How are we to survive? the characters wonder. While the stakes of history and the circumstances of survival could not be more distinct across the 1960s Jewish American suburbs and the wartime Jewish ghetto in which the stories are set, both texts foreground questions of how to read a world and determine meaning under absurd circumstances. In neither *A Serious Man* nor "The Tumblers" are we—the reader, alongside the characters—able to pinpoint stable logic or faith. Characters struggle with how to "be good" when the gauge for measuring that morality is entirely out of whack—Gopnik has no recourse to rational or religious affirmations; neither is the Holocaust-inflected world of "The Tumblers" privy to proof of logic of a rational or cosmic sort. These texts ask, how do Jews live and interpret the universe without recourse to reliable signs and modes of meaning? The mixed-genres narrative's turn to uncertainty becomes a privileged mode of mediating history. Like Chabon's project, these texts are invested in shattering the certainty through which we determine histories or modes of being; however, where Chabon substitutes a concrete fantasy (we are reminded of the redemption of Meyer Landsman) for a plunge into the uncertainty, the Coen Brothers and Englander leave characters unmoored, or even disfigured by the chaos.

Both texts are invested in a play of genre that destabilizes the various historical narratives invoked in each. When film critic Lee Sabo comments that the films of the Coen brothers, collectively, seem to take place in a "postmodern Chelm," he is referring to the reversal of logic—where wise men behave foolishly—that occurs in the landscape common to Yiddish folklore. As Englander's stories intuit four millennia later,[111] for the Wise Men of Chelm, the flip-flopped logic was necessary for survival. In "The Tumblers," the narrator recounts the many stories passed down through the generations that testify to this logic. One such tale details the events of the great sour cream shortage as the narrator notes "how Gronam had declared that water was sour cream and sour cream water, single-handedly saving the Feast of Weeks from complete and total ruin" (Englander 27). Story after story, the seemingly haphazard foolishness of the Chelmites distills and disguises the unbelievable logic of the Jews' survival. Sabo explains, "Chelm served as sort of a symbolic place where all Jewish foolishness could be pointed at and ridiculed, and the Coens' movie universe serves the same purpose among the genres they emulate and mock." In fact, the Coen brothers have devoted their career to inhabiting American genre films (Western, noir, gangster thriller, screwball comedy) and turning them into dark, ironic mockeries (Sabo). The Coen brothers frequently occupy a particular genre or borrow from multiple genres to expose foolish tropes, relying on satire and ridicule to create new contexts.

But in these texts, the insular quality of Chelm—timeless, self-contained, and usually set apart from history—is opened to historical narratives, and those stock characters of the fools of

[111]While some scholars link the schlemiel to biblical narratives, he is most commonly thought to be a product of nineteenth-century *Yiddishkeit*. Recent work by Ruth von Bernuth suggests that the story of the Chelm fables actually begins not with Jewish in Poland, but with Christians in Germany in 1597 and the Schildburg tales (Friedman).

Chelm, the schlemiels, are put towards different ends. In *A Serious Man*, the Chelm space posits historical alternatives to the 1967 narrative in which the story is set, while "The Tumblers" tests and exhausts the limits of the Chelmites' logic in a post-Holocaust world. The schlemiels of Jewish jokes and stories already embody the strange commensurability between fantasy tropes and traumatic reality. As Wisse explains, they "are simpletons, provoking our recognition that in an insane world, the fool may be the only morally sane man" (Wisse 4). Both texts play with genre and Chelm to stress the ways in which we must reevaluate interpretive modes. In so doing, the texts reveal that the binary logic of disenchantment/enchantment is both insufficient to interpret ontological questions—"But *WHY*?" is Larry Gopnik's signature refrain—in addition to proving much more aligned than dissimilar. Placing the schlemiel and the fools of Chelm in a historical context illustrates the mode of enchantment that I have been developing throughout this project—the fantasy mode of storytelling and historical representation that "delights and disturbs" as it defamiliarizes historical events.

The Postmodern Schlemiel

Larry Gopnik, the protagonist of *A Serious Man,* is a modern-day Gimpel the fool: cuckolded by his wife (and forced to pay for her lover's funeral); used by his brother; bullied by his anti-semitic neighbor; extorted by his son (and corporate America); threatened by his failing student; and ignored by his rabbis (all three of them). In one of the opening shots of the film, the frame perfectly captures the paradox of the bumbling brilliant professor. From the side, we watch Larry scribbling across a chalkboard; the medium low-angle shot catches Larry crouching so awkwardly that his yogic squat, high-water length trousers, and toothy overbite signal only that he must be clueless. How do we read the stock characters of Yiddish folklore—those foolish schlemiels—in this contemporary Chelm space? Interested in how to situate the

schlemiel in a post-Holocaust world, Ruth Wisse turns to what she calls "the political potential" of the schlemiel. Historically, Yiddish literature and folk culture have often relied on the schlemiel's naiveté to mock what otherwise remains unbearable. As the following joke from the opening of Ruth Wisse's *The Schlemiel as Modern Hero*[112] illustrates, the logic that was used to protect from harm and to confront the most difficult and otherwise insufferable things is the logic of the faithful simpleton, Gimpel the fool, the schlemiel. This joke is set during the height of Battle of Tannenberg, fought at the start of World War I between the armies of Germany and Russia, at a moment when a czarist officer attempts to prepare his troops for battle (Wisse 6):

> "The moment has come! We're going to charge the enemy. It'll be man against man in hand to hand combat."
> In the company was a Jewish soldier who was not fond of the czar or his war.
> "Please sir, show me my man!" he cried, "Perhaps I can come to an understanding with him." (Wisse 6)

The Jewish soldier in this scenario is the quintessential schlemiel, Wisse explains; clearly a fool, his absurdity stems from his suggestion that reason ("an understanding") is a logical weapon (Wisse 6). The joke mocks the Jew's foolishness but it also works to reveal that the impulse to fight is similarly foolish, both at odds with Jewish intellectualism and by extension, an insult to the czarist general's modus operandi and the larger gentile context of which he is part. Thus, the Jew is mocked, but also, he is put towards subversive ends as he reveals the inanity of the surrounding cultural and historical context—war. Wisse argues that the schlemiel is a

---

[112]In *The Schlemiel as Modern Hero,* Wisse asks how our perception of the schlemiel, "the victor in defeat," changes after the Holocaust (60). "How does one retain the notion of psychic survival when its cost has been physical extinction?," she asks (Wisse 60). In Eastern Europe, the schlemiel served as a reflection of Jewish life; the shtetl Jews "saw the schlemiel's ineptitude as an extended metaphor for their socioeconomic plight" (Pinsker 13). Wisse's argument centers on the distinction of the European versus the American schlemiel: whereas the European schlemiel's dilemma is metaphysical, in an American context, the schlemiel knows that life is futile but refuses to let it suppress his joy in living (Wisse 60).

resilient character who suffered "vicious, unrelenting harassment" but "whose continuing ability to experience frustration without yielding to desperation or defeatism may be reason enough for winning our interest" (Wisse 4).

In her seminal study, Wisse thus redefines the schlemiel in terms of his transgressive qualities. Locating the schlemiel's political potential in his intransigence, she explains:[113]

> Outrageous and absurd as his innocence may be by the normal guidelines of political reality, the Jew is simply rational within the context of ideal humanism. He is a fool, seriously—maybe even fatally—out of step with the actual march of events. Yet the impulse of the joke, and of schlemiel literature in general, is to use the comical stance as a stage from which to challenge the political and philosophical status quo. (3)

This reading provides a platform from which to situate the schlemiels of the disparate texts I juxtapose in this chapter. Because the Chelm of *A Serious Man* and "The Tumblers" is no longer removed from historical contexts, these twenty-first century schlemiels, and the mixed-genre texts of which they are part, employ (to borrow from Wisse) the comical stance as a stage from which to challenge historical status quo. While Gopnik seems unable to act—"But I didn't *DO ANYTHING*"—it is this space of inaction that closely links him to his fellow Gimpels and manifests the political potential of the "not yet." And it is play—as both a narrative mode and survival strategy—in "The Tumblers" that captures their desire to transcend a historical order at odds with their logic.

"Accept the Mystery:" The Play of Uncertainty in *A Serious Man*

A Serious Man opens with a prologue set in a winter *shtetl* of nineteenth century Europe (while the setting is nondescript, one critic remarks that it has the feeling of a nineteenth-century Poland) (Zemmelman 24). Staged entirely in Yiddish, the scene depicts Velvel and Dora, a

married couple, as they try to determine whether the old Hasid Velvel has just encountered in his travels is or is not a *dybbuk*.[114] The hybrid generic qualities of the opening scenes underscore the film's premise to "accept the mystery," and invocations of curses and *dybbuks* in the opening parable mysteriously spill into the film's central frame, resonating with the evil monsters that populate classic horror films and Jewish folk culture, further obscuring the film's genre.[115] The film opens by presenting the text of a quote attributed to Rashi, "receive with simplicity everything that happens," which is playfully undermined by the seriousness with which Larry approaches the meaning of life, God, and the universe.[116] Snowflakes fall across the black night sky of the shot, obscuring first the sky and then the text. The quotation coupled with the heaviness of the night sky masquerades as a serious worldview that is soon mocked by the philosophical quandaries that perplex Dora and Velvel of the parable, Larry, and the viewer. While at first the snowflakes fall on the viewer's perspective from a low-angle shot, the frame switches to a God's eye-view of the snow-covered village. Thus, the film opens and at once signals God's viewpoint, but the snow and the change in camera angles indicates that the viewer has lost a sense of perspective. The foreignness of the first words we hear, spoken in Yiddish, increases the sense of mystery, while their meaning points to a cosmic uncertainty. The rosy-cheeked Velvel leads his horse towards his home in the blizzard, repeating the refrain, "What a marvel, What a Marvel," and the language of enchantment teases the viewer amidst the mysterious context. Returning from his errand selling geese late at night, a wheel falls off

---

[114]In Jewish mythology, a dybbuk (from the Hebrew dāḇaq meaning "adhere" or "cling") is an evil spirit which enters into a living person and "clings" to his soul (Jewish Virtual Library).

[115]In fact, there are Jewish roots to the evil spirits of the horror genre. Paul Wegener's *Der Golem* (1914, Ger.), an adaptation of the Golem myth, is considered one of the first early horror films that influenced the later Frankenstein monster films of the 1930s.

Velvel's cart, and as luck would have it he meets a traveler on the road who assists him, whom he invites for soup.

When Dora accuses the visitor, Reb Groshkever, of being a dybbuk, his deep, sinister laughter foreshadows the bleak, Kafkaesque humor that follows. The camera pans back and forth between Dora and Velvel in a medium shot from Groshkever's perspective, presenting the alternate and gendered perspectives of Dora, who believes in dybbuks, and Velvel, who is "a rational man." Groshkover chuckles loudly and uncomfortably, his laughter peppered with disbelief as he shakes his head and wonders aloud at the accusations: "dybbuk?" "corpse?" Like Larry, Reb Groshkever is a passive spectator in the scene before him as Dora and Velvel represent the competing worldviews that will decide his fate; he observes the couple's lively argument as they debate the circumstances of his death and whether or not he is dead or alive. The grotesque farce comes to a head as Dora plunges the ice pick into Groshkever's chest and he staggers out, bleeding but seemingly unharmed—or is he? Velvel chides, "Dear wife. We are ruined. Tomorrow they will discover the body. All is lost!" And Dora responds: "Nonsense, Velvel. Blessed is the Lord. Good riddance to evil." Is Groshkover a *dybbuk* or not? Uncertainty about Reb Groshkever's fate is complicated by the seeming reality of the shtetl, which the reader has no way of authenticating; the fact that the scene is delivered entirely in Yiddish; and the mixing of farce, the grotesque, and realism. Critics disagree over this question and debate both the meaning of the parable in and of itself and its relationship to the seemingly disconnected story that follows. What is certain is the way in which the scene foreshadows the qualities of uncertainty and unresolvability that characterize the film as a whole.

The rest of the film chronicles two weeks in the life of Larry Gopnik (Michael Stuhlbarg), a physics professor facing tenure review. At the university, Larry's department has informed

him that an anonymous letter-writer is attempting to sabotage his promotion. In addition, a disgruntled Korean student, Clive Park (David Kang) tries to bribe Larry for a higher grade on his mid-term exam, and when Larry refuses, the student's father threatens Larry with a defamation suit. But Larry's troubles at the university are just one set of dilemmas in the maelstrom that has recently overtaken his formerly peaceful middle-class suburban life, now falling apart before him. Out of the blue, his wife Judith (Sari Lennick) asks for a divorce so that she can marry Sy Abelman (Fred Melamed), a self-important family friend. At home, Larry's domestic life is further complicated by his brother Arthur (Richard Kind), who, unemployed, moves in to the Gopniks' home. When not at work on his magnum opus, his notebook of sprawling hand-scrawled signs and equations titled "The Mentaculous" (which in fact turns out to be pages of meaningless gibberish), Arthur can be found hogging the family's singular bathroom where he drains his cyst. As if it could get any worse, Sy and Judith suggest that Larry (along with Arthur) move out of the Gopniks' home and into a seedy hotel nearby called the Jolly Roger. Arthur, who has a penchant for gambling, is then arrested for sex solicitation, and Larry must add to the costs of his divorce attorney representation for his brother. In an ironic twist of schlemiel-like fate, Sy is killed in a car accident and Larry is somehow roped into paying for his funeral even as we discover that Sy has been the mysterious letter-writer aiming to derail Larry's promotion. And as if it really could not get any worse, in the last scene Larry receives a call from the doctor that confirms his worst suspicions— it is cancer, probably, but not certainly. In the final frame of the film, as Larry assesses his mounting debt he caves to the financial pressure and finally takes action and changes Clive's grade from an F to a C-. Just as he erases the grade, a tornado blows into town and heads directly for Danny's Hebrew school as the children evacuate.

In *A Serious Man,* intertextual play is left ambiguously open-ended, both overdetermined (specific textual resonances are obviously indicated) and underdetermined (there is no clear way to read or evaluate the textual precursors that so obviously appear). This section explores the mixed-genre quality of the film as a way to position the theme of liminality. Coupled with the schlemel's inaction, this space of in-betweenness problematizes essentialist dogmas—religious, countercultural, historical—and encourages the viewer to occupy a space of uncertainty. Like History, counterculture is a meta-discourse all the same, one that whole-heartedly rejects the concept of culture. And as Larry comes to discover, any single mode of thought, whether it be quantum physics or religion, is sufficient proof for our existence; in Larry's ontological quest, both scientific inquiry and conventional religion are both found lacking. The only way forward is to "accept the mystery," as Mr. Park says to Larry, both affirming and denying the possibility of the cash bribe Clive leaves on Larry's desk.

This strange both/and quality defines both the hermetic, ahistorical quality of the Coen brothers' film and their obsessive recreation of suburban Minneapolis. Most critics tend to discount the Coen brothers' films as altogether ahistorical. Commentators like Emanuel Levy lament that their films are "detached from contemporary concerns and lack social relevance" which is a direct result of "their creating sealed universes that have few references outside the world of cinema" (qtd. in Adams 2). But there is something of a paradox at play as Adams refers to their films as remarkably "a-historical" and "period films" obsessed with re-creating the past. In *A Serious Man*, this paradox comes into crisp focus topically, as the film is about the 1960s and Jews—two subjects that are seemingly impossible to divorce from questions of history—yet set in a suburban enclave that is apparently immune to the political climate of both present and past. In the context of *A Serious Man* and the "new freedoms" of the 1960s, Larry's cry—"But I

didn't *DO ANYTHING*"—is both perversely ahistorical and potentially historical, even political. As a schlemiel, Larry both resists the countercultural movement (because he fails to act), where this failure reflects the movement's ideological pull as just another false sign of ontological certainty. While some historical narratives of the 1960s are directly invoked, particularly the "new freedoms" (quoted or invoked directly by many of the characters), drug culture (Larry's son is rarely present independently of smoking pot), and psychedelic rock (Jimi Hendrix and Jefferson Airplane are intricately woven into the plot), many key narratives are conspicuously absent: the U.S. involvement in Vietnam, the Six-Day War (an absence all the more obvious given the Jewish content of the film), mounting racial tensions and race riots breaking out across the U.S. (including Minneapolis), and ongoing Cold War-tensions. Absent are the familiar monikers of the decade, like Summer of Love, Swinging Sixties, and Decade of Disillusionment. Their absence is all the more conspicuous through Larry's quest for meaning and context, especially as we would expect Larry's metaphysical questions to evoke the period's cultural and ideological upheaval: Why is this happening to me? What does it mean? What do I do? What are my choices?

While Sabo's remark about the Coens' oeuvre's likeness to a postmodern Chelm does not specifically refer to *A Serious Man*, if there is a geographic location that resonates most sharply with Chelm it must be the Minnesota of the Coens' youth, which serves as the backdrop to a number of their films (Fargo; No Country for Old Men). Just as paradox is key to the logic of Chelm, it is central to *A Serious Man*, and in fact signaled in one of the opening scenes of the film that immediately invokes the paradoxical logic of Chelm and frames Larry as a schlemiel. Larry is finishing up a lecture on Schrödinger's paradox, scribbling awkwardly on the chalkboard as he turns and affirms to his class, "Right? Am I right? Is the cat dead, or is the cat

not dead?" It is in the confusing language we detect the affirmation—"Right"—of the uncertainty paradox that sets up the logic of the entire film. Designed by Austrian physicist Erwin Schrödinger in 1935, Schrödinger's paradox (or Schrödinger's cat) illustrates the nature of wave particles in quantum mechanics. In this famous experiment, a cat is placed in steel box with a Geiger counter, a vial of poison, and a radioactive substance (Kramer et al.). When the radioactive substance decays (and there is no way to predict when this will happen), the Geiger senses it and triggers the release of the poison, which then kills the cat (Kramer et al.). The cat's fate is linked directly to whether or not the atom has decayed, but the paradox is that until the box is opened, the observer is unsure whether the cat is alive or dead and must treat the cat as if it is doing all possible things (Kramer et al.). That is, the cat must be assumed to be alive or dead at the same time, which Larry sums up for the class in the form of his rhetorical statement (another form of paradox—a question that does not require an answer). Attention to the uncertainty paradox illustrates one of the key critiques, voiced by Weber himself, of the enchantment/disenchantment binary—that science in and of itself is mysterious and enchanting—and the affirmation of Larry's faith in the proof of mathematics, which I will return to later, is immediately undercut. In addition, the liminal state of the cat, its potential to be both/and before we open the box, is also invoked the threshold or liminal spaces of the film. As a schlemiel, Larry's passivity and his recourse to inaction also reside in a space that is both/and, mediating against determining or fixing possible historical outcomes; because nothing has been done, all possibilities are still at play—just like the (dead) cat.

Narratives of quantum physics, alongside the opening parable, cue the viewer in to the multiplicity of narrative ontologies that characterize *A Serious Man*. The mixing of uncertainty and mathematics, Job and Larry, fantasy and reality, Chelm and 1967 Minnesota extends

questions of potentiality, underscoring the myriad directions that Larry's life (and its context) could take. Like Chabon's *The Yiddish Policemen's Union*, the Coen brothers' films defy easy categorization and are packed with various stylistic and narrative structures. As Palmer comments, "all Coen films are adaptations of other texts, from which are confected diegetic worlds, or perhaps better, ontological modes that usually engage complex intertexts" (57). Michael Chabon's hybrid genre in the form of the novel—and the way this play critically places his work in the space of the "no man's land" between generic forms—comes closest to describing the generic hybridity and ontological play of horror, farce, fantasy, and realism in the film. Across the Coen brothers' oeuvre, narrative ontologies are in constant tension but no single mode is privileged. Aligning the Jobian character with quantum physics, the film's mixing of ontology mocks Larry's quest to locate proof of Hashem's existence.

Sometimes described in terms of their "neo-noir"[117] sensibility, which is in part a hybrid of noir characteristics from the 1940s and 1950s, the Coens' filmmaking consistently pursues inconsistency rather than developing a singular hybrid genre over time. As Adams summarizes, "the Coens prefer to work in impersonal generic forms, changing styles with each new film" and thus, "one of the few consistent patterns in their development as filmmakers has been a desire to do something different in each film" (2). The pattern of "certain uncertainty" thus defines both the formalist and thematic elements of *A Serious Man*. But as Robert C. Sickels (2008) insists, "any discussion of the Coens' work must start with an examination of genre classification, as all of their films are firmly rooted in one or more traditional genres" (116). As Carolyn Russell echoes, their world "utilizes a mesmerizing amalgamation of generic paradigms," imparting to

their films an entertaining quality of "postmodern bricolage" and "fervid absurdism" (42-4).[118]

In one *A Serious Man* delivers its Kafka-inflected message by way of Jewish folklore and biblical narratives. According to Adams, the Coens' style is quintessentially Bakhtinian in nature,[119] and a key element of the film's hybridity is thus the mixing of literary and cinematic as their films display the dual influences of film noir and pulp fiction (Adams 8). The dark comic visitation of Reb Groschkover that opens the film notably reflects the parabolic writings of Franz Kafka, an influence that marks almost all of the Coens' films (Adams 183).[120] Adams explains the particular resonances between Josef K., the protagonist of The Trial, and Gopnik, as he remarks that Josef K. too is a "serious man," one who seeks knowledge of the court and justification for his trial (185). The convoluted bureaucracy, however, precludes Josef K.'s learning the truth, just as the Gopniks' search for the truth to Hashem's logic proves futile. *The Trial* and *A Serious Man* share the same structure, where an allegorical parable precedes the longer, central narrative. If Kafka's parable "Before the Law" (the precursor to *The Trial*) instructs that the human mind is unable to comprehend truth, which cannot be communicated in ordinary, rational terms but may only be perceived when illustrated in the form of the parable (Adams 185), then the Coens complicate this concept through the play of the opening parable, itself a lesson in uncertainty, and its unstable connections to the rest of the film. In *A Serious*

---

[118]This includes but is not limited to the prison movie genre, the crime docudrama, apocalyptic science fiction/horror, the slapstick/screwball, comedy of manners, romantic comedy, the criminal-couple subgenre, and social satire (Redmon xii).

[119]In *Dialogic Imagination*, Bakhtin examines the "intentional dialogized hybrid," a pastiche within which a mixture of "languages and styles actively and mutually illuminate one another" (76).

[120]The Coens have admitted to introducing a "Kafka break" into their films, which often surprises viewers as it veers away from the main plot line without warning (Adams 183).

Man, the parable-narrative structure renders commensurate disparate experiences of absurdity: the horror of *shtetl* life and the uncertain fate of the dybbuk is no more absurd than life in a 1967 middle-class suburban Jewish community, albeit we are conditioned to think differently.

The biblical intertext is on display at various points throughout the film. Larry is clearly Jobian, and through his perils the viewer is reminded of how Job withstands tremendous torment, physical pain, and loss of his family and wealth, only to ponder the injustice of God as he allows wicked people to prosper and the innocent to suffer. (Also, Gopnik and *Abel*man's relationship resonates with the story of Cain and Abel, and Mrs. Samsky' s nude sunbathing tempts Gopnik just as Batsheva tempts King David). Larry's assimilated middle-class lifestyle of course parallels Job's comfortable status. But Sanford Pinsker and Harry Moore remind us that while Job is perhaps *schlimazl,* he is not a *schlemiel*, the difference being that while the *schlimazl* is not responsible for his bad luck (indeed Job's circumstances are directly charged to God), the bungling *schlemiel,* in part, is (9; 2). Job is also more active than Gopnik—the bulk of the biblical Job story is composed of Job arguing with three friends as they contemplate Job's afflictions and disparage God's injustice, and while Larry visits three rabbis, symbolizing the three friends, he is much more a passive listener than a skilled rhetor.

In fact, Larry barely gains permission for an audience with each one, and even that effort is stalled. Larry wants to see the wisest, oldest Rabbi Marshak first, but instead is forced to visit them—Rabbi Scott, Rabbi Nachner, and Rabbi Marshak—in the order of youngest and least experienced to oldest and most devout. As the rabbis provide mini-lessons attesting to the complexity of God's decision-making, the advice only becomes more obscure before it reaches silence: Rabbi Marshak refuses to see Larry as he is busy "thinking." The rabbis remind him that it is presumptuous of Larry even to try to understand God and that the best he can hope for is to

"help others," Rabbi Nachner counsels. In the biblical story, God finally interrupts out of whirlwind to reveal Job's limited power in the face of God's limitless omnipotence; he belittles Job's complaints, and when Job submits to God's power, his livelihood is replenished. The tornado that threatens Danny's Hebrew school as the film closes parallels the biblical whirlwind. However, unlike in the biblical narrative, God does not respond to Larry in *A Serious Man*.

We may not know how to decipher the parable, exactly, in relation to the film, but maybe that's not the point. All along, the film teases Larry and the viewer with the interpretive power of signs—of which genre tropes may be the most obvious—only to show their limitations and failures. In this way, *A Serious Man* becomes a sort of inversion of Susan Sontag's *camp* sensibility; while equally invested in parody, where *camp* takes the mundane or frivolous seriously, *A Serious Man* renders frivolous any attempts to live or render meaning seriously. The film mocks Larry's attempts to grasp stable meanings, and further ironizes these efforts through the instability of signs. Larry's brother Arthur's "Mentaculous," for example, a complex and cryptic mathematical equation that constitutes Arthur's life's work, is supposedly "a probability map of the universe," but amounts to little more than nonsensical doodling and scribbles. When Sy Abelman visits Larry to discuss his interest in marrying Judith, he instructs Larry that the recent events (namely his coupling with Judith) "are signs and tokens." Waving a bottle of wine under Larry's nose as a "peace offering," he closes in a few imposing inches from Larry's face, instructs him to "open the wine, let it breathe," and hugs him so tightly that in this moment Larry lacks for air. Peace offerings are clearly not to be trusted and we will never know the fate of the *dybbuk*. But through the homage to Kafka's own parable-mixing, what we do know that is that parable as an interpretive mode alongside the rational must mean something—and that one, independent of the other, is insufficient. This is reinforced by the parallel structure of Larry's

lecture on Schrödinger's paradox, which is part fable and part math. When a disgruntled Clive shows up in Larry's office for his failing grade on the midterm, Clive claims to have understood the parable of Schrödinger's paradox, but not the math. Larry stresses, "you cannot do physics without mathematics." Clive responds, "but I understand the physics. I understand the dead cat," to which Larry responds, "you can't really understand the physics, without understanding the math, the math tells how it really works—that's the real thing—the stories I give you in class are just illustrative, they're like fables, say, to help give you a picture." Larry scoffs, "I don't even understand the dead cat." Like Clive, Larry's singular worldview misses the mark, revealing that recourse to either/or—fable *or* math—is seemingly limited.

The film's dark humor and affinities to horror (a genre intimately connected to the fantastic) also underscore these hybrid, paradoxical interpretive frameworks. A.O. Scott of *The New York Times* described *A Serious Man* as written and structured like a farce, and shot and edited like a horror film. The combination of farce and horror brings together the cousins of fear and laughter in homage to Kafka and invokes Saul Bellow's famous categorization of the "laughter and trembling" of Jewish humor (12). As Sabo remarks, "the Coens hardly see a difference between horror and farce, and if they do, *A Serious Man* has them in such balance that it's impossible to separate them." The aesthetics of horror infiltrate the many scenes that position Larry amidst shadows and sharp lighting contrasts, often occurring at night or at dawn; the deep sonic booms that accompany scene shifts; askew camera angles;[121] or the painfully slow shots that zoom-in on long hallways, building suspense and mirroring Larry's perspective of uncertainty as he attempts to figure out causes of events.

[121]A notable example is the angle that frames Larry's reaction to the parable of the Goy's teeth.

The hetereogeneity of the horror genre has led to conflicting positions over its cinematic devaluation, but nevertheless some representations of the genre remain lodged in debates over "low status" (Jancovich 152). Part of this low status is due to its affinity to fantasy. As Robin Wood explains in his seminal essay on the genre, "the clearly fantastical nature of many horror plots presents a problem: fantasy is often seen as mere escapism, a refusal to deal with 'reality', and hence inherently unserious," a problem frequently addressed by the psychoanalytic turn as a way to "reinvest horror with seriousness" (Jancovich 22). In this way *A Serious Man* comes to mock not only the seriousness with which Larry attempts to determine meaning in his life, but also, perhaps the attempt to construct *serious* art.

If, as Jason Mittell argues, genre is a "cultural category" that defines cosmologies of human experience, then we should read seriously the interplay of horror and farce that the parable introduces (xiv). As Palmer summarizes, "the conventions of noir serve as 'a readymade set of coordinates for texts that can then respectfully repeat, cannibalize, transform, or subvert those conventions in some fashion, thus utilizing the 'already said' to say something new" (47). Placing the horror genre in a wider context, Worland notes, "the horror genre typically confronts universal philosophical and moral questions about human mortality and the nature of evil; emphasizes the psychological processes reflected in or stimulated by frightening narratives; and may suggest allegories of contemporary social and political ideology (3). The film relies on the schlemiel to reveal the horror of mundane suburban life or the price of inclusion in a conservative Jewish community: the petty harassment by Dick Dutton of the Columbia Record Club, for example. *A Serious Man* is not just "shot" like a horror film, but also invokes horror thematically in its recourse to Larry's nightmares, vulnerability, alienation, and the irrational bad luck in which he is somehow partially at fault. As Kawin suggests, "the horror film can bring

uncomfortably close the worst that could ever happen—to a character or to ourselves" (2). By relying on Worland's conceptualization of horror as a context in which to understand the farce, the film presents the horror of the banality of middle-class Jewish suburbia in the 1960s, isolated and alienated from the lively context of social change.[122]

One example of generic code-switching occurs just after the parable in the opening sequence. When the parable switches to Danny's Hebrew school classroom in Saint Louis Park, Missouri, the shift first marks an uncertain relationship between the parable's relationship to the rest of the film—is Saint Louis Park just a 1960s shtetl facing the same philosophical quandaries? The film provides no clear answer, instead privileging the mode of play as a way to connect the parable with the rest of the film. Like the opening shots obscured by the snow, as the scene switches to St. Louis Park of 1967 the viewer again loses her sense of orientation. The close-up shot travels down a pitch-black tunnel and the beginning of Jefferson Airplane's music beats loudly. As the shot zooms out from a spec on Danny's tiny earphone, we realize we have been traveling through his ear canal as he listens to his radio; to further shake up our frame of reference, the scene cuts to a close-up of a doctor inspecting Larry's ear canal somewhere across town. In the sterilized space of the doctor's office, the music abruptly stops; in contrast, the hums of the doctor's office are magnified (the crinkle of the exam table paper, the whir of the medical imaging machine). Both stylistically and thematically, ambiguity and multiplicity unfold. The Hebrew school teacher paces the room and conjugates the verb sequence, "Ani

[122]And while there is arguably little of the graphic violence or grotesque trauma that we customarily expect from horror in *A Serious Man*, the film much more subtly suggests themes attuned to the horror of bodily decay and mortality. I am thinking particularly of the close-up shots of the ear hair of the elderly principal who inspects Danny's transistor radio; the dead deer strapped to the top of the anti-Semitic neighbor's car; and most notably, the close-up shots (and gurgling sounds) of the machine that drains Arthur's sebaceous cyst.

holechet a baiyta," ("I go home," "you go home," etc.).[123] Like the Yiddish in previous scenes, the Hebrew phrases, left untranslated and without subtitles, add to the viewer's confusion. Searching for someone to conjugate, the teacher asks, "Me Yodeah?" ("Who knows?") stopping beside Rivka's desk. "Rivka, At Osa? (Do you know?)," he asks, but Rivka has no idea, and in fact, even her uncertainty is punctuated incorrectly as the teacher must correct her response "Ani lo yodeah (I don't know/masculine)" to the grammatically correct feminine ending, "Ani lo yodahaat (I don't know/feminine)." Not knowing is both the subject of communication and denotes the confused mode of communication. Across town in the doctor's office, the viewer wonders if this is a routine checkup or if something might be really wrong. From the opening scenes, the film relies toys with the assumptions of human knowledge and understanding, which will in turn comment on how we have come to know and understand the historical decade the film distills.

The logic of the disparate scenes is linked through association as the sequence continues to cut back and forth. A medium shot with a focus on a sleepy student's eyes glazed over in the Hebrew school classroom, for example, corresponds to a close-up shot of Larry's physician inspecting his eyes. The question of whether something is seriously wrong with Larry's health is transposed onto the scene in the classroom; in what sense might culture—Jewish, insular—be diseased? As Larry's doctor inspects and prods, the elderly teacher in the adjacent scene makes an unusual discovery that highlights the shocking disjunction of old and new. As the elderly teacher discovers that Danny is listening to his transistor radio and the class erupts into chaos, the camera stays focused on the teacher's reaction, "Ma Zeh? Ma Zeh? Ma Zeh?" Translating to

[123]All translations my own.

"what's this?,"[124] the teacher's reaction, the repetition of the question in Hebrew, is less a comment on Danny's transgression during class than the nature of the new technology itself disrupting ancient (and now irrelevant) modes of Jewish expression or the tradition of sending one's child to Hebrew school to prepare for his or her bar mitzvah.

The transistor radio comes to illuminate the generational divide, the cultural rift, and the general dis-ease between old and new as we see Danny sitting across from an even older man in the principal's office, the transistor radio placed on the desk between them. It's clear the principal is intrigued with the device, and not knowing how it works, Danny leans forward, about to speak up to instruct—but as he opens his mouth the principal barks, "EVREEET!," meaning that Danny may only speak if he communicates in Hebrew, and Danny sits back, silent and defeated. The degree to which the new technology befuddles the elderly instructor corresponds to the strangeness of learning Hebrew for Danny and his classmates. As the principal figures out how to use the radio, the close-up shot of the earphone in the principal's ear mirrors the earlier close-up that introduced us to Danny; but barred from communicating, the two sit, in silence, estranged from one another and the common experience—Jefferson Airplane—that defines this particular historical moment.

The sounds of the doctor's exam room (squeaky chair; doctor's dubious "hmm)), the odd, incorrect Hebrew of the religious school classroom, and stilted conversation in the principal's office offer a corrective to universal brotherly love—in this community, no one seems to get one another. The cutting highlights the overall instability of the film and characters' isolation. The directors have inserted a universal narrative of 1960s culture into an uncertain, unstable frame;

[124]With the exception of the English subtitles in the opening parable, none of the Yiddish or Hebrew words are translated for the viewer.

the message of Jefferson Airplane is not communicated cross-generationally, but rather, only experienced through the isolation of the individual. This lack of community in experience is reinforced by the individual and parallel shots of a single ear—one young, one old and hairy—listening through the earbud.

In addition to the specific reflections on cultural narratives, the liminal spaces of genre in the film in the sequences that blur the distinction between dreaming and reality reflect a reality that very well could be not what it seems. Before the dreams are revealed to be dreams, these sequences trick the viewer into thinking events may have turned out differently; the enchantment of genre-mixing indicates that perhaps the distinctions between dreaming and reality are less stark than we think. As Edwards reminds us, the fictional is used to show that "the actual world is more inconclusive, more open to refigurings, discoveries and new combinations than it is sometimes held to be. Complex and heterogeneous, it invites and resists attempts at settlement" (260). Likewise, Doreen Maitre writes that when the fictional presents worlds which in part invite us to mistake them for the actual, these spaces "make us aware of both the continuities and the discontinuities between the actual and the possible" (qtd. in Edwards 260). Horror films are frequently cited for developing this trope as they break down clear distinctions between the waking world and the dream world (Worland 33). And as Adams points out tropes of "sudden shifts from the real to the unreal" are common occurrences in Kafka's stories, where waking and dreaming are often "indistinguishable and interchangeable" (183).

In the first dream, a close-up shot once again finds Larry teaching, and this time frames Larry's hand as he verbalizes the final steps of a complicated equation—Heisenberg's uncertainty principle. Because the viewer immediately recalls the earlier scene of Larry teaching, she immediately registers this scene, too, as part of the film's reality. Thus, "the

process of presupposition and reversal" that is characteristic of Kafka's writings (Adams 183) is directly transposed onto the film and the viewer's assumption of reality is undermined when she learns it was a dream.[125] Punctuated in a tone of frustration, Larry's voice echoes, "the uncertainty principle. It proves that we can't ever really know what's going on." As he makes this assertion, the perspective shifts to a high-angle long shot of Larry, his small frame diminished by the huge scale of the chalkboard crammed with graphs and equations. "But even though you can't figure anything out, you will be responsible for it on the midterm," Larry calls out as the students file out, leaving only Sy Abelman in his baby blue golf attire staring down and with authority at Larry. It is at this point that Sy's clothes, the same he wears en route to the golf course when he makes the impetuous left turn that kills him, signal that this cannot, in fact, be happening. The camera cuts back and forth between Sy (high angle medium shot) and Larry (medium close-up), as Sy lectures Larry on the futility of mathematical proof for deciphering "this world":

> "Now I can see that it's subtle, clever, but at the end of the day, is it convincing?"
> "Well yes it's convincing, it's a proof. It's mathematics."
> "Now excuse me, mathematics is the art of the possible."
> "Eeeh I don't think so. The art of the possible, that's" and Larry squeezes one eye shut as he trails off, thinking, "I can't remember, that's something else."
> "I'm a serious man, Larry."
> "I know that, so if I've got it wrong."

[125]Like this scene, two additional dream scenes are seamlessly integrated into the film before the viewer belatedly realizes they are part of Larry's nightmares, and as they violate the tenets of reality, they also point to spaces where transgressed behaviors are sanctioned: In the second dream, Larry is having sex with the bohemian neighbor Mrs. Samsky; in the final dream, Larry sends Arthur off in a Canoe, on his way to a peaceful refuge in Canada with Clive's cash bribe before the anti-Semitic neighbor (from a hiding spot in the woods) first murders Arthur, then Larry.

"So simple, see Marshak," Sy retorts with another dismissive wave of the hand, as if he is talking to an imbecile. The conversation quickly devolves into Sy's pummeling Larry into the chalkboard and screaming at him to see Marshak when Larry wakes up in a cold sweat, breathing heavily, in the Jolly Roger to the sound of Arthur's machine as he drains his cyst in the bathroom.

Like Schrödinger's paradox, the equation casts doubt on knowledge and enchants disenchantment as it explains the imprecise nature of knowledge according to quantum physics, the moment when position and momentum cannot be determined simultaneously. The already unstable dreamscape similarly reveals the imprecise nature of knowledge. Sy Abelman's wagging hand gesture to something else at work "in this world," something that the proof of mathematics or all of quantum physics fails to fully grasp. It is not mathematics that is the art of the possible, but "politics," as Otto von Bismarck, German Chancellor from 1871-1890, famously stated. The slippage between mathematics and politics mocks Larry's faith in this mode of "proof" as it marks the space between what Larry thinks he can calculate and what is beyond his control.[126] Perhaps this something else is the Hashem that Larry so desperately wishes to reach, but the shot that showcases Larry's diminutive body in front of the vast equation emphasizes the hubris underlying Larry's entitlement to knowledge—whether by calculation or otherwise. The off-kilter proportions and failed interpretive frameworks, expressed in an already unstable dream space, indicate that our recourse to science *or* religion is also flawed and unstable.

[126]In Heidegger's gloss on this famous line, he explains that "possibility" denotes not chance but destiny imposed from above. Heidegger explains, "What is meant by possibility, here, is not just any one, that might be thought up by chance, but the one possible, the only possible. Politics for Bismarck is the capacity to see and achieve what must spring forth of essential necessity from a historical situation . . . " Politics results not from freedom of choice but exists as "the sole possible" that must "by essence and necessity spring from a historical situation" (Faye 129).

And the strange commensurability of the dream sequence (the fantastic) and the real enchants and arrives at this paradoxical truth.

Larry may play the fool, but there is still meaning to be gleaned from his pathetic failings. Wisse reminds us that the schlemiel is "out of step with the actual march of events," but following Wisse's argument, this does not necessarily make him politically or historically irrelevant (3). The schlemiel's recourse to *inaction* (non-military) rather than overt resistance (anti-military) constitutes the schlemiel's political grounds, meaning that "the responses [of the schlemiel in the military jokes] are not in the spirit of conscious rebellion, but the naïve, wholly spontaneous question of a different culture" (Wisse 4). The quintessential schlemiel inaction is of course exemplified by Larry's plea, often screamed out in a desperate naiveté: "BUT I DIDN'T DO ANYTHING!" And once again, paradoxically, Larry might be closer to some version of the truth than it appears; being "out of step with the march of events" signals possibilities, potentialities, the both/and of Schrödinger's paradox.

Regarding the historical narratives that fail to appear, *A Serious Man* is remarkable for its juxtaposition of Larry Gopnik's pathetic failings to act ("BUT I DIDN'T DO ANYTHING!") with a decade of revolutionary social change—of which Gopnik remains alienated. Larry's baby boomer brethren and their Jewish, Midwestern enclave represent a doubly alienated, insular community at odds with the revolutionary counterculture signaled by the film's recourse to music and drugs. The historical narratives that *are* present noticeably lack political context, a message that is often delivered through the play of different filmic elements. For example, the music of Jimi Hendrix is heard not as the backdrop to the sixties Zeitgeist but rather as a strangely accurate (the beats of the music punctuate the plot as Nachner tells it) non-diegetic melody that accompanies Rabbi Nachner's meaningless story of the goy's teeth. The

countercultural music scene turns capitalist as Larry dodges and eventually must answer calls from the annoying Dick Dutton. The emissary of the Columbia Record Club leaves Larry countless messages requesting payment for records like Santana Abraxas (1970), as underground rock becomes above ground and corporatized (it turns out that Danny has signed up for the service without Larry's knowledge). He receives this calls in the form of messages taken by his secretary at the University, a dynamic that points to conventional gender norms in another space that has been stripped of any political potential and instead delivered in a sanitized, ahistorical frame.

The generational clash of the opening sequence that I previously mentioned persists throughout the film and is exemplified by the futuristic sound of the new age rock of the Santana Abraxas (1970) album in contrast to the sadly melodic music of a Yiddish past. Mark Warshavskhy's (1845-1907) "Dem Milners Trern" plays in the background during a brief moment of respite as Larry relaxes in his living room with his brother Arthur. Larry may be fatally "out of step with the actual march of events," but, following Wisse, the schlemiel instructs that we may need to adjust our perception of the events in the first place (Wisse 3).

One of the ways in which the film gestures to alternative perceptions of history is through the constant positioning of Larry in liminal spaces, on the cusp of tenure, for example, in doorframes, or in the shadows.[127] The idea of a postmodern schlemiel further captures the sense of outsiderhood embedded in the liminal. In a film that is already situated between genres, Larry's *tsuris* makes him an outsider even to his own Jewish community. Like the function of liminality in Chabon's *Yiddish Policemen's Union,* liminality also encapsulates the film's

[127]The fact that Larry's son is about to be a bar mitzvah gestures to the ritual processes that are part of Turner's conceptualization of liminality.

existence "betwixt-and-between" genres, a "neither this-nor-that domain" (Turner 40). I am referring to the sense of the liminal as it relates to Victor Turner's interest in the seriousness of human play, where limen, which stems from the Latin for "threshold" (41), indicates "an interval, however brief, of margin or limen, when the past is momentarily negated, suspended or abrogated, and the future has not yet begun, an instant of pure potentiality when everything, as it were, trembles in the balance" (44). The schlemiel, by not acting, by playing the fool, inhabits a realm of "in-between" where *anything* is possible; or, in the logic of Schrödinger's paradox, we have not yet opened the box, and so the cat is both dead and not dead. All possibilities are still at play. Philip Neel reads the concept of historical contingency through Larry's individual agency. He remarks that the "superpositional crux points" indicate the moments in the film where, "if Gopnik had chosen to act, he could have altered the outcome of events. . . but throughout, the directors are hinting at the chance that at each point, things could have gone differently" (173).[128]

Extending Neel's reading of the "super positional crux points" to the wider political context or the "ahistorical" frame means thinking through Larry's inaction in relation to the absence of historical references and similar to the threshold space in which he finds himself as the threshold spaces of history. Like the dream sequences, these threshold spaces tests our own process "of presupposition and reversal" that occurs with our knowledge of history (Adams 183). Most relevant to the film's Jewish context is the cusp of the 1967 six-day war that will take place in June, but also the beginning of the Vietnam conflict and the presence of American troops in South Vietnam; or even the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and the rise of civil

[128]Neel makes this comment in passing in a larger argument centered on the somewhat strange and tangential connection of Gopnik's state of mind to Dominic Fox's idea of "militant consciousness" and the artistic potentiality of a depressive state of mind.

unrest that would occur in April, 1968. But in *A Serious Man*, this history still has the potential to unfold.

The threshold spaces in which Larry is physically staged throughout the film reinforce this sense of in-betweenness as he desperately searches for meaningful signs through which to interpret his life. A number of scenes position Larry in or near doorways as if to emphasize various possibilities behind what we would otherwise read as the doomed fate of the schlemiel. That is, lurking in the liminal is a sense of historical contingency that has larger repercussions for the somewhat ahistorical film as a whole. The entire narrative of Larry's tenure review is staged with Arlon leaning against the frame of Larry's office doorway, emphasizing the precarity of his status in the university. A few of the doorway scenes interestingly gesture to potentially transgressive behaviors. After he converses with Mrs. Samsky, who remains partially obscured from view behind her screen door, Larry partakes of the "new freedoms," smokes a joint, and dreams of having sex with his neighbor. Similarly, Larry protects Arthur from the police when he is wanted for sex solicitation; they wait somewhat impatiently outside Larry's front door as the Gopniks sit shiva for Sy Abelman. These scenarios all gesture to the threshold space as one in which Larry's character is tested, signaling the larger anthropological conception of the limen as a period in which one's identity is at stake (80).

The doorframes and liminal spaces of the film's aesthetic enclose Larry, physically, and gesture towards the space outside the film's formalist universe. Besides the music of Jefferson Airplane, considered a pioneer of counterculture-era psychedelic rock, there are few references to the historical "outside" that contextualize the backdrop of 1967. Tyree writes,

> In the 1967 world depicted in *A Serious Man* . . . we see the satirical television war comedy *F Troop*, but the escalating war in Vietnam gets no air time. This absence of history itself could be read not so much as a flaw than as a gap that

> forms an acid comment about the dreamlike detachment of Middle America from any consciousness of what's happening in the wider world. (39)

J.M. Tyree's attention to the film's ahistoricity leads him to conclude that the film is a revision of sixties ideology and "the liberating perspective of social change," instead presenting a counter-mythology to the 1960s and "ripostes to Baby Boomer self-congratulation" (33). But Tyree does not state what this counter-mythology is, exactly, and I would disagree that the film is wholly ahistorical. Tyree does not account for the open-endedness of the schlemiel's potentiality as a reflection of historical possibility that has yet to unfold. It is not just Middle America that is detached, but its Jews as the emblem of Middle America. With the exception of the Gopniks' neighbors (and they are the token anti-Semites), everyone they know is Jewish. Larry sees a Jewish doctor, hires a Jewish lawyer, and socializes with members of his Shul. Even Arlon, his colleague at the university, is Jewish and a member of the congregation, just as the dentist and the criminal attorney are. The ethnic particularity of the Minnesotan enclave is comically insular; except in this detachment that Tyree pinpoints we find an entire population of schlemiels—a liminal people living in the threshold of Middle America—and perhaps also a wider context through which to challenge our perception of the status quo.

One of the most prominent absent narratives in the film is America's involvement in Vietnam; the absent politics become present through the narrative that defines nearly of Larry's interactions with his son. As Tyree points out, the Vietnam conflict is signified obliquely by the satirical television war comedy *F Troop*. As David Desser writes of 1960s television, "certain genre deconstructions may fairly be said to have been symptomatic of the stirrings of dissatisfaction in the culture at large" (133). Citing "F Troop" (1965-1967) amidst others, he notes that these shows "began to tweak the mythos of the mainstream" (134) as *F Troop* put a

different spin on frontier life than John Ford's cavalry films ever imagined (134). When Larry is at the lawyer's office, Danny calls, interrupts and Larry is alarmed ("Danny, what's wrong?:), but the problem is only that *F Troop* is fuzzy and he needs his father to come home and fix the aerial. Later, when Danny calls Larry—this time interrupting him at the office—Danny assumes that he is after the same-old request, but this time a "real" emergency has occurred: Sy Abelman's death. What is *really* wrong here, of course, lies outside the frame in the story's intertexts: the emergencies abroad in the wider world that never come into focus.

Tyree's revisionist readings find traction in the three rabbis' advice to Larry. Mixing high and low, authority and counterculture, these rabbis spout nonsensical 1960s ideologies as a comment on the omnipotent—and in this case, empty—doctrine of the new freedoms. Disrupting these historical narratives offers a corrective to the sense of historical progress and reveals that in isolation, they will be no more successful than quantum physics or religious orthodoxy as a path towards understanding. For example, the film mocks Rabbi Scott's advice to Larry to take in all that the parking lot has to offer, counseling him to "embrace a new perspective." In the kooky rhetoric espoused by Sy Abelman, Rabbi Scott, and Rabbi Nachner, J.M. Tyree reads a "1960s vocabulary of universal brotherhood, the power of good vibes, and the parable-making of religious gurus" that amounts to nothing more than gibberish (37); this is just another version of Arthur's mentaculous, seeming brilliant advice delivered by the sagest of rabbis that is quite empty. But what, exactly is the nature of this counter-narrative? And why is it constructed through a Jewish context? In Gopnik's 1967, we discover an assimilated, insular Jewish community that communes only within itself and remains shut off from the wider world of political agitation. In fact, the way in which rock lyrics are put to subversive ends occurs in the final, climactic moment of the film when we are finally allowed to see Rabbi Marshak up

close. As Danny the bar mitzvah boy is granted his audience with the famed rabbi, Marshak's congratulatory speech is none other than the Talmudic wisdom of Jefferson Airplane that we have been hearing all along: "if the truth is found to be lies and all the hope within you dies, then what?" he asks Danny, as he proceeds to list the members of the band by name before he returns the transistor radio and sends Danny on his way with the advice to "Be a good boy." In the mixing of high and low culture, new and old technologies, music and text, foolishness and wisdom, the lyrics of Jefferson Airplane seamlessly stand in for logic of the highest religious order. This is one example of how ontological mixing renders chaotic the hierarchies of meaning through which Larry lives his life and how the sixties signal to a present-day audience. That Marshak appropriates Jefferson Airplane clearly mocks the recourse to any dogma—whether it be one's commitment to psychedelic rock or quantum physics—as a mode of determining meaning. Mixing ontologies, tropes, and signs mocks the seriousness with which Larry reads his life, endlessly searching for meaning in the surrounding tokens, gestures, and language. To place the lyrics of Jefferson Airplane and 1960s rock and roll as the bedrock of Marshak's Talmudic wisdom is to mock the entire history of Jewish intellectualism at the same time that it questions the notion of 1960s ideologies.

These liminal spaces, and their in-between, uncertain qualities, come to characterize the film's genre, many of the frames' mis-en-scene, and Larry's life trajectory. Ultimately, they test Larry's faith in a world where, as the ultimate paradox of truth, Hashem's existence does not need to be explained. Like Job, throughout his trials Larry maintains his faith. The ultimate test occurs during his visit to Marshak's office and the subsequent scene where Arthur accuses Larry of being handed a better lot in life. When he finally arrives to see Marshak, Larry is met with silence and remains stuck in a threshold space outside the office door. A medium shot frames

Larry, in the foreground, and paintings of religious Jews on the wall in the background perch just so that they are literally peering over Larry from behind each shoulder, somewhat like the "good" versus "evil" quandary of medieval morality plays. The frame communicates the moral weight of Larry's actions, as if he is being judged, like Job, as the goodness of his life evaporates and his frustration swells—Marshak cannot see him, he is busy "thinking." With the weight of his ancestors looming on his shoulders, Larry pleads with Marshak's unexpressive gatekeeper—his non-responsive secretary. At this point in the film, Larry has departed significantly from the serenity that initially characterized his interactions. Instead, with his voice breaking and his hands nervously fluttering in and out of the frame, he desperately manages to sputter the following plea:

> . . . I've already talked to the other rabbis, please. . . It's more about myself, I've had quite a bit of *tsuris*, lately, marital problems, professional, you name it, this is not a frivolous request. This is a ser—I'm a ser—I'm uhhh, I've tried to be a serious man. You know? Tried to do right, be a member of the community, raise the ki—Danny, Sarah—they both go to school, Hebrew school, a good breakfast, well, Danny goes to Hebrew school, Sarah doesn't have time, she mostly washes her hair, apparently there are several steps involved but you don't have to tell Marshak that just tell him I need help, *please*—I need hheelp.

At the moment Larry tries to say "kids," the camera cuts to the gatekeeper's evaluative glance over her glasses perched skeptically at the end of her nose, as if signaling Larry's internal guilt (Is he really a serious man—a good father?) and need to clarify. And when she opens her mouth to relay that, "the rabbi is busy," the voice is deep, masculine, and echoes with the presumed power of the rabbi's chamber so that Larry's, high-pitched, squeaky, "But he doesn't look busy!" makes him all the more schlemiel-like.

But as the horrendous events in Larry's life unfurl without end, Larry, unlike Arthur, does not renounce Hashem or give up on his search for meaning, even though Arthur's version

of events—"It's all shit!, Larry"—is much closer to the truth. Occurring in succession, the scenes placed outside Marshak's office and the empty pool of the Jolly Rodger gesture to an emotional climax of frustration and inaction for both Arthur and Larry. And yet, Larry does not sway from trying to be a "serious man." At this crucial moment in the film, Larry wakes in the middle of the night to find his brother standing confusedly in the middle of their room sobbing. Turning on the light, he tries to console Arthur, "It'll be OK, Don't worry" before Arthur runs out the door. Larry, framed for a moment by a close-up shot of him in the doorway (again, the emphasis is on the threshold space) listening to the wails of his brother and his bare feet slapping the pavement, runs after him. Sitting at the edge of the empty pool, a sobbing Arthur bemoans, "It's all shit Larry, it's all shit." Larry remains calm as he assuages his brother, trying but missing the mark as he offers misplaced guidance and tells Arthur "not to use that word." Arthur continues, rocking and wailing,

> "It's all fucking shit! Look at all that Hashem has given you, what has he given me? He hasn't given me shit."
> Larry responds, soothingly, "Arthur, what do I have? I live at the Jolly Rodger."
> "You have a family. You have a job. Hashem hasn't given me shit. He hasn't given me bubkus," Arthur moans.

But instead of becoming angry at his brother for lashing out at himself, Larry takes the moral high ground—he protects God—and his words resound with Jobian undertones: "It's not fair to blame Hashem, Arthur, please, sometimes, please calm down, you have to help yourself." When Arthur refuses to relent, the camera shows Larry leaning down to hug and comfort a crying Arthur, saying "it's OK," embracing him as if to illustrate that "when all the joy within you dies / and the truth is found to be lies," we all just "want somebody to love." In the next scene, Larry wakes up and wonders if it was all a dream: "Arthur, were we out at the pool last night?"

One scholar, Walter Metz in *Americana,* reads *A Serious Man* through Johan Huizinga's *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play Element in Culture* (1944). While his argument really centers on Paul Thomas Anderson's *Punch-Drunk Love,* Metz's work on Huizinga lauds the Coen brothers (alongside Anderson) for restoring the "ludic function" of civilization. Huizinga, whose work serves as a precursor to Victor Turner's work on liminality and play,[129] wrote *Homo Ludens* in 1938 when he was a Dutch history professor at the University of Leiden and the text was published in Switzerland in 1944. As Metz avers, Huizinga titled the book *Homo Ludens*, Man the Player, because "civilization arises and unfolds in and as play" and argued for naming man after what he "could be, not what he had become in the 1930s" as fascism brewed in Europe (qtd. in Metz). In fact, Huizinga criticizes the "false play" of the Nazis and ends his text with the word "silence," which for him means failing to rescue civilization from Nazi "seriousness" (qtd. in Metz). This reading of Huizinga leads Metz to conclude that "the misanthropy of the films of Stanley Kubrick and the Coen Brothers is one possible response to the fascist turn of the twentieth century." Huizinga calls for a return to play as a defining human characteristic, as an opposite response, but one equally critical of the fascist reduction of humanity (Metz). So maybe, the film's sense of play—while considered "ahistorical" by most—politicizes the seemingly random, ill-fated events of Larry's life, it resists the closed nature of historical inevitabilities aligned with fascism in favor of open-ended historical potentialities. On the one hand, leveling out the "meaninglessness" of religious totems and the guiding insights of quantum physics—the directors allow neither to take central stage, dictate plot, or determine meaning—

[129]Huizinga defines play as an "activity that proceeds within certain limits of time and space, in a visible order, according to rules freely accepted, and outside the sphere of necessity or material utility" (qtd. in Metz 132). He continues, "the play mood is one of rapture and enthusiasm, and is sacred or festive in accordance with the occasion. A feeling of exaltation and tension accompanies the action, mirth, and relaxation follow" (qtd. in Metz 132-3).

mocks our impulse to ask the question, "why" because as their work reveals, it's all arbitrary anyways. But on the other hand, this flattening of the world to parodic intertextuality levels the playing field. Like the inaction of the schlemiel, the film's detachment recognizes all potentialities (the cat is both dead *and* alive, as Larry instructs of Schrödinger's paradox) without having to privilege a single mode of meaning or interpretive framework. In addition to the potentialities that reside in the schlemiel's inaction, the film uses the liminal spaces that mix fantasy and reality to undermine a sense of historical determinism or a single interpretive framework.

"Hup! Hup! We must Tumble!": Survival and the Carnivalesque in "The Tumblers"

> "It was an absurd undertaking. But then again, Mendel thought, no more unbelievable than the reality from which they'd escaped, no more unfathomable than the magic of disappearing Jews. If the good people of Chelm could believe that water was sour cream, . . . then why not pass as acrobats and tumble across the earth until they found a place where they were welcome?" (43)

"The Tumblers" makes overt the underlying quality of parable that characterizes *A Serious Man*, bringing to the fore the tropes of Yiddish folklore as the fantasy story imagines the fate of the Chelmites on the eve of the Holocaust. Like the Jewish suburban enclave of St. Louis Park, Chelm is typically constructed as self-contained, impervious to the historical or logical elements that categorize the world outside the text. In addition to geographical isolation, Chelm is a place where logic is upended. As Wisse explains, "stories of Chelm. . . usually follow a single pattern—when a problem must be solved, the Chelmites come up with a formula that is theoretically correct, but practically absurd" (10). While the absurd logic of Chelm has traditionally been set apart from reality, Englander's tale reverses the trope of historical isolation while maintaining the logic of the absurd. Integrating history into the narrative through an uncomfortable laughter and a grotesque sense of play, the upended logic of "The Tumblers" embodies a carnivalesque sensibility that alludes to the way in which the Holocaust itself has

come to constitute a transgression of reality. In so doing, the story pinpoints the strange way the absurdity of history is made commensurate with the foolishness of Chelm, revealing the dark malaise at the center of enchantment. As Alexis Wilson comments, though "The Tumblers" is a Chelm story, it veers away from the customarily redemptive endings and the triumph of good faith over evil (119). "The Tumblers," she notes, "is no longer a children's story, and it is no longer redemptive in the sense that a problem is solved, an injustice is reversed, and a comical solution is offered" (Wilson 119).

The Chelmites are divided into two groups of varying religious fealty. Much like the Slouchers and the Uprighters of Jonathan Safran Foer's Trachimbrod, the Mekyls and the Mahmirim are lenient and stringent, respectively, in their religious devotion. When two trains arrive in Chelm both groups (each with their own Rabbi) must decide what to do. The Mekyls gather up their most precious belongings, while the Mahmirim are instructed to shave their hair and strip themselves of their religious garb. The groups randomly board different trains: while the Mekyls are sent to a concentration camp, the Mahmirim board a train full of circus performers bound for Germany and en route to entertain high-level Nazi officials. When the protagonist, a former Mekyl-turned-Mahmir by the name of Mendel, reports this news to the group, the "Rabbi sat in silence for some minutes, considering the mystery of the last years and the mystery of all those who had disappeared before them" (40). Ultimately, faced with their situation, the Rabbi decides that they have no other choice: "we must tumble." In this way the tumblers place their faith in the practice of acrobatics and art (in this case the performance of tumbling) becomes a vital mode of survival.

Play enters the text through the folkloric nature of the Chelm narrative and the circus trope. As Mendel steals bits and bobbles from the "real" acrobats so that Raizel may sew their

costumes, the Mahmirim do their best to perfect their new art on the train. Clad in rags, awkwardly rehearsed, feeble in their athleticism, the Jews take the stage. As they tumble clumsily, ankles cracking, limbs akimbo, a voice from the highest of the high-level audience members calls out and highlights the twisted sense of mockery at the center of the tragedy-comedy: "Look. . . they are as clumsy as Jews," the official remarks, laughing. "More," called the voice, before another—a woman's voice—chimes in, "Yes, keep on, . . . More of the Jewish ballet" (54). The story closes to the sound of the Rebbe's foot. He begins to tap, as if to cue the tumblers, but in a silent gesture Mendel waves him away and steps forward. The narrator remarks, "he [Mendel] reached out past the footlights into the dark, his hands cracked and bloodless, gnarled and intrusive. Mendel turned his palms upward, benighted. But there were no snipers, as there are for hands that reach out of the ghettos; no dogs, as for hands that reach out from the cracks in boxcar floors; no angels waiting, as they always do, for hands that reach out from chimneys into ash-clouded skies" (55). Miraculously, the Mahmirim have escaped the horror of the death camps, but in this unresolved ending, Mendel's "benighted" palms reflect his complicity in the circus act and a shame in having survived (55).

Jews disguised as aerialists, the Mahmirim do not anticipate that they will be mistaken for gentiles performing as Jews. Like the uncertainty that undergirds the whirlwind that sweeps into the final scene of *A Serious Man*, there are myriad interpretations of Mendel's final movement, raising questions but few answers: Is Mendel's gesture a wish for suicide? A desire for forgiveness? Such uncertainty reveals that the logic of Chelm is no longer impervious to historical trauma. While Wisse posits that the schlemiel is possible in a post-Holocaust American Jewish context, Menachem Feuer and Andrew Schmitz comment that, "ultimately, a naïve, schlemiel-like response to the world, one that denies it, is no longer tenable when it comes

to history" and Chelm comes face-to-face with a horrific historical context. In this story, the threshold space of the circus allows for what Bakhtin refers to as the "temporary liberation from the prevailing truth and from the established order"—the Jews survive, the Nazis are fooled—but the result is not what Bakhtin would have expected. The "gay" spectacle of "becoming, change, and renewal" does not end in rebirth, but only in ambiguity.

As I indicate in my introduction, it is the strange commensurability of seemingly incompatible modes that is the basis for my conceptualization of enchantment. This story opens by attesting to the strange pairing of Chelm and history as modes seemingly at odds: "Who would have thought that a war of such proportions would bother to turn its fury against the fools of Chelm? Never before, not by smallpox or tax collectors, was the city intruded upon by the troubles of the outside world" (27). Chelm symbolizes the ideal, fantasy image of the shtetl (Wilson 121). No one ever leaves nor arrives in Chelm, nor is it affected by pogroms (Wilson 121). The juxtaposition of an ahistorical, fictional homeland with the reality of historical trauma reveals that fools of Chelm are no longer isolated from history. The question defamiliarizes incredulity as the dark tone reverberates with the reminder of loss. Concerned with the relationship between history, aesthetics, and the ethical, Feuer and Schmitz locate the post-Holocaust denial of omnipresent reality of evil in this juxtaposition of Chelm with history (9). And Behlman explains that in this pairing of Chelm and the historical, Jewish folklore does not simply play the part of "conventional" narrative that is torn apart by the incursion of the darker, anarchic force of Holocaust reality; nor is it problematically "seamless" and merely "aesthetically pleasing," in Sue Vice's terms (qtd. in Behlman 161). Instead, Behlman notes, "it maintains its own disruptive, dark comic powers and existential profundity, resources that Kafka and Isaac Bashevis Singer famously drew upon in fashioning their own fictions" (Behlman 161).

That is, "The Tumblers" does not just reiterate the insular nature of Chelm, but draws on enchantment to reveal its logic and limitations as a mode of survival.

As we have seen from Larry's role in *A Serious Man,* the schlemiel is set apart from reality in order to problematize reality rather than simply negate it (Wisse 3). In "The Tumblers," the schlemiel's comic stance and challenge to the status quo are compounded by a carnivalesque sensibility, which contributes to the disruptive power of the story as it extends the story's mode of serious play. For Bakhtin,[130] the carnivalesque is both the description of a historical phenomenon and a literary aesthetic, and it is the latter sense of the term that is relevant to this analysis. Drawing on the tradition of folk culture in medieval carnival, Bakhtin writes that carnival celebrates the "temporary liberation from the prevailing truth and from the established order," during which time everything is susceptible to the "peculiar logic of the inside out, of the 'turnabout,' of a continual shifting from top to bottom, from front to rear, of numerous parodies and travesties, humiliations, profanations, comic crownings and uncrownings" (*Rabelais* 11).[131] In "The Tumblers," this "turnabout" describes both the tumbling bodies of the acrobats and the inversion of the historical order. Like the serious play that comes to define *A Serious Man* both aesthetically and thematically, the sense of the carnivalesque applies to both the peculiar logic of Chelm and the circus trope in "The Tumblers," where the irruption of traumatic history into the story problematizes conceits of wisdom and foolishness. The result is mixed: the Mahmirim

---

[130]Lachmann et al. reveals that Bakhtin's goals were twofold. First, Bakhtin wanted to correct the misreadings of *Rabelais* by placing it within the cultural and semantic context of the Renaissance during which "folk culture and high culture converge" (115-6). Second, he wanted to reconstruct folk culture in its "verbal, gestural, and ritual manifestations" through an analysis of Rabelais's novel (Lachmann et al. 116).

[131]The central ritualistic act was customarily a coronation of the fool, clown, or slave.

survive, but at a cost—the schlemiel is no longer insulated from history, and the irony and foolish faith in the triumph of good over evil is tinged with trauma and sadness.

This carnivalesque spirit is one that "revives and renews," ultimately offering "the chance to have a new outlook on the world, to realize the relative nature of all that exists, and to enter a completely new order of things" (*Rabelais* 34). As Shanti Elliot explains, images of reversal twist through many folklore traditions and are especially central to the carnivalesque, which manifests in the language of the Chelmites as "The Tumblers" begins (130). As is customary of Chelm, this new order, the chance at a new outlook, resides in the inversion of wisdom and foolishness:

> Gronam's logic was still employed when the invaders built the walls around a corner of the city, creating the Ghetto of Chelm. There were so many good things lacking and so many bad in abundance that the people of the ghetto renamed almost all they had: they called their aches 'mother's milk,' and darkness became 'freedom'; filth they referred to as 'hope'—and felt for a while, looking at each other's hands and faces and soot-blackened clothes, fortunate. . . potatoes were treated as gold, and a sack of gold might as well have been potatoes . . . (28)

Renaming encapsulates the logic of absurdity in Chelm, where the normal order of language is completely upended. But the reversal of logic here reaches its limit at the reality of death: "it was only death that they [the Chelmites] could not rename, for they had nothing to put in its place. This is when they became sad and felt their hunger and when some began to lose their faith in god" (28). In "The Tumblers," death alters the language of Chelm as it is equated with a literal loss of language and great gaps of silence enter this previously insular community. When the Mahmirim board the train and the Rebbe counts his followers according to the Psalms, he does not know how to account for the violent death of the young woman Yechoved: "he counted his followers with a verse of Psalms, one word for each person, knowing already that he would fall short without Yocheved. This is the curse that had befallen them. Always one less word"

(38). In the loss of language, the violence of history is transposed onto aesthetics. The chaos of the historical trauma becomes manifest in the blundering logic of the Chelmites as they rename and revise reality, but death leaves them only a void.

Like the aesthetic paradox of pleasurable fear that emanates from the horror genre invoked in the filmic techniques of *A Serious Man*, Englander's story couples the pleasure of laughter with the darkness of historical anxiety, revealing deeper emotional responses beneath the surface. Monica Osborne comments that grounded in the story's larger historical and cultural narratives is "a laughter under which horror resides, and never completely surfaces in the ways we expect it to" (130). For Bakhtin, the laughter evoked by carnivalesque humor has "a deep philosophical meaning, it is one of the essential forms of truth concerning the world as a whole" (*Rabelais* 66). Adams actually attributes a grotesque carnivalesque laughter to the Coen brothers' oeuvre, and in "The Tumblers" it resonates with ambivalence (6). In the laughter that was celebrated by Renaissance folk culture in the carnival, as a spectacular feast of inversion and parody of high culture, Bakhtin sees the possibility of a "complete withdrawal from the present order" (*Rabelais*, 275), where another world in which "anti-hierarchism, relativity of values, questioning authority, openness, joyous anarchy, and the ridiculing of all dogmas hold sway, a world in which syncretism and a myriad of differing perspectives are permitted" (118)."[132] Like absurdist language, this carnivalesque sense of laughter is also critical to the reversal of logic

[132]According to readings that historicize Bakhtin's concept of the carnivalesque, the carnival laughter applied not only to the Renaissance, but was also, under Stalinism, a subversive attack on "the perverted concept of folk culture that prevailed in the Stalin era, a culture that was decreed from on high and that in reality offered no alterative to the official one" (Lachmann et al. 118). Carnivalistic laughter likewise is directed toward something higher—toward a shift of authorities and truths, a shift of world orders. Laughter embraces both poles of change, it deals with the very process of change, with crisis itself. Combined in the act of carnival laughter are death and rebirth, negation (a smirk) and affirmation (rejoicing laughter). This is profoundly universal laughter, a laughter that contains a whole outlook on the world" (*Dostoevsky* 127).

immediately present in "The Tumblers," deepening the sense of disbelief over the war that has reached the Chelmites. When the story opens, the narrator describes a global laughter rising in response to the tales of Mendel's grandfather, Gronam the Ox: "In the Fulton Street Fish Market the dockworkers laughed with Yiddish good humor upon hearing how Gronam had tried to drown a carp. At a dairy restaurant in Buenos Aires, a customer was overcome with the hiccups as his waiter recounted the events of the great sour cream shortage" (28). "The Tumblers" is also a story that will invoke "good humor" and joyful "hiccups" as the Chelmites learn to tumble, but like language, the laughter fails to overcome historical trauma.

At first, the laughter, like the logic of language, is quintessentially carnivalesque, grounded in subversion, ambivalence and becoming (Elliot 130). The Mahmirim begin to practice their acrobatics: "Who knew that Raizel the widow had double-jointed arms, or that Shmeul [sic] Berel could scurry about upside down on hands and feet mocking the movements of a crab. Falling from a luggage rack from which he had tried to suspend himself, Mendel, on his back, began to laugh. The others shared the release and laughed along with him" (41). There was a "real and heartfelt delight" among the Mahmirim, and "they laughed as the uncondemned might, as free people in free countries do" (42). But the invocation of the carnivalesque, once again, does not end as expected. The "joyous anarchy" that momentarily questions authority in Bakhtinian terms is only temporary, and the quality of the official's laughter at the end of the performance undermines the intent to ridicule (*Rabelais* 118). When the official identifies the clumsy Jews, "there was a pause and then a singular and boisterous laughter. The laughter echoed and was picked up by the audience, who laughed back with lesser glee—not wanting to overstep their bounds" (54). A key feature of the carnivalesque is the elision of boundaries as high and low mix and mock authority. But the tentative laughter of the crowd that responds with

a "lesser glee—not wanting to overstep their bounds" reinforces that the boundaries temporarily transcended by the tumblers remain more or less intact.

The circus trope deepens the absurdist logic of Chelm. Like the mixing of high and low that constitutes the carnivalesque, the circus has traditionally been positioned as a hybrid, transgressive space. In an analysis of Australian circus acts of the late 1900s, one scholar found that "the circus was popular because these individual circus bodies were perceived as 'low-Other,'" allowing her to conclude that entry into the circus tent invoked suspension of social laws so that the circus can be seen as inheriting the Bakhtinian site of the carnivalesque (qtd. in Stoddart 173).[133] But as Stoddart explains, the concept of the circus embodies a paradoxical self-image: "it promotes an idea of itself in the popular imagination as embodying a lifestyle unfettered by conventionality or by social and legal restraint; a freedom which was echoed in performances which foregrounded the illusion of ease" (175). And though it promoted this atmosphere of freedom from social restraint, traditionally, spectators perceived themselves as more masculine than the gendered-female lithe bodies of the acrobat/aerialist, and with regards to class, morally superior (173).[134]

Part of the line that is blurred between the Chelmites and the performers is that between performance and identity; as the Mahmirim wish to be seen as Jews performing as non-Jews, they are ironically mistaken for gentiles performing as Jews. This is not a space in which the

---

[133]To complicate the reading of the circus as carnivalesque, Stoddart remarks that many spectators perceived themselves to be morally and intellectually superior to both the performers and in some cases, the rest of the audience, and if the circus were a truly carnivalesque space, such divisional hierarchies would be overturned in favor of a "free and familiar contact among people" (174). Stoddart comments that the spectator "is a voyeur, always importantly to him, in *both* sexual *and* class terms" (174).

[134]In aerial performances, men were performing as acrobats and aerialists, but also overtly performing femininity.

carnivalesque logic follows its usual reversal-to-rebirth trajectory, but one in which the Jews end up imitating themselves and the logic of Chelm is made foolish. While the space in which they perform is characterized as a "theater," the fools have undergone multiple transformations in order to fully dupe their audience. The first form of play with identity that the reader encounters is the Mahmirim's shedding of their religious clothing, as Jewish signs here are physically discarded. When they first receive orders to pack up their things for transport, "the Mahmirim rushed back to their cramped flats, the men shedding their gabardines and ritual fringes, the women folding their frocks and slipping them into drawers" (32). The men shave their beards and the women leave their kerchiefs behind (32). No longer marked as Jews, they draw on the trope of performing identity (borrowed from the carnivalesque) to survive. As Stoddart explains, "circus performers tend, perhaps with the exception of clowns, to present acts and physical stunts through which they are defined (the lion tamer, the magician, the acrobat, and so on) rather than perform dramatic roles" (59-60 Stoddart). This kind of collapse between naming and reality and the literalization of metaphors, as we have seen, is quintessential to the typical logic of the Chelm story.

When the Mahmirim appear on the back of the train, the narrator makes an important correction as he tells the story—that the Mahmirim are perceived as *acrobats*, not clowns (Englander 38). As the gentile entertainers notice the new travelers, "they turned in their seats, laughing out loud at these shaved-headed fools, these clowns without makeup—no, not clowns, acrobats. They could only be acrobats in such bland and colorless attire—and so skinny, too. Just the right builds for it. Lithe for the high wire" (38). The same characteristics that invoke the thin, bland, colorless bodies of Jews in concentration camps constitute their identification as acrobats: it is precisely "in this way, [as acrobats] the Mahmirim successfully boarded the train"

(38). Clowns, since Charles Dickens's *Hard Times* (1854), have often been associated with death and "morbid speechlessness," their humor tied to a failure to make themselves understood (Stoddart 131). In contrast, the Mahmirim reflect a clear desire to be understood as gentiles. Embedded in the concept of the circus aerialist, acrobat, or "tumbler," however, is a certain degree of transcendence. As Stoddart demonstrates, "the capacity of the human body to perform beyond its normal or even imagined limitations in forms which are entertaining, astonishing and beautiful has always constituted the very core of the circus" (166). For the acrobatic aerialist acts this would demonstrate human transcendence over the natural elements, like gravity and fire; machinery, like wires, bicycles, and cannons; "and over the possibility of death itself," a risk that is extended to the reality of historical circumstances in the story (Stoddart 166).

Like the nature of Chelm, the concept of the carnivalesque is transformed as "death defying" circus tropes take on new significance. This power of transcendence is invoked by what may seem an "incongruous set of attributes describing the powerful bodies involved as light, often weightless, flying or even transcendent of the physical body" (Stoddart 166). The ambitions and fantasies of the circus are legible on these bodies, and also, "such bodies are frequently reinscribed within subsequent texts about the circus with further more specific meanings which may have little or nothing to do with circuses" (Stoddart 166). In their initial debuts, aerialists "were held to be representative of the suspensions of place, time, and social relations which is the fantasy offered by the circus and encapsulated by the trapeze artist" (Stoddart 176).[135] Both within the frame of the story and in the larger historical context of the Holocaust, embedded within the aerialist trope is the desire to transcend place, time and relations

[135]As Tait describes, the fantasy implied in the trapezist's art "is the desire of physical bodies to defy the gravity of social categories, before returning to familiar territory when he or she halts the free fall and reinstates gender identity and the material order of bodies" (qtd. in Stoddart 175).

of history. Of course, the aerialists perform great risk—tumbling down into the real of history and to their deaths.

There is a tension between the performance of Tumblers, how they have come to embody and exist in this transcendent, carnivalesque space, and how it approximates the logic of Chelm as Chelm transforms into something else. The twists and turns of the Chelmites' language and acrobatic moves, as they begin to practice, extend the carnivalesque as they borrow from authoritarian ideology and transform into the performers. From watching the circus as a boy, Mendel recalls the secret to convincing the other performers that they were acrobats: "The secret was nothing more than an exclamation. It was simply, a 'Hup!' Knowing this, the Mahmirim lined the corridor and began to practice" (41). Like death, for which there is no expression, the Chelmites must invent a new language to describe their circumstances. "Hup" is not really a word but better described as a grunt or sound through which the Chelmites' language is degraded. Mendel instructs, "you must clap your hands once in a while as well" (41). "Hup" is the first beat of a 4/4 military cadence, which commands the lead-off step in a march or another action, as the Mahmirim—the highest on high of the religious Jews—use the logic of the third Reich against itself. But something disturbs the Chelmites in the process. The comfortable Chaos of Chelm dissipates and starts to embody a rigidity that disturbs Mendel. As the procession filed [sic] in to the theater, Mendel notices the preparations of the performers and "went cold with terror, watching, trying to isolate what in these innocuous preparations was so disturbing" (51). Realizing to "what his great terror was due," he notes:

> It was the efficiency displayed by each and every one, the crack hop-to-it-ness, the discipline and order. He had seen it from the start, from the day the intruders marched into town and, finding the square empty, began kicking down doors, from for the instant meticulousness demanded that a war of such massive scope make time to seek out a happily isolated dot-on-the-map hamlet-called-city where

> resided the fools of Chelm. It was this efficiency, Mendel knew, that would catch up with them. (51)

In this efficient and calculated mode, the Chelmites joke that they can reach up and pull the endless ropes and pegs to control the weather: "Which one to pull for rain?" Feitel asks, or a "good harvest?". . . "'And which for redemption?' the Rebbe said—his tone forlorn and as close as he came to despair" (51-2). Before the "crack hop-to-it-ness" that defines an efficient, disenchanted system of order, the Chelmites were full of faith and mystery: "there are secrets behind everything that God creates," the Rebbe notes as he nudges Mendel to remember his faith in God's mysterious ways, but such a worldview has been emptied out as the Rebbe despairs over the loss of disorder (43).

On the one hand, the Rabbi's usurping of the logic of orderliness offers a powerful sense of Jewish reclamation in the face of horror. On the other, when Mendel remarks that he knew "it would catch up with them," his reflection reveals that this reclamation is fleeting and antithetical to the Chelmites way of life. There are other ways in which the story's enchantment relies on a metafictional magic to reverse the logic of the Aktion. When the French horn player shares a drink with Mendel on the train, he also reveals the rumor of "unmatched feats of magic being performed with the trains. They go away full—packed so tightly that babies are stuffed in over the heads of the passengers when there's no room for another full grown—and come back empty, as if never before used" (39). Mendel asks, "And the Jews? . . . What trick is performed with the Jews?" "Sleight of hand," the horn player responds, "A classic illusion. First they are here, and then they are gone" (40).

Mendel's horrific feeling of disturbance—that this would "catch up with them"—recurs as he tries to teach the Mahmirim how to perform the Full Twisting Volta. In poetry, the volta,

or turn, signals a rhetorical shift or dramatic change in thought or emotion.[136] In the performance, the twists and turns result in a grotesque carnivalesque and point to an off-kilter mood that couples exaltation with fear:

> Mendel, glorious Mendel, actually executed a springing Half-Hanlon and, with Shmuel Berel's assistance (his only real task), ended in a Soaring Angel. Feitel, off his mark, missed his wife as she came toward him in a leap. Zahava landed on her ankle, which let out a crisp, clear crack. She did not whimper, quickly standing up. Though it was obvious even from the balcony that her foot was not on right. (54)

It is after the silence that follows this moment that crowd laughs. Zahava and Feitel's twisted limbs and jumps that miss the mark reveal a sense of the "the freakish or the abnormal," drawing on a carnivalesque sense of the grotesque body (176).[137] Such images echo the traumatized, disfigured, grotesque bodies of those Jews hidden from the story's view.

Nona Fienberg locates the story's power in the metaphor of the acrobatics, the newly learned skills, and the risk-taking of the tumblers, but is only through a closer look at the reversal of logic that "The Tumblers" power becomes clear (78). Crowned the orchestrator of the tumbling routine, the Rebbe is the quintessential carnivalesque "fool"; the carnivalesque lowers everything that is the "high, spiritual, ideal, abstract," "to the material level, to the sphere of earth and body" (*Rabelais* 19-20). But the spiritual degradation is more than just the cracking of limbs, where the shift from the language of the Psalms and the Chaos of the shtetl to the

---

[136]Paul Fussell refers to the volta as indispensible to poetry, explaining that "the turn is the dramatic and climactic center of the poem, the place where the intellectual or emotional method of release first becomes clear and possible. Surely no sonnet succeeds as a sonnet that does not execute at the turn something analogous to the general kinds of 'release' with which the reader's muscles and nervous system are familiar" (115-6).

[137]The degradation of the body (eating, drinking, defecating, fornicating) are central to the carnivalesque (*Rabelais* 19-20).

terseness of the circus cues and the orderliness of the performers also performs the loss of Jewish cultural and spiritual practice. This is most apparent in the rich wisdom of Rebbe that is reduced to the curse language of the circus: "He tapped out a four beat with his foot. 'Hup,' he said. 'From the top,' he said, exhausting all of the vocabulary that he had learned" (53); and later, "to your marks" (53). This is a world in which the rich chaos of Jewish folklore has been diminished.

Wisse positions Gimpel the fool's struggle as a metaphysical one; that is, Singer is providing a metaphysical purpose for Gimpel's struggle and not merely reducing it to a psychological condition (66-7). By extension, Wisse offers, Gimpel's suffering was not in vain; the trope can endure in America simply because Americans did not experience the Holocaust" (66-7). Because Americans have not endured the same history, she continues, they have an ability to believe in his sense of belief—a concept she refers to as the schlemiel's "saintliness," akin to that status of a "lamid vovnik" (65). But the Mendel who literally steps outside "the actual march of events" is not one in whom we can locate a "saintly optimism," aregue Feuer and Schmitz (105). As the narrator comments, initially Mendel's "hands were huge, befitting his lineage. Gronam's own were said to have been as broad as a shovel's head. Mendel's—somewhat smaller, had always been soft, ungainly but unnoticed. The ghetto changed that. It turned them hard and menacing" (36) and when he reaches out past the footlights, his hands are "cracked and bloodless, gnarled and intrusive" (55). In the movement from the clumsy immaturity of the "soft, ungainly but unnoticed" depiction of Mendel's hands to their "bloodless, gnarled and intrusive" description, it is as if Mendel has lived an entire lifetime. The grotesque body again echoes the cracked limbs of the tumblers and the disfigured bodies of those Jews disappeared by the trains. As the story traces the change in Mendel's hands, those that he raises

“benighted” and into the darkness, it alters the lineage of the Chelm tales, mixing the logic of absurdity across fantasy and reality.

Conclusion:

Enchantment-as-Mode: A Metafictional Structure of Feeling

In this chapter, I ask what have we learned from approaching fantasy tropes and genre mixing in Jewish American literature? What kinds of historical narratives and approaches to knowing history have we begun to see anew? The question of "why fantasy?" that Malamud asked in 1966 still begs to be answered, especially because of the ways in which fantasy tropes have become a central mode of contemporary Jewish American storytelling. Whereas Malamud relies on fantasy to make commensurate otherwise disparate experiences of history for postwar American and European Jews, the contemporary set of authors turn to fantasy—often embedding it within mixed-genre narratives—with a similar aim: to place otherwise incomparable experiences on the same representational plane. As Robert Alter notes of Malamud's use of the Beilis story in *The Fixer* (1966), the story provided "a way of approaching the European Holocaust on a scale that is imaginable, susceptible of fictional representation" (Jewishness 38). It was not just the Beilis story, but also the dreams and hallucinations of the novel that allowed the European Holocaust to be made "susceptible of fictional representation" (Jewishness 38). As both a narrative strategy and thematic concern, fantasy tropes level the representational playing field, allowing writers to bring together histories, traumas, and geographies that would otherwise remain isolated from one another.

For the contemporary set of writers, fantasy makes the strangeness of historical trauma approachable across otherwise unbridgeable gaps in time, space, and language, thus providing a way in to exploring questions of knowability and unknowability that linger in the present.

Structurally, enchantment privileges the mixing of fantasy and reality tropes as a way to self-consciously mark the third-generation's lack of direct experience with the Holocaust. In so doing, it becomes this generation's way in to mediating Holocaust memory and representation that touches, albeit through the poetics of indirection, the historical event. Fantasy thus becomes a "structure of feeling" that makes no claim to direct experience; as such, it is a way to extend Gary Weissman's idea of "fantasies of witnessing" into the present. The idea of enchantment metafictionally attunes the reader to multiple meanings of impossibility: the trauma's inconceivability in the first place; the contemporary writers' lack of direct connection complicated by their relationship to the event through representation, memory, writing, and objects; the imperative to "never forget" an even that one did not experience directly; the always already yawning gap between history and representation. Fantasy is already a space where the otherwise impossible becomes conceivable. When paired with postmodern aesthetics critical of grand narratives and authenticity, postmodern fantasies favor open-ended approaches to mediating Holocaust history that ask the reader to consider *how* she knows alongside *what* she knows.

In the Introduction to this project, I began to carve out a space to theorize enchantment, and illustrated how the term converges and diverges with existing models. Because this schemata may refer to narratives set in "our world" (*A Serious Man*; *Great House*; Malamud's short fiction); narratives set in otherworlds (*A Yiddish Policemen's Union*; "The Tumblers"); and those texts that fall in-between (*Everything Is Illuminated*), enchantment functions across definitions of Todorov's "fantastic" and Tolkien's "fantasy." For the purposes of this project, fantasy includes mixed-genre narratives that incorporate fantasy genres (sf, high fantasy); fantastic tropes that occur in fictional universes set in "our world"; and fantasy tropes that occur

in fictional universes set in otherwords. I thus use fantasy as an all-inclusive term for both fantasy and fantastic tropes. By collapsing these distinctions, I mean to illustrate how fantasy is a mode employed across genres and narrative worlds rather than define fantasy as a particular genre. Fantasy-as-mode thus opens up the analysis of play within and between genres, styles, and narrative worlds, and one that recognizes strangeness (and play with strangeness) as a key feature.

Methodologically, this project draws on genre theory, anthropology of human play, narrative theory, and Holocaust studies. Surveying the concept's reach, I note a range of definitions and approaches to enchantment since its emergence in Max Weber's famous binary to contemporary work by literary theorist Rita Felski, political scientist Jane Bennett, and historian Michael Saler. My takeaway was the interrelationship between theories of reading practices that jolt one out of a default, automatic and thus dulled experience of perception to one in which objects, historical narratives, relationships, genres, register as new but not necessarily redemptive or restorative. That is, enchantment may also stir up feelings of malaise or discontent.

As a theoretical trope, enchantment straddles the middle ground between genre and history as it dismantles the idea that Holocaust history falls squarely into categories of "knowable" and "unknowable." Some critics, like Lee Behlman, Derek Parker Royal, and Caroline Rody, have begun to note the prevalence of fantasy in third-generation Jewish American literature. These analyses successfully identify the broad intertextual influences and fantasy tropes of contemporary Jewish American literature, but they stop short at analyzing the function of fantasy. Case in point is Caroline Rody's "Jewish Post-Holocaust Fiction and the Magical Realist Turn. As I mentioned in the Introduction to this project, Rody argues that the magical moments in contemporary Jewish American literature serve "the imaginative will to

reanimate buried histories, to memorialize and resurrect the dead" (9). But is this turn to fantasy purely recuperative? Surely not, given the uncomfortable histories that rise to the surface in Malamud's and Chabon's stories. Rody's argument seems to me an overly nostalgic conception of the use of magic as she argues that these texts "rewrite death in a vision that celebrates the power of love" (56). Her claim links together magic and redemption, or magic and recuperation, without questioning why or how that magic is useful to and/or critical of historical narratives. In this way, Rody's work does not account for the ways that fantasy tropes also operate metafictionally and at a critical distance from the object of recuperation. While there are certainly elements of nostalgia at work in some of the texts in this project, these tropes are subordinated to the function of magical or fantastical tropes and the authors' investment in exploring more complicated relationships to history. For example, we are immediately reminded of Malamud's early short fiction and the ways in which fantastic tropes highlight the tendency of postwar American Jews to insulate themselves from the experiences of postwar European Jews.

The fantasy in Malamud's early short fiction questions certain historical narratives as it deepens the conversation about post-Holocaust Jewish American silence. While historians like Peter Novick have argued that cold war tensions made the Holocaust a taboo topic of conversations in the postwar period, Hasia Diner's research on local memorials, Jewish community events, and Jewish newspapers during this period allows her to revise arguments about postwar silence. Evinced in the title of her work, *We Remember with Reverence and Love: American Jews and the Myth of Silence after the Holocaust*, Diner questions Novick and others' prevailing claims to postwar silence. Turning to fantasy, Malamud's work mediates these two historical positions; while "silence" may be too strong a word to characterize postwar American Jewish reaction, there is recognition without little "reverence and love" in Fidelman's immediate

contempt for Susskind, the Holocaust refugee: "my first hello in Rome and it has to be a schnorrer," he laments (*Magic Barrel* 157). Without fantasy, the experiences of postwar American and European Jews would remain incommensurable, thus left unexplored, in Malamud's work. But through fantasy, Malamud is able to explore the personal and historical consequences of the American Jewish protagonists who travel to Italy and disavow their Jewish histories.

Malamud's early turn towards fantasy reveals the trope's ability to defamiliarize the reality of his protagonists, showing them the truth of reality hidden in plain sight, so-to-speak. The instructive scene that opens "Angel Levine" positions Manischevitz reading "but not truly reading" and poised to get "the shock of his life" when Angel Levine interrupts the scene (45). This is a doubly enchanted moment, as Levine literally interrupts the reality-oriented scene (one that takes place in "our world") and metafictionally reveals that Manischevitz no longer reads the world or its news with a clear view (not to mention the fact that Levine is a black Angel). The angel jolts Manischevitz out of oblivion and sets him on path to self-discovery so that he may read the world as it really appears. The Italy stories, in comparison, use fantasy to reveal the context of self-conscious oblivion that characterizes American Jewish middle-class life. Thus, these stories show that as a literary trope and mode of mediating historical trauma, fantasy is no less real than the protagonists' psychological delusions and conscious willingness to "unsee" their place in Jewish American history. Malamud eschews the boundaries between fantasy and reality that will later come to characterize Krauss's work and the Coen brothers' filmic world, works that allow us to defamiliarize Weber's disenchantment binary itself. And as I mentioned previously, considering the stories in a broader context of post-war Jewish American history allows the reader to juxtapose various arguments concerning post-war Jewish American "silence."

One aspect that comes into sharp focus is the American Jewish desire *not* to see the reality of European Jewish survivors, a narrative that is distinct from both discourses on silence and reverence.

As we jump to the contemporary archive and turn to objects in Chapter 2, seeing historical reality becomes problematic as we must sift through layers of representation, distance, and a deluge of ". . . photographs and movies, books and personal testimonies" (Donadio n. pag.). Fantasy tropes in Krauss's *Great House* and Safran Foer's *Everything is Illuminated* animate the inanimate, self-consciously calling attention to the texts' impossible logic. Nevertheless, the metaphysics of things allows us to approach the third-generation protagonists' inherited experiences of trauma, the protagonist/survivor's first-hand experience, and characters who haphazardly bump into traumatic representations to which they have loose cultural or historical ties. If fantasy in Malamud's work is a kind of nodal point that allows for distinct and diverse experiences of trauma to intersect, for Krauss and Safran Foer these tropes similarly enable characters with disparate relationships to both each other and the Holocaust to meet. Fantasy seems to draw together stories and characters that would otherwise have no common intersection; as such, otherwise incompatible experiences (whether generationally, geographically, or even those separated by degrees of trauma) are placed together on the same representational plane.

Enchanted objects in these novels indicate the strange ways in which the material or spiritless animate narrative and juxtapose the knowable and unknowable of Holocaust representation. In realist modes of representation,[138] to possess an object or a narrative is to know it. In contrast, by enchanting objects (giving them agency; emphasizing their metaphysics;

allowing them to signify) and making such objects incapable of being possessed, novelists like Krauss and Safran Foer underscore the impossibility for third generation writers to know and posses Holocaust history. Objects in these texts are made to feel strange in order to foreground that which eludes our grasp. To be clear, objects are not the solution to a lack of "graspable meaning," but in fact foreground the extent to which the impact of traumatic history may be unknowable. Nevertheless, there is an imperative to determine the limits of knowledge and representation by formulating new modes of storytelling that play with fantasy and reality. In *Great House*, embedded within these strange pieces of furniture is a discourse of enchantment that reveals the reality of characters' lack of direct experience. As the protagonist-desk shapeshifts across the disparate narratives, not only does it invoke the trope common to sf or fantasy literatures, but also, its instability reflects its current possessor's relationship to history. For example, without knowledge of Lotte's past, Bender's insecurity becomes a projected onto the desk's monstrosity; the furniture that crowd the Weisz children's home, and their indifference to it, comes to stand-in for their complicated relationship to their inherited trauma.

Because these novels include multiple narrators, and in the case of Safran Foer's work, multiple kinds of writing and narrative ontologies, genre mixing materializes as a mode of mediating different characters' relationships to history as well as specific historical narratives. The turn to the folkloric in the Trachimbrod narrative is extended in Chabon's Sitka; in *The Yiddish Policemen's Union* play and uncertainty become metafictional strategies explicitly tied to allohistory. Chabon genre-bends and weaves together allohistory, detective fiction, romance, and the secondary-world status of high fantasy and science fiction literatures. In so doing, Chabon's metafictional text deliberately plays with the meaning of estrangement as he blends what are usually distinct ontologies of genre: the function of a detective plot is to *detect* the

strange; the function of the sf/fantasy genre is to *normalize* the strange; the function of allohistory is to *estrange* history. Through genre play, Chabon's novel asks questions about the shaping of twentieth-century Jewish American history; and it is amidst the interplay of strangeness, defamiliarization, and genre, that he asks, why have certain narratives come to dominate others, and to what ends? By including the Jewish terrorist plot orchestrated by the Verbovers to blow up the Dome of the Rock, Chabon's point seems to be that one cannot choose to remember Jewishness within the context of the Holocaust without considering the broader contexts of Jewish diaspora. Without this multidirectional frame, historical narratives become essentialized or un-perceptible; genre mixing thus serves a historiographical purpose as it works against the absorption or naturalization of certain historical narratives. Another interesting effect of genre mixing and the inclusion of romance in this space is the story's relationship to nostalgia. Because the sentimental elements—Bina and Landsman's reconciliation; Landsman and Berko's familial love—are part and parcel of the genre, they are divorced from historical memory and instead rooted in the specific codes of romance.

If Chabon's project aims to distort how Jewish American literature perceives and positions Holocaust history, then the Coen brothers' movie *A Serious Man* thematizes the impossibility of knowing in any possible world. Even though the film does not take up Holocaust themes, it dismantles the binary structure of disenchantment and the premise that rational logic (math and physics, for example) *or* fantastical parables (dybbuks and dreams) are sufficient grounds upon which one "can know." And it is absurd, the film cautions, to stake certainty on one or either of these epistemologies. While seemingly unrelated to Holocaust themes, the film's play with horror and farce provides a way to critique the structure of seriousness inherent to fascist ideology. In this reading, genre play's connection to

anthropological play also creates political potential. That Larry's inaction, his consistent state of uncertainty, resists a definitive course of events leaves open his life's potential and gestures toward a broader sense that history is not necessarily teleological. The film does suggest certain revisions of 1960s ideological freedoms. Rabbi's Scott's advice to take in the new perspective of the parking lot mocks the movement's spiritual awakening, for example, and Dick Dutton's calls to Larry's office suggests that countercultural rock is not free of mainstream capitalism. But it is the film's mixing of horror and farce that most surprises the viewer's perception of post-war Jewish suburbia as it represents the horrific reality of the Jewish community's insularity.

In "The Tumblers" the foolish logic of Chelm is both a narrative and survival strategy as Chelm is no longer insulated from traumatic history; the story exhausts the innocence of Jewish foolishness as well as the transcendence embedded in the Bakhtinian carnivalesque. And while the Mahmirim survive the tumble, their future, just like the Jews of Sitka, is uncertain. This is also a spce in which the literary tropes of the carnivalesque and the logic of Chelm ultimately fail. These final readings of *A Serious Man* and "The Tumbers" test the limits of Yiddish folklore in a twenty-first century present; while Ruth Wisse argues that the schlemiel's innocence *is* possible in a postwar American Jewish framework (the trope is not, however, viable in a postwar European context), Larry Gopnik and Mendel are two schlemiels who contradict Wisse's claim. When Larry erases Clive's failing grade in the final scene of the film and changes the mark to a passing grade, the schlemiel fails to exist; similarly, Mendel's disfigured body and the figurative implications of his "benighted palms" indicate that the schlemiel is no longer innocent and outside history.

There are a significant number of mixed genre narratives that I did not have space to include in this project, and future studies of the interrelationship between fantasy, history, and

enchantment in Jewish American literature would include analysis of the following: Boris Fishman's *A Replacement Life* (2014); Gary Shteyngart's *The Russian Debutant's Handbook* (2002); Michael Chabon's *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier and Clay* (2002) Rebecca Goldstein's *Mazel* (2002); Thane Rosenbaum's *Golems of Gothem: A Novel* (2003). While this project investigates the intersection of hybrid genres and historiography in contemporary Jewish American literature, this move toward mixed-genre fiction is characteristic of the larger trends in American multiethnic literature could be explored as a natural extension of my current project. Moving beyond a Jewish American frame, a comparative project could consider multidirectional memory in a multiethnic American context and this inter-ethnic research would broaden the context of enchantment. Relevant texts could include Colson Whitehead (*The Intuitionist*), Junot Díaz (*The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*), and Karen Tei Yamashita (*I Hotel*). By analyzing the mixed-genre characteristics across texts by African American, Latino, and Asian American writers alongside discourses on enchantment and genre mixing, I envision conceptualizing the increasing genre-hybridization of the novel as a reflection of the structures of feeling that resituates contemporary postmodern theory.

WORKS CITED

Abramson, Edward A. "Magic, Miracle, and Faith Healing: Bernard Malamud's 'Angel Levine' and 'The Silver Crown.'" *Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism*. Ed. Thomas J. Schoenberg and Lawrence J. Trudeau. Vol. 184. Detroit: Gale, 2007. *Gale*. Web. 20 Feb. 2016.

Adams, Jeffrey. *The Cinema of the Coen Brothers: Hard-Boiled Entertainments*. Columbia University Press, 2015. Print.

Adams, Jenni. *Magic Realism in Holocaust Literature: Troping the Traumatic Real*. Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire ; New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011. Print.

Adorno, Theodor. *Minima Moralia : Reflections on a Damaged Life*. London: Verso, 2005. Print.

Alter, Robert. "In the Community: Confronting the Holocaust: Three Israeli Novels." *Commentary* 41.3 (1966): 67. Web. 20 Aug. 2014.

---. "Jewishness as Metaphor." *Bernard Malamud and the Critics*. Eds. Field, Leslie A., and Joyce W. Field. New York: NYU Press, 1970. 29-42. Print.

American Standard Version. Bible Gateway. Web. 7 Feb. 2016.

Amian, Katrin. *Rethinking Postmodernism(s): Charles S. Peirce and the Pragmatist Negotiations of Thomas Pynchon, Toni Morrison, and Jonathan Safran Foer*. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2008. Print.

Attebery, Brian. *Strategies of Fantasy*. Bloomington: IU Press, 1992. Print.

Avery, Evelyn, ed. *The Magic Worlds of Bernard Malamud*. Albany: SUNY Press, 2001. Print.

Baer, Elizabeth. *The Golem Redux : From Prague to Post-Holocaust Fiction*. Detroit: Wayne State UP, 2012. Print.

Bakhtin, Mikhail. *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*. Ed. Michael Holquist. Trans. Caryl Emerson. Reprint edition. Austin: U of Texas P, 1982. Print.

---.*Rabelais and His World*. Trans. Helene Iswolsky. New edition. Bloomington: IU Press, 2009. Print.

---. *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*. Ed. Michael Holquist. Trans. Caryl Emerson. Reprint edition. Austin: U of Texas P, 1982. Print.

---. and Caryl Emerson. *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*. U of Minnesota P, 1993. Print.

Bann, Stephen, and John E. Bowlt. *Russian Formalism: A Collection of Articles and Texts in*

Translation. Scottish Academic P, 1973. Print.

Baudrillard, Jean. *Simulacra and Simulation*. Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 1994. Print.

---. *The System of Objects*. Trans. James Benedict. London ; New York: Verso, 2006. Print.

Behlman, Lee. "The Escapist: Fantasy, Folklore, and the Pleasures of the Comic Book in Recent Jewish American Holocaust Fiction." *Shofar: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Jewish Studies* 22.3 (2004): 56–71. *Project MUSE*. Web.

Bellow, Saul, ed. *Great Jewish Short Stories*. New York: Laurel, 1985. Print.

Benjamin, Walter. *Illuminations*. 1968. New York: Schochen, 2007. Print.

Bennett, Jane. *The Enchantment of Modern Life : Attachments, Crossings, and Ethics*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton UP, 2001. Print.

---. *Vibrant Matter : A Political Ecology of Things*. Durham: Duke UP, 2010. Print.

Berger, Alan, and Asher Milbauer. "The Burden of Inheritance." *Shofar: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Jewish Studies* 31.3 (2013): 64–85. *Project MUSE*. Web. 7 Feb. 2016

Berman, Gerald S. "Reaction to the Resettlement of World War II Refugees in Alaska." *Jewish Social Studies* 44.3/4 (1982): 271–282. Print.

Bernstein, Michael André. *Foregone Conclusions: Against Apocalyptic History*. U of California P, 1994. Print.

Bernstein, J. M. *Adorno: Disenchantment and Ethics*. Cambridge [England] ; New York: Cambridge UP, 2001. Print.

Boyarin, Daniel. *Unheroic Conduct: The Rise of Heterosexuality and the Invention of the Jewish Man*. Berkeley: U of California P, 1997. Print.

Breitbach, Julia. *Analog Fictions for the Digital Age: Literary Realism and Photographic Discourses in Novels After 2000*. Rochester, NY: Camden House, 2012. Print.

Brown, Bill. "How to Do Things with Things (A Toy Story)." *Critical Inquiry* 24.4 (1998): 935-964. Print.

---. "Thing Theory." *Critical Inquiry* 28.1 (2001): 1–22. Print.

Budnick, Emily Miller. "The Holocaust in the Jewish American literary imagination." *The Cambridge Companion to Jewish American Literature*. Eds. Hana Wirth-Nesher and Michael P. Kramer. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2003. 212–230. Print.

---. *The Subject of Holocaust Fiction*. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 2015. Print.

Byatt, A.S. *A.S. Byatt: Critical Storytelling*. Reprint edition. Manchester: Manchester UP, 2012. Print.

Cappell, Ezra. *American Talmud: The Cultural Work of Jewish American Fiction*. Albany: SUNY Press, 2008. Print.

Caruth, Cathy. *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History*. First Edition. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins UP, 1996. Print.

Cawelti, John G. *Adventure, Mystery, and Romance: Formula Stories as Art and Popular Culture*. Chicago: University Of Chicago Press, 1977. Print.

Chabon, Michael. "Trickster in a Suit of Lights: Thoughts on the Modern Short Story." *Maps and Legends: Reading and Writing Along the Borderlands*. Reprint edition. New York: Harper Perennial, 2009. 1-14. Print.

---. *The Yiddish Policemen's Union : A Novel*. New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2007. Print.

Clute, John, and John Grant. *The Encyclopedia of Fantasy*. Revised edition. New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 1999. Print.

Coen, Joel and Ethan. *A Serious Man*. Focus Features, 2010. Film.

Cohen, Norman. "A Serious Man." *Journal of Religion & Film* 15.2 (2012): n. pag. Web.

Conard, Mark. *The Philosophy of the Coen Brothers*. updated edition. Lexington, Ky: UP of Kentucky, 2012. Print.

Desser, Professor David. "Movies and the Color Line." *American Cinema of the 1960s: Themes and Variations*. Ed. Barry Keith Grant. New Brunswick, N.J: Rutgers UP, 2008. 130–149. Print.

Dewey, John. *Art as Experience*. Trade pbk. ed. New York: Perigee Books, 2005. Print.

Díaz, Junot. "Conversation with Junot Díaz." Audio blog post. MIT Comparative Media Studies: Writing. 15 September, 2008. Web.

Diner, Hasia. *We Remember with Reverence and Love: American Jews and the Myth of Silence after the Holocaust, 1945-1962*. New York: NYU Press, 2010. Print.

Dippie, Brian W. *The Vanishing American: White Attitudes and U.S. Indian Policy*. Revised Edition. Middletown, Conn.: UP of Kansas, 1991. Print.

Donadio, Rachel. "Preserving the Ghastly Inventory of Auschwitz." *The New York Times* 15 Apr.

2015. *NYTimes.com*. Web. 13 July 2015.

Drout, Michael D.C. *J.R.R. Tolkien Encyclopedia: Scholarship and Critical Assessment*. 1 edition. Routledge, 2013. Print.

Dunst, Alexander. "Introduction: Third Reality — On the Persistence of Philip K. Dick." In *The World according to Philip K. Dick*. Eds. Alexander Dunst and Stefan Schlensag. Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire ; New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015. 1-10. Print.

"dybbuk." *Encyclopedia Judaica* 2008: n. pag. Print. Jewish Virtual Library.

Edwards, Brian. *Theories of Play and Postmodern Fiction*. New York: Routledge,1997. Print.

Eichler-Levine, Jodi. *Suffer the Little Children: Uses of the Past in Jewish and African American Children's Literature*. New York: NYU Press, 2013. Print.

Elliot, Shanti. "Carnival and Dialogue in Bakhtin's Poetics of Folklore." (1999): n. pag. *scholarworks-iu-edu.libproxy.lib.unc.edu*. Web. 23 Jan. 2016.

Englander, Nathan. "The Tumblers." *For the Relief of Unbearable Urges: Stories*. New York: Vintage, 2000. 26–55. Print.

"entropy, n." *OED Online*. Oxford University Press, March 2015. Web. 27 April 2015.

Faris, Wendy B. "Scheherazade's Children: Magical Realism and Postmodern Fiction." *Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community*. Eds. Lois Parkinson Zamora and Wendy B. Faris. Durham: Duke UP, 1995. 163-190. Print.

Faye, Emmanuel. *Heidegger, the Introduction of Nazism Into Philosophy in Light of the Unpublished Seminars of 1933-1935*. New Haven, CT: Yale UP, 2009. Print.

Felski, Rita. *Uses of Literature*. 1 edition. Malden, MA ; Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2008. Print.

Feuer, Menachem, and Andrew Schmitz. "Hup! Hup! We Must Tumble: Toward an Ethical Reading of the Schlemiel." *MFS Modern Fiction Studies* 54.1 (2008): 91–114. *Project MUSE*. Web.

Fienberg, Nona. "Teaching 'The Tumblers': Nathan Englander's Postmodern Chelm." *Rendezvous: Journal of Arts and Letters* 34.1 n. pag. Print.

Filmer, Paul. "Structures of Feeling and Socio-Cultural Formations: The Significance of Literature and Experience to Raymond Williams's Sociology of Culture." *The British Journal of Sociology* 54.2 (2003): 199–219. *Wiley Online Library*. Web.

Flanzbaum, Hilene, ed. *The Americanization of the Holocaust*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1999. Print.

Floreani, Tracy. "Metafictional Witnessing in Jonathan Safran Foer's *Everything Is Illuminated*." In *Unfinalized Moments: Essays in the Development of Contemporary Jewish American Narrative*. Ed. Derek Parker Royal. West Lafayette: Purdue UP, 2011. 139-52. Print.

Foer, Jonathan Safran. *Everything Is Illuminated: A Novel*. New York: Perennial, 2003. Print.

Foucault, Michel. *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*. Reissue edition. New York: Vintage, 1994. Print.

Friedlander, Saul. *Probing the Limits of Representation: Nazism and the "Final Solution."* Cambridge, Mass: Harvard UP, 1992. Print.

Friedman, Matti. "The Serious History of a Comical Town." *The Times of Israel*. N.p., 23 March 2012. Web. 23 Jan. 2016.

Furman, Andrew. *Contemporary Jewish American Writers and the Multicultural Dilemma: The Return of the Exiled*. First Edition. Syracuse UP, 2001. Print.

Furman, Andrew. "Malamud's Moral Universe." Rev. of *Bernard Malamud The Complete Stories* with intro. by Robert Giroux. *The Jewish Daily Forward* 31 Oct. 1997: n. pag. Web. 15 Oct. 2014.

Fussell, Paul. *Poetic Meter and Poetic Form*. Revised edition. Princeton, NJ: McGraw-Hill, 1979. Print.

Gilman, Sander L. *Jewish Self-Hatred: Anti-Semitism and the Hidden Language of the Jews*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins UP, 1990. Print.

Herman, David, Manfred Jahn, and Marie-Laure Ryan. *Routledge Encyclopedia of Narrative Theory*. Routledge, 2010. Print.

Hamon, Philippe. "On the Major Features of Realist Discourse." *Realism*. Ed. Lilian Furst. Trans. L.R. Furst and Sean Hand. London: Longman Pub Group, 1992. 166-85. Print.

Hasan-Rokem, Galit, and David Shulman. *Untying the Knot : On Riddles and Other Enigmatic Modes: On Riddles and Other Enigmatic Modes*. Oxford: Oxford UP. Print.

Huber, Irmtraud. *Literature after Postmodernism: Reconstructive Fantasies*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014. Print.

Hühn, Peter. "The Detective as Reader: Narrativity and Reading Concepts in Detective Fiction." *MFS Modern Fiction Studies* 3.3 (1987): 451–466. *Project MUSE*. Web. 25 Apr. 2015.

Hume, Kathryn. *Fantasy and Mimesis: Responses to Reality in Western Literature*. Methuen, 1984. Print.

Hirsch, Marianne. “The Generation of Postmemory.” *Poetics Today* 29.1 (2008): n. pag. Print.

Hungerford, Amy. *The Holocaust of Texts: Genocide, Literature, and Personification*. 1 edition. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003. Print.

---. “How Jonathan Safran Foer Made Love.” *American Literary History* 25.3 (2013): 607–624. Print.

Jackson, Rosemary. *Fantasy, the Literature of Subversion*. London ; New York: Methuen, 1981. Print.

James, Edward, and Farah Mendlesohn. *The Cambridge Companion to Fantasy Literature*. Cambridge UP, 2012. Print.

James, William. *Will To Believe, The*. South Bend, IN, USA: Infomotions, Inc., 2001. *ebrary*. Web. 20 Feb. 2016.

Jameson, Fredric. “Magical Narratives: Romance as Genre.” *New Literary History* 7.1 (1975): 135–163. *JSTOR*. Web. 25 Apr. 2015.

---. *Postmodernism, Or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. Reprint. Durham: Duke UP, 1990. Print.

Jancovich, Mark. *Horror, the Film Reader*. Florence, KY, USA: Routledge, 2001. *ebrary*. Web. 9 Dec. 2015.

Kaplan, Brett. *Unwanted Beauty : Aesthetic Pleasure in Holocaust Representation*. Urbana: U of Illinois P, 2007. Print.

Kawin, Bruce F. *Horror and the Horror Film*. Anthem Press, 2012. Print.

Kelly, James Patrick, and John Kessel, eds. *Feeling Very Strange: The Slipstream Anthology*. San Francisco: Tachyon Publications, 2006. Print.

Kramer, Melody. “The Physics Behind Schrödinger’s Cat Paradox.” *National Geographic News*. N.p. 14 August 2013. Web. 1 Jan. 2016.

Krauss, Nicole. *Great House: A Novel*. Reprint edition. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2011. Print.

---. “‘Great House’ Built On ‘Willful Uncertainty.’” *NPR.org*. N.p. 14 October 2010. Web. 16 July 2015.

---. “Interview.” By Dean Franco. Wake Forest University in Italy. Venetian Center for Jewish Studies International, Venice, Italy. 8 April 2016.

Kravitz, Bennett. "The 'Aquatic Zionist' in *The Yiddish Policemen's Union*." *Studies in Popular Culture* 33.1 (2010): 103-112. Web. 5 January 2012.

Kremer, S. Lillian. *Witness Through the Imagination: Jewish-American Holocaust Literature*. Wayne State UP, 1989. Print.

Kristeva, Julia. 1982. *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*. Translated by Leon S. Roudiez. Reprint edition. New York, NY: Columbia UP. Press.

Lachmann, Renate, Raoul Eshelman, and Marc Davis. "Bakhtin and Carnival: Culture as Counter-Culture." *Cultural Critique* 11 (1988): 115–152. *JSTOR*. Web.

Landsberg, Alison. *Prosthetic Memory: The Transformation of American Remembrance in the Age of Mass Culture*. New York: Columbia UP, 2004. Print.

Langer, Lawrence L. *Admitting the Holocaust: Collected Essays*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1995. Print.

---.*The Holocaust and the Literary Imagination*. New Haven: Yale UP, 1977. Print.

Lear, Edward. "The Jumblies." The Poetry Foundation. N.p., n.d. Web. 11 Apr. 2015.

Lewis, R. W. B. *The American Adam*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1959. Print.

Lipstadt, Deborah. "America and the Memory of the Holocaust: 1950-1965." *Modern Judaism* 16.3 (1996): 195-214. Web. 20 Oct. 2014.

Livingston, Michael. "The Shell-Shocked Hobbit: The First World War and Tolkien's Trauma of the Ring." *Mythlore* 25.1/2 (2006): 77–92. Print.

Livy, Titus, and Stephen Oakley. *The Early History of Rome, Books I-V*. Trans. by Aubrey De Selincourt. Revised edition. London: Penguin Classics, 2002. Print.

"luftmensch | luftmensh, n." *OED Online*. Oxford UP, September 2014. Web. 26 October 2014.

Malamud, Bernard. *Conversations with Bernard Malamud*. Ed. Lawrence Lasher. Jackson, MI: UP of Mississippi, 1991. Print.

---. *The Magic Barrel: Stories*. Reprint edition. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003.

---. "Why Fantasy?" *Talking Horse: Bernard Malamud on Life and Work*. Alan Cheuse and Nicholas Delbanco, eds. New York: Columbia UP, 1997. Print. 47-61.

Malmgren, Carl D. *Worlds Apart: Narratology of Science Fiction*. 1st edition. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1991. Print.

Martin, Theodore. "The Long Wait: Timely Secrets of the Contemporary Detective Novel." *Novel* 45.2 (2012): 165–183. Print.

McHale, Brian. *Postmodernist Fiction*. York: Methuen, 1987. Print.

Mendelsohn, Daniel. *The Lost: The Search for Six of Six Million*. Reissue edition. New York: Harper Perennial, 2013. Print.

Merivale, Patricia, and Susan Elizabeth Sweeney. *Detecting Texts: The Metaphysical Detective Story from Poe to Postmodernism*. U of Pennsylvania P, 2011. Print.

Metz, Walter C. "The Mechanics of the Tectonic Man: Comedy and the 'Ludic Function' of A Serious Man and Punch-Drunk Love." *Americana: The Journal of American Popular Culture (1900-Present)* 10.1 (2011): Electronic publication. Print.

Miller, J. Hillis. "The Fiction of Realism: Sketches of Boz, Oliver Twist, and Cruickshank's Illustrations." Reprinted in part in *Realism*. Ed. Lilian Furst. Trans. L.R. Furst and Sean Hand. London: Longman Pub Group, 1992. 287–318. Print.

Mittell, Jason. *Genre and Television: From Cop Shows to Cartoons in American Culture*. New York: Routledge, 2004. Print.

Neel, Phillip. "The Doldrums, or Shadows of Revolution in Theodore Dreiser's Cold World." *Philosophy and Literature* 37.1 (2013): 164–178. *Project MUSE*. Web.

Newton, Adam Zachary. *Facing Black and Jew: Literature as Public Space in Twentieth-Century America*. Cambridge UP, 1999. Print.

Ngai, Sianne. *Ugly Feelings*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2005. Print.

Nora, Pierre. *Realms of Memory: Rethinking the French Past, Vol. 1 - Conflicts and Divisions*. Subsequent edition. New York: Columbia UP, 1996. Print.

Novick, Peter. *The Holocaust in American Life*. Boston: Mariner Books, 2000. Print.

Ochshorn, Kathleen G. *The Heart's Essential Landscape: Bernard Malamud's Hero*. New York: P. Lang, 1990. Print.

Osborne, Monica. "Laughter and Trembling: The Short Fiction of Steve Stern and Nathan Englander." In *Unfinalized Moments: Essays in the Development of Contemporary Jewish American Narrative*. Ed. Derek Parker Royal. West Lafayette, Ind: Purdue University Press, 2011. 125–139. Print.

O'Valle, Violet. "Bernard Malamud's 'The Lady of the Lake' and the Lake Legends of Wales." *Language and Literature* 7 (1982): 63-80. Print.

Ozick, Cynthia. *Art & Ardor: Essays*. Knopf, 1983. Print.

Palmer, R. Barton. *Joel and Ethan Coen*. Urbana and Chicago: U of Illinois P, 2004. Print.

"perception, n." *OED Online*. Oxford University Press, March 2015. Web. 27 April 2015.

Pinsker, Sanford, and Harry T. Moore. *The Schlemiel as Metaphor: Studies in the Yiddish and American Jewish Novel*. 1st edition. Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 1971. Print.

Polster, Karen. "America and the History of the Jews in Bernard Malamud's 'The Last Mohican.'" Avery. 59-68.

"populous, adj." *OED Online*. Oxford University Press, September 2015. Web. 26 October 2015.

Proust, Marcel. *The Past Recaptured*. Random House, 1970. Print.

Ransom, Amy J. "Alternate History and Uchronia: Some Questions of Terminology and Genre." *Foundation: The International Review of Science Fiction* (2003): 58. Print.

Redmon, Allen H. *Constructing the Coens: From Blood Simple to Inside Llewyn Davis*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2015. Print.

Regis, Pamela. *A Natural History of the Romance Novel*. Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 2007. Print.

Rody, Caroline. "Jewish Post-Holocaust Fiction and the Magical Realist Turn." In *Moments of Magical Realism in US Ethnic Literatures*. Eds. Lyn Di Iorio Sandín and Richard Perez eds. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012. Print. 39-63.

Rothberg, Michael. *Multidirectional Memory*. *Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization*. Stanford: Stanford UP, 2009. Print.

---. *Traumatic Realism: The Demands of Holocaust Representation*Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2000. Print.

Rothenberg Gritz, Jennie. "Nicole Krauss on Fame, Loss, and Writing About Holocaust Survivors." *The Atlantic* 21 Oct. 2010. *The Atlantic*. Web. 29 July 2015.

Rovner, Adam. "Alternate History: The Case of Nava Semel's IsraIsland and Michael Chabon's The Yiddish Policemen's Union." *Partial Answers: Journal of Literature and the History of Ideas* 9.1 (2011): 131–152. *Project MUSE*. Web. 25 Apr. 2015.

Royal, Nicholas. *The Uncanny: An Introduction*. 1 edition. Manchester: Manchester U P, 2003. Print.

Russell, Carolyn R. *The Films of Joel and Ethan Coen*. Jefferson, N.C: McFarland & Company, 2001. Print.

Sabo, Lee Weston. "Serious Joke: The Coen Brothers' Emergence as Jewish Humorists." *Bright Lights Film Journal*. N.p. 31 Jan. 2010. Web. 11 Nov. 2015.

Saldívar, Ramón. "Historical Fantasy, Speculative Realism, and Postrace Aesthetics in Contemporary American Fiction." *American Literary History* 23.3 (2011): 574–99. Print.

Saler, Michael T. *As If: Modern Enchantment and the Literary Pre-History of Virtual Reality*. Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2012. Print.

---. "Modernity, Disenchantment, and the Ironic Imagination." *Philosophy and Literature* 28.1 (2004): 137–149. *Project MUSE*. Web. 25 Apr. 2015.

Sandín, Lyn Di Iorio, and Richard Perez, eds. *Moments of Magical Realism in US Ethnic Literatures*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012. Print.

Scanlan, Margaret. "Strange Times to Be a Jew: Alternative History after 9/11." *MFS Modern Fiction Studies* 57.3 (2011): 503–531. *Project MUSE*. Web.

Schmid, Wolf. *Narratology: An Introduction*. Walter de Gruyter, 2010. Print.

Schwenger, Peter. *The Tears of Things: Melancholy and Physical Objects*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2006. Print.

Scott, A. O. "From Coen Brothers, Calls to God and Always a Busy Signal." *The New York Times* 1 Oct. 2009. *NYTimes.com*. Web. 23 Jan. 2016.

Shallcross, Bożena. *The Holocaust Object in Polish and Polish-Jewish Culture*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2011. Print.

Shklovsky, Victor. "Art as Technique." *The Critical Tradition: Classic Texts and Contemporary Trends*. Ed. David Richter. Third. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 1997. 774–784. Print.

---. *Theory of Prose*. Dalkey Archive Press, 1991. Print.

"sincerity, n." *OED Online*. Oxford University Press, March 2015. Web. 27 April 2015.

Sickels, Robert C. "'We're in a Tight Spot!': The Coen Brothers' Screwy Romantic Comedies." *Journal of Popular Film and Television* 36.3 (2008): 114–122. *Taylor and Francis+NEJM*. Web.

Sontag, Susan. *Against Interpretation: And Other Essays*. 1st edition. New York, N.Y.: Picador, 2001. Print.

Sterling, Bruce. “Slipstream.” *Catscan 5 Science Fiction Eye* 1.5 (1989): 77–80. Print. Sterling, Bruce https://w2.eff.org/Misc/Publications/Bruce_Sterling/Catscan_columns/catscan.05

Stewart, Ralph. “The Enchanted World of the Lady of the Lake.” *Scottish Literary Journal* 22.2 (1995): 5. Web. 15 Sept. 2014.

Stoddart, Helen. *Rings of Desire: Circus History and Representation*. Manchester University Press, 2000. Print.

“strange, adj.” *OED Online*. Oxford University Press, March 2015. Web. 27 April 2015.

Sundquist, Eric J. *Strangers in the Land: Blacks, Jews, Post-Holocaust America*. Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press, 2009. Print.

Suvin, Darko. *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction : On the Poetics and History of a Literary Genre*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979. Print.

Spiegel, Simon. “Things Made Strange: On the Concept of ‘Estrangement’ in Science Fiction Theory.” *Science Fiction Studies* 35.3 (2008): 369–385. Print.

Taylor, Charles. “A Place for Transcendence?” *Transcendence: Philosophy, Literature, and Theology Approach the Beyond*. Routledge, 2007. 1–13. Print.

Thomas, Ronald R. *Detective Fiction and the Rise of Forensic Science*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004. Print.

Todorov, Tzvetan. *The Poetics of Prose*. Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1977. Print.

---. *The Fantastic; a Structural Approach to a Literary Genre*. Cleveland: Case Western Reserve University Press, 1973. Print.

Tolkien, J. R. R, Verlyn Flieger, and Douglas A Anderson. *Tolkien on Fairy-Stories*. London: HarperCollins, 2008. Print.

Tolstoy, Leo, and Vincent Tomas. *What Is Art?* 1897. Trans. Aylmer Maude. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Co., 1996. Print.

Turner, Victor. *From Ritual to Theatre : The Human Seriousness of Play*. New York City: Performing Arts Journal Publications, 1982. Print.

Tyree, J. M. “No Fun: Debunking the 1960s in *Mad Men* and *A Serious Man*.” *Film Quarterly* 63.4 (2010): 33–39. *CrossRef*. Web.

United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. “Ardeatine Caves Massacre.” *United States Holocaust Memorial Museum*. Web. 19 Feb. 2016.

Watts, Eileen H. "Not True Although Truth: The Holocaust's Legacy in Three Malamud Stories: 'The German Refugee,' 'Man in the Drawer,' and 'The Lady of the Lake.'" Avery. 139-52.

Weber, Max. "Science as a Vocation." 1918. In *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*. H.H. Gerth and C Wright Mills, Trans. and Eds. NY: Oxford UP, 1958. 129-156. Print.

Weissman, Gary. *Fantasies of Witnessing: Postwar Efforts to Experience the Holocaust*. 1 edition. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004. Print.

Wiesel, Elie. "The Holocaust as Literary Inspiration." *Dimensions of the Holocaust: Lectures at the Northwestern University*. Ed. Elliot Lefkovitz. Evanston, IL: Northwestern U P, 1977. 7.

---. "Nobel Prize Acceptance Speech." Oslo City Hall, Norway. 10 December 1986.

---. *One Generation After*. New York: Schocken, 2011. Print.

Williams, Raymond. *Marxism and Literature*. London: OUP, 1977. Print.

---. *Problems in Materialism and Culture: Selected Essays*. London: Verso, 1980. Print.

Wilson, Alex. "A Tale Told About Idiots: The Chelm Story And Holocaust Representation." In *Unfinalized Moments: Essays in the Development of Contemporary Jewish American Narrative*. Ed. Derek Parker Royal. Purdue University Press, 2011. 113–125. Print.

Wisse, Ruth R. "The Yiddish Policemen's Union by Michael Chabon." *Commentary* (2007): n. pag. Web.

---. *The Schlemiel As Modern Hero*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1971. Print.

Wolfe, Gary K. *Evaporating Genres: Essays on Fantastic Literature*. Middletown, Conn: Wesleyan, 2011. Print.

Worland, Rick. *The Horror Film: An Introduction*. 1 edition. Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2006. Print.

Zemmelman, Steve. "The Tempest Speaks." *Jung Journal* 7.3 (2013): 16–24. *Taylor and Francis+NEJM*. Web.