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Novel deceptions: historical illusionism in contemporary American fiction

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**NOVEL DECEPTIONS: HISTORICAL ILLUSIONISM IN CONTEMPORARY
AMERICAN FICTION**

by

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“Stories, like conjuring tricks, are invented because history is inadequate to our dreams.”

Steven Millhauser, “Eisenheim the Illusionist”

DEDICATION

To my parents, Robin and Alison, who taught me to read and write and encouraged me to
continue doing so.

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(Order No.)

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the subject of illusionism in contemporary American fiction. A recurrent yet under-examined theme, the history of stage magic in the U.S. suggests how an earlier age domesticated the seeming sorcery of market capitalism, credit, limitless self-(re)making, and ethnic vanishing. Such conditions provide antecedents and analogues for the writing of fiction in a world of digitalized knowledge, work, identity, and financialization. Self-reflexively illusionist fiction today represents itself ambivalently as magical entertainment. Is its function to mesmerize audiences or alert them to ideological sleight-of-hand? If the enchantments of literary art screen the machinations of power, how do novelists preserve fiction's capacity to inspire wonder, affective experience, and ethical commitment?

Chapter One argues that Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian* presents illusionism as integral to imperialism and commodification, as well as to its own artistry. McCarthy indicates the instrumentalization of aesthetics under late capitalism yet seeks through moments of enchantment to transcend it. Chapter Two shows that in *Mr. Vertigo* by Paul Auster and *In the Lake of the Woods* by Tim O'Brien, fiction's "magic" lies in

transcending social differences and inspiring empathy, but that the historical residue of racism in American illusionism obstructs the effort to imagine otherness. Both novels reframe the worth of fiction as therapeutic. Chapter Three argues that the figure of Harry Houdini embodies literature's status as primarily entertainment, inspiring wonder rather than critique. Michael Chabon's *Kavalier & Clay* celebrates escapistry, but seeks through Houdini to restore a utopian dimension to entertainment.

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INTRODUCTION

The Presence of Illusionism

Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita* (1955) grew out of a short story he wrote in Russian in the early 1940s called "The Enchanter." This unpublished tale would lend *Lolita* its premise and a thematic keynote, as notions of enchantment and magic throb throughout the novel. "The Enchanted Hunters," for instance, is the name of the hotel where Humbert Humbert, under the "spell" of the "perilous magic of nymphets" (Nabokov 15, 134), drugs Dolores Haze in anticipation of taking his first "enchanted voyage" upon her body (129). While Humbert justifies his appetites and delusions as symptoms of enchantment, he praises his own craft using the language of stage magic. At the Enchanted Hunters, he practices sleight of hand, palming and pretending to swallow his own sleeping pill (122). And when he covertly attains sexual satisfaction one afternoon as the unwitting Lolita sits on his lap, he boasts: "Absolutely no harm done. The conjurer had poured milk, molasses, foaming champagne into a young lady's new white purse; and lo, the purse was intact" (62). What he had "madly possessed," he explains, was an illusion—"my own creation, another, fanciful Lolita ... having no will, no consciousness—indeed, no life of her own" (62). Humbert's magic, he would have us believe, is the magic of art. "The Enchanted Hunters" is also, after all, the name of a play performed at Lolita's school in which a Young Poet insists to the main enchantress that "she and the entertainment provided ... were his, the Poet's, invention" (201).

The equation of magic with art, and specifically literary fiction, occurs repeatedly in Nabokov's writing. In *Speak, Memory* (1951), writing is a magic carpet to be folded in

careful patterning after imaginative flight; in the Afterword to *Lolita* he laments having to write in a foreign tongue because it is “devoid of any of those apparatuses—the baffling mirror, the black velvet backdrop, the implied associations and traditions—which the native illusionist, frac-tails flying, can magically use to transcend the heritage in his own way” (317). Nabokov’s figures of speech illuminate the mutual affinities between narrative fictions and the arts of deception: Charles Dickens, for instance, was an amateur magician, while across the Channel his contemporary Robert-Houdin retired from magic to write *Confidences d’un prestidigitateur* (1859), a bestselling memoir that treated biographical “facts” like so many brightly colored handkerchiefs (Steinmeyer 141).¹ The storyteller and the magician share a common ancestor in the shaman, who is both a caster of spells and teller of tales. Kenneth Burke finds that because “the magical decree is implicit in all language ... [any] attempt to *eliminate* magic, in this sense, would involve us in the elimination of vocabulary itself as a way of sizing up reality” (qtd. in *During* 26). It is fitting, then, that when Shakespeare inserted an author-figure into *The Tempest*, he made him a conjuror.

Humbert Humbert’s particular brand of magic might give one pause, however. This shared language of invention betrays unease concerning the intents or effects of illusionism, which, in contradistinction to the “objectivity” of realism, always “involves power over subjects ... [who must] be addressed, persuaded, entertained, deceived” (W. Mitchell 326). What then separates the mesmerizing, enchanting properties of art from commercially or ideologically manipulative deceptions? *Lolita*, among other things the

¹ For contemporary examples of these affinities, see O’Brien, “The Magic Show” (1991), Welles, *F is for Fake* (1974), and Blaine, *Mysterious Stranger* (2002).

novel of postwar American consumerism *par excellence*, radicalizes this ambivalence: Humbert's imaginative conjuring in the novel is at once a meditation on aesthetics and desire and an account of coercion, exploitation, self-delusion, and deceit. Dolores Haze is the subject "to whom ads were dedicated: the ideal consumer, the subject and object of every foul poster," and Humbert puts all manner of artful illusions to work in controlling his prey (Nabokov 148).² The "aesthetic bliss" its literary illusionism affords (Nabokov 314) is in turn inextricable from Humbert's deceptions. *Lolita* thus ushers the trope of fiction-as-magic into a late capitalist milieu in which magic cannot be separated from the illusions of advertising, distractive entertainment, or commodity fetishism. The novel signals the terms under which magic enters postmodernity.

This study pursues the topic of magic in contemporary American fiction, where it describes and seeks to resolve this ambivalence concerning the function of artful illusion in an age dominated by images and the consumption of commodified, "virtually real" forms. While stage magic might seem old-fashioned in our technologically and rationally sophisticated world, the frequency with which narratives of illusionism feature in recent fiction, film, and popular culture alerts us to its contemporary relevance.³ We are surrounded by and regularly consume forms of illusion, and the language of magic infuses the terms in which we discuss politics, economics, technology, and culture. Yet in

² For an excellent analysis of consumer culture in *Lolita*, see Bowlby.

³ The most visible instance of magic today is, of course, J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* franchise—an outlier to this study, inasmuch as it deals with fantasy magic rather than staged illusions. A list of works that involve forms of "rational enchantment" includes novels by E.L. Doctorow, Thomas Pynchon, Paul Auster, Tim O'Brien, Steven Millhauser, Susanna Clarke, Robinson Davies, Ann Patchett, Erin Morgenstern, Lev Grossman, and Michael Chabon.

spite of this, and in spite of the longstanding affinities and common metaphors connecting magic and fiction, the interplay between illusionism and literary fiction has received little scholarly consideration. In this study, I consider why there has been a resurgence of historical forms of illusionism in contemporary narrative fiction, and how a discourse of magic queries the aesthetic, political, and ethical stakes of fiction today. Situating contemporary literary treatments of magic within a history of illusionism in popular entertainment, commerce, and critical rhetoric—from P.T. Barnum and Karl Marx to David Blaine and Steve Jobs—I assert the enduring vitality of the arts of deception in American culture, arguing that magic is integral to our experience and representations of the electronically mediated and globalized present.

My study considers a number of texts written since 1975—an approximate marker for the advent of both the digital revolution and neoliberal economics⁴—that involve stage magicians, conjurors, and escape artists and are set in the heyday of entertainment magic. Magic blossomed as popular entertainment during the Industrial Revolution, in part because it dramatized and rationalized the bewildering changes in everyday experience (new technologies of communication and production, scientific discoveries, urbanization and commodity trading, etc.), providing a fantasy of individual control over those processes and harking back to premodern enchantments. The history of stage magic in the U.S. suggests how an earlier age domesticated the seeming sorcery of market capitalism, credit, limitless self-(re)making, and ethnic vanishing. Such conditions

⁴ Apple was founded and released its first personal computer in 1976; David Harvey's *Brief History of Neoliberalism* (2007) locates neoliberalism's rise in the late 1970s, and the ascent of Ronald Reagan, Margaret Thatcher, and Deng Xiaoping.

provide antecedents and analogues for the writing of fiction in a world of digitalized knowledge, work, identity, and financialization. Magic describes this digitalization, the pervasiveness of spectacular entertainment and images—in short, the widespread perception of postmodernity as unreal, the culmination of Marx’s lament that “all that is solid melts into air.”⁵

Like *Lolita*, illusionist fictions are self-reflexive, presenting themselves ambivalently as magical entertainment. They celebrate imaginative invention and simultaneously critique the uses to which illusionism is put. In employing the sorts of conjuring, escapistry, and legerdemain that they depict, their treatment of magic critically reflects on their own workings and uses, and confronts us with the aesthetic and ethical dilemmas that they stage. Is the function of illusionism to mesmerize audiences or alert them to ideological sleight-of-hand? If the enchantments of literary art screen the machinations of power, how do novelists preserve fiction’s capacity to inspire wonder, affective experience, and ethical commitment? I argue that these illusionist fictions offer a dialectical understanding of literary enchantment, one which recognizes it both as ephemeral and compromised and as limned with imaginative possibility. They seek to mediate, in other words, between an attachment to critique that would “see through” illusions and an assertion of the power of illusion to inspire wonder, invigorate the senses, and spur us to political and ethical commitment. In attesting to the transformative potential of illusion, the turn to magic intervenes in recent debates in the humanities

⁵ For accounts stressing the pervasive unreality of capitalist modernity, see Berman, and Lears, *No Place of Grace*. For theorizations of postmodernity in terms of invidious illusion, see Baudrillard and Debord.

concerning the efficacy of critique, the rehabilitation of imagination, and the affective turn. While the recuperation of magic contains a residue of nostalgia for outmoded forms of literary authority, it more decisively articulates the hopeful, generative properties of literary enchantment.

Equivocal Illusionism: Magic in Modernity

My project examines how nineteenth-century arts of deception reemerge in the globalized and digitized present. It thus works within the double timeframe of contemporary historical fiction largely set between 1850 and 1940 (a period encompassing magic's consolidation and demise as show business). An assumption I share with cultural historians of magic is that the technological and epistemic upheavals of the nineteenth century are analogous to those of the twenty-first, and thus that studying past cultural responses to those changes can help us understand those of the present.⁶ I use the terms "magic," "conjuring," and "illusionism" mostly interchangeably throughout. All describe the arts of deception, or what Simon During calls "magic assemblage"—commercial performances by professional magicians, jugglers, cardsharps, escape artists, confidence men, and showmen that were clustered around theaters, fairs, music halls, and circuses (During 66). These arts are distinct from, although they consciously evoke, the "real magic" of wizards and witches, sorcery and possession. Whereas the latter are artifacts of folkloric beliefs, secular magic aims to produce effects of wonder, enchantment, or mystery within a rational, performative, commercial

⁶ In various ways, this assumption is implicit or explicit in During, Saler, and Sconce. See also Berman 35-36.

paradigm. The arts of deception are thus distinguished by self-reflexivity: the wonders produced point not towards some hidden power (as in sorcery) or desired effect (as in fraudulence) but towards the craft of the performer. This craft aims at producing temporary enchantment in persons and things—“enchantment” describing an affective experience of wonder or immersion in the former, and properties of immanent value, mystery, or strangeness in the latter.

Literary illusionism, adopting this self-reflexivity and pursuit of temporary enchantments, must be distinguished from self-reflexive postmodernist fiction and from magical realism. For whereas postmodern fiction punctures its own fictionality, illusionist fiction seeks rather to effect a conscious immersion in artifice—just as a magician heightens the “reality” of his tricks by forswearing false pretenses. And unlike magical realism, its enchantments are rooted not in the clash of divergent epistemologies (e.g., first-world capitalist vs. third-world folkloric) but instead express tensions within rational modernity.⁷ The literary illusionism I consider is defined by two primary, interrelated features, one historical and one discursive. In the first place, these works critically engage the history of illusionist entertainment in the United States—its commercial, cultural, and ideological uses—and more generally the history of forms of enchantment within capitalist modernity. Secondly, they share with stage magic an equivocal stance regarding its own effects: it seeks to deceive and to reveal, to compel belief and foster suspicion. “Magic” denotes both an embrace and residual suspicion of wonder and enchantment. The works of illusionist fiction I consider embody this dialectical element particularly

⁷ For magical realism as the literary expression of such a clash, see Jameson, “On Magic Realism in Film” 311. See also Aldama and Faris.

because the imaginative goods of literary enchantment they pursue are in tension with the critical histories of magic they contain.

I argue that the contemporary preoccupation with the arts of deception reflects and extends the longstanding American tradition (and literary tradition) of counterfeiting, invention and self-invention, stretching from *Wieland* and *Huckleberry Finn* to *The Great Gatsby* and *The Wolf of Wall Street*. My dissertation aligns with recent studies such as Mary McAleer Balkun's *The American Counterfeit* and Lara Langer Cohen's *The Fabrication of American Literature* in asserting the centrality of the arts of deception in American literature. It calls attention to the aesthetic and commercial dimensions of illusion-making, self-fashioning, and counterfeiting, and hence to the pleasures and perils of knowingly consuming such deceptions. The texts in my study are in conversation with various canonical American works—Melville's *Confidence-Man*, Hawthorne's "Wakefield," Twain's *Huckleberry Finn*, and the Horatio Alger stories, to name a few—and so I position my readings of magicians, escape artists, and showmen alongside the figure of the confidence man and the trickster in American literature.⁸ My study is likewise in dialogue with other recent studies of American literature that consider the dimensions and politics of contemporary literary engagements with history—most closely, with Ramón Saldivar's notion of "speculative realism" and historical fantasy as

⁸ For a discussion of the trickster, see Hyde, and Ammons and White-Parks. For studies of the confidence man in American literature, see Lenz and Lindberg.

movements that grow out of and extend the magical realist critique of capitalist epistemologies.⁹

Conjuring is an ancient practice, not confined to any specific culture. The earliest account of a magic trick is found in Ancient Egypt, where a figure named Dedi performed a trick in which he beheaded a goose and then brought it back to life (Mangan 5). As a form of entertainment, however, magic grew into a major industry in the nineteenth century (Schmidt, “From Demon Possession” 275). This alignment is not coincidental: the arts of deception reflected the forces of modernization—scientific rationalization, technological innovation, the expansion of markets and abstraction of money and labor—and became popular in part because they dramatized those forces. Staged magic demands a disenchanted perspective: if sorcery is real, a magic show might be terrifying, not entertaining. In this sense, entertainment magic is a product of the Enlightenment because it depends upon what Charles Taylor has called the “buffered self,” a notion of selfhood and objectivity subject only to empirical forces, not divine or mysterious ones (Taylor 33-40). Concomitantly, objects are stripped of their immanent or affective power and become instrumentalized; only thereafter can they (or need they) be re-enchanted by an illusionist. As Roland Barthes explains,

[the] muscular magic of the music hall is essentially urban: it is no accident that the music hall is an Anglo-Saxon phenomenon, born in the world of abrupt urban concentrations and the great Protestant myths of labor: the promotion of objects, of metals, and of dreamed gestures, the sublimation of labor by its magical

⁹ See also Berlatsky, Eshel, Parrish, and Melley.

effacement and not by its consecration, as in rural folklore—all this has to do with the artifice of cities. The city ... reduces space to a continuity of solid shiny objects, products to which the artist's action gives the glamorous status of a quite human thought. (Barthes 125)

Barthes implies that such magic is compensatory: it serves to dramatize or justify existing arrangements, to cover up or repress lack, to make the absurd objects of the city space momentarily alive and subject to human agency.¹⁰ In this sense magic represents a flight from modernity, either into an enchanted past or a magical future. It played to fantasies of individual self-sufficiency and human ingenuity over technology at a time when industrialization rendered such notions increasingly implausible.

Inasmuch as magic expressed an ambivalent attitude towards the modern world, it did so not simply through compensatory fantasy but also through the cultivation of a critical disposition. Illusionism challenged audiences to properly recognize deception and demystify superstition, to distinguish artful deceptions from those of superstition and fraudulence. During writes that “from the moment that they were widely tolerated and commercialized, magic shows have helped provide the terms and content of modern culture's understanding and judgment of itself” (1). Beyond encoding premodern fantasies, they nurtured skepticism, publicized scientific discoveries, offered to explain

¹⁰ As Trachtenberg writes in *The Incorporation of America*, “The great city had enlarged the scope and scale of mystery itself, bursting the conventional biblical and Gothic tropes to form a new figure, a fusion of social, political, and technological peril. Mystery had been raised to the level of spectacle, the daily performances of city life now seemed to more and more commentators to be parades of obscurity, of enigma, of silent sphinxes challenging the puzzled citizen” (104).

technological innovation,¹¹ and called viewers' attention to the mechanisms by which they could be duped. In its paradoxical structure of "honest deception," simultaneously duping and instructing the audience, magic presents a double-sided, equivocal dynamic. Although an illusionist demands that the onlooker pay close attention, his tricks ultimately encourage the suspension of disbelief and delight in the wonder of its effects. A successful magic trick thus invites credulity and skepticism, and equivocates between mystification and exposure, fantasy and critical recognition. The "skilled revelation of skilled concealment," it sells artifice as miraculous without denying its artfulness (Taussig 272).

The arts of deception have enjoyed a particularly rich history in the United States.¹² Although industrialization was by no means a distinctively American phenomenon, the United States in the nineteenth century underwent unprecedented expansion of territory, population, industry and economy, political influence, and cultural production. Rampant change created the conditions in which con-men, counterfeiters, hucksters, and quacks could thrive. As the favorite aphorism of James J. Hooper's literary confidence man Simon Suggs asserts, "It is good to be shifty in a new country" (Hooper 12). Magicians and showmen dramatized epistemic confusions and deception, exposing the tricks of con-men and spiritualists, and thereby reassured audiences that they could inoculate themselves against being fooled. But in so doing they also glamorized trickery,

¹¹ For the relationship between magic, science, and technology, see Nadis and Sconce.

¹² For scholarship on the pervasiveness of deception and illusion in 19th century American culture, advertising, and commerce, see Cook, Crary, Halttunen, Lears' *Fables of Abundance*, and Mihm.

which was inevitably enjoyed for its own sake. Part of the particular texture of the American arts of deception is their openly commercial, whiff-of-fraudulence air— aestheticizing, commercializing, or ironically reflecting the national preoccupation with self-made men. Indeed, there is no more distinctively American archetype than that of the self-made man, whose self-making might involve any manner of inventions, fabrications, bluffs, schemes, and cons. P.T. Barnum embodies this tradition, as does Harry Houdini. As James W. Cook and others have shown,¹³ Barnum served to transition the American arts of bunkum, speculation, and self-invention from local practices to a global industry, anticipating the development of the culture industry in the twentieth century (Cook, “Architect” 2). The self-reflexive deceptions of Barnum (and other magicians) appealed to a particularly American disposition: the admixture of skepticism and credulity conditioned by the “land of opportunity.” Ideological commitments to authenticity and straight-talking (and -shooting) are belied by an eagerness to believe the snake oil salesman, be he peddling self-transformation, wealth, or just a good time.¹⁴

The fundamental equivocality of illusionism, between mystifying deception and exposing it, is evident in critical and popular discourse. Magic has long supplied a set of metaphors for celebrating invention and for critiquing duplicity. One might, for instance, colloquially describe as “magical” a gripping story, dazzling special effects, an innovative technology, or an effective stain remover. Kindred terms such as prestige,

¹³ See Adams, Harris, and Reiss.

¹⁴ Mark Twain was among the most direct critics of this national tendency, with the jack-of-all-cons the King and the Duke of *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* being his most memorable skewering of American credulity and opportunism. See also Leja.

charm, fascination, and entrancement are all rooted in magic (During 39). The language of magic thus celebrates wondrous effects or immersive pleasures, but it also furnishes much of our critical lexicon for exposing pernicious illusions. From Marxian critiques of commodity fetishism to present-day condemnations of financial speculation, political doublespeak, media spectacle or simulacra, terms of stage magic—“sleight of hand,” “smoke and mirrors,” and so forth—serve to describe manipulation and delusion. In this tradition, illusion is something to be exposed. At the conclusion of *The Wizard of Oz*, for example, the curtain must be ripped aside to reveal the sham wizard pulling the levers. Of course, these celebratory and critical facets of magic residually contain their antithesis: to praise something as magical hints that its reality is suspect, and to condemn trickery attests to the skill of its perpetrator.

Both strands of magical rhetoric are flourishing today. We hear the language of magic and enchantment applied to everything from iPads and 3D film technology to derivative swaps and drone warfare. Magicians appear in commercials for car insurance and computers; the titles of recent works on the 2007 financial crisis include *The Escape Artists* (Schreiber) and *Confidence Men* (Suskind). Celebrity magicians such as David Blaine, Criss Angel, and Penn & Teller consciously continue the “edgy,” transgressive, or skeptical heritage of their nineteenth century forebears. I would contend, however, that with the waning of postmodernism the critique of illusion has ceded ground to the celebratory strain. For instance, in recent years a number of films have used tropes of magic in deploying new filmic technologies ostensibly to romance cinema’s past and imaginative power: *Oz the Great and Powerful* recounts the origins of the Wizard of Oz

as a fairground magician, while *Hugo*, Martin Scorsese's "love letter to early cinema," involves the films and inventions of magician Georges Méliès.¹⁵ These films indicate the allure that tropes of magic hold in mediating between disruptive technologies and imaginative ingenuity.

While much of the discursive longevity of magic is attributable to continual technological development, it is also embedded in capitalism itself. Scholars such as Raymond Williams and T. Jackson Lears have argued that commodity culture constitutes a "magic system" that aims to produce the effects and experience of a magic trick. That is, it imbues objects with the appearance of magical properties that the consumer "believes" even while knowing they are fabricated. Commodity fetishism thus appears akin to rational enchantment: even as the consumer knows that a commodity is "a simple embodiment of social relations," she nevertheless continues to view it as "a magical object endowed with special powers" (Žižek, *Parallax* 351). Inasmuch as magic tricks make illusions "real" by generating semblances and by hiding the work that produces them, they allegorize the revolutions in digital technology and capitalist finance that have ushered us into a time of spectacle and simulation, in which effects are remote from causes and operations from concrete actions.¹⁶

¹⁵ See also *The Illusionist*, dir. Neil Burger (2006) and *The Imaginarium of Dr. Parnassus*, dir. Terry Gilliam (2009).

¹⁶ At the same time, however, there is something misleading about characterizing such economic phenomena as illusionistic: the "magical" properties of money or commodities are, after all, not the work of human agency but inscribed into the system of capitalist relations. As such, representing them as magical is perhaps a willful misrecognition—the urge to see impersonal market forces as subject to human control.

In asserting the timeliness of magic, my dissertation builds on a growing body of scholarship that contests the commonly held Weberian narrative of modernity as disenchanting. Not simply an inexorable march toward rationalization, instrumentalization, and empiricism, modernity has always contained strong undercurrents of magic, wonder, and mystery.¹⁷ The Enlightenment from its origins sustained no clear separation between new science and occult knowledge (Fleming), although magical thinking “has been constantly disavowed ... and its action and effects consequently misunderstood” (Warner 23). In nineteenth and early twentieth century American science and invention, any line demarcating science and magic was highly tenuous, as the study of electricity, telegraphy, spiritualism, and mesmerism overlapped in various ways.¹⁸ Thomas Edison, for instance, argued for the theoretical possibility of communication with the spirit world in a 1920 issue of *Scientific American* and dabbled in its pursuit (Mangan 168).¹⁹ This blend of science and occult can also be found in the literature of the era, such as Pauline Hopkins’ *Of One Blood* (1903). Mystical, uncanny, and ventriloquized voices resounded in nineteenth century American experience, though they have been excluded from historical narratives that grant primacy to optical rationalism (Schmidt). Thomas Pynchon’s *Against the Day* (2006) recaptures this sense of possibility within enchanted modernity in refusing to cordon off strange or fantastic

¹⁷ For accounts of modernity that contest its disenchantment, see especially Warner, During, Saler, and Landy.

¹⁸ On the overlaps between technological innovation, stage magic, and the occult, see Nadis and Sconce.

¹⁹ See also Steinmeyer 70-88.

possibilities from subsequent developments. Two loci of enchanting possibility in Pynchon's novel are the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition and the laboratory of Nikola Tesla, Edison's rival in the development of electricity—sites where science and magical spectacle merge.²⁰ Properly understanding the world that was and the world that could have been requires a recognition of magic and magical thinking within modernity.

This recognition also usefully nuances the opposition between reason and fantasy. In contradistinction to unalloyed rationalism or unquestioning belief, the arts of deception helped to foster a space that was simultaneously enchanted and rational, and that encouraged both critical, self-reflexive viewership and a sense of wonder.²¹ Consumers of enchantment practiced an investment in illusion that was provisional, or what Michael T. Saler calls the “ironic imagination,” in which enchantment could be pursued without foregoing a critical grasp of “reality” (*As If*, 30). Conjuring directs attention to acts of perception and judgment themselves, calling into focus questions of appearance, possibility, knowledge, what is hidden or faked. As such, it is an art form that “flirts with fundamental metaphysical questions about the nature of reality and truth” (Jones, *Trade* 235). Stage magic performs epistemological “boundary work,” challenging the spectator's assumptions about reality by playing with the seemingly impossible, uncanny, marvelous, or forbidden (Mangan xv). In this sense, magic has a critical or subversive edge that belies its frequent association with frivolity or childish diversion. One of the

²⁰ Tesla also plays an important role in Christopher Nolan's *The Prestige* (2006), where his electrical experiments represent a utopian, magical alternative to Edison's practical, market-driven kind.

²¹See especially Cook, *The Arts of Deception*.

aims of this study is to recover this critical dimension, which is contained in the history of stage magic and made visible in the texts I consider. A striking example of the subversive power of illusion comes in Steven Millhauser's short story "Eisenheim the Illusionist," which ends with the police unsuccessfully attempting to arrest the magician. Because Eisenheim "deliberately crossed boundaries and therefore disturbed the essence of things," he was "in consequence doing something far worse: subverting the Empire. For where would the Empire be, once the idea of boundaries became blurred and uncertain?" (Millhauser 276) In contrast to residual antagonism toward illusion as something to puncture or expose, these works invite recognition of its generative potential. Properly understood, illusionism's form allegorizes what Ernst Bloch calls the "Janus-faced" nature of ideology, in which cultural products contain both a mystifying dimension and a utopian, disruptive surplus implicit in their fantasy content (Kellner).²²

A Dialectic of Illusionism

As a growing body of scholarship suggests, enchantment remains a vital, if downplayed, category of experience today. One can see its continued pull not just in the persistence of religious dispositions (including various fundamentalisms) or in the seemingly unbounded appetite for technological wizardry and entertainment, but also in a range of practices that fall outside the bounds of scientific rationalism—from yoga and holistic medicine to belief in the paranormal. The history of magic in modernity

²² While Bloch's strain of Marxism has not held much prominence in Anglo-American thought, this understanding of the utopian content of ideological products informs Fredric Jameson's "Reification and Utopia in Mass Culture" (1979). See Thompson and Žižek.

demonstrates that it is a mistake to label any of these activities as necessarily anti-modern, however. As Akeel Bilgrami points out, it is not just outsiders but also those within Western culture who must “*live in and cope with the disenchantment of their world, seeking whatever forms of re-enchantment that are available to them*” (407, italics original).²³ In noting the persistence of enchantment, a number of scholars have argued more specifically for a reconsideration of what it entails: namely, not delusion or escapism but an affective experience that restores immanent value to a disenchanted or commodified world. Enchantment as a form of imaginative activity thus becomes an essential social practice within globalized modernity—not merely compensation for modernity’s disenchantments, or a trapping of the late capitalist order, but essential to empathy, community, and identity formation.²⁴ Jane Bennett argues that, even in commodified forms such as television advertisements, aesthetic enchantments can produce an immediacy of experience that holds the potential to spur social and ethical commitments in a way that reason or information cannot: “without modes of enchantment, we might not have the energy and inspiration to enact ecological projects, or to contest ugly and unjust modes of commercialization, or to respond generously to humans and nonhumans that challenge our settled identities” (174).

In recovering modes of enchantment, the turn to magic in contemporary fiction signals a departure from postmodernist discourse, marked predominantly by the critique

²³ See also Warner 21-30.

²⁴ For the role of imagination within globalization, see Appadurai. For an overview of how imagination has been rehabilitated as a literary/critical category in recent years, see Brittan.

of illusions. Timothy Bewes argues that a feature common to postmodern and poststructuralist theory has been an anxiety towards reification—described variously as mystification, illusion, or commodification.—that itself produces reified binaries of surface and depth, appearance and substance, illusion and reality. The attempt to do away with illusion thus perpetuates it: “To try to strike through the mask is to recognize it, in all its pasteboard reality; to bestow reality upon it ... Leaving the mask intact, conversely, demonstrates freedom from it, annihilating it all the more thoroughly” (Bewes 153). In other words, only by recognizing the totality of reification does it become a reversible, and thus liberating category. “By articulating and analyzing the totality, both anxiety and a spirit of possibility enters. This operation imbues existing reality with an otherness which ensures its imminent and radical transformation” (Bewes 255). The conditions of late capitalism, Bewes argues, thus necessitate a dialectical approach to illusion.

A sense of the limits of critical hermeneutics is likewise implicit in the recent “turn from critique.” Bruno Latour has famously insisted that critique has “run out of steam” because it depends on a hermeneutics of depth, critical suspicion, and agency that has become discredited or enervated in postmodernity (“Why Has Critique,” 225). Similarly, Rita Felski asks, “What virtue remains in the act of unmasking when we know full well what lies beneath the mask?” (1) Felski argues specifically for enchantment as an important category of literary experience stemming from imaginative and aesthetic engagement. Correctives or alternatives to the hermeneutics of suspicion include the

rehabilitation of imagination, the turn to affect,²⁵ to things and surfaces,²⁶ to sentiment and sincerity.²⁷ What this rich and varied range of approaches shares is an investment not in hidden meanings but in appearances and affective experience.

Inasmuch as illusionism entails the decision to turn from hidden truth to immediate effect, the invocation of magic frequently carries with it an invitation to set aside suspicion for belief, cynicism for openness to wonder. In novels such as Paul Auster's *Mr. Vertigo* and Glen David Gold's *Carter Beats the Devil*, the capacity for belief and wonder is linked to a therapeutic immersion in fiction. However, this appeal—that belief or wonder should be consciously chosen because they are pleasurable and healthy, and suspicion consequently set aside—can resemble an invitation to disavow and consume.²⁸ The critical dimensions of magic are thus in tension with its commercial applications. The latter are manifest in an advertisement that first aired during the 2013 Super Bowl, entitled “The Magic of Touch,” which uncannily echoes the claims Bennett and others (including some of the novelists I consider here) put forward concerning enchantment. In it, a professional magician named Dan White uses a Hewlett-Packard tablet called the Envy X2. Over a soundtrack of gongs and sitar, shots cut between White

²⁵ For an overview of the affective turn, see N. Armstrong 442. See also Hardt and Sedgwick for articulations of its motivation and contours.

²⁶ On the recovery of things, see Brown and Malewitz. The term “Surface Reading” comes from Best and Marcus, and is challenged and modified in various ways by Love and by Sumner.

²⁷ See Chandler on the endurance of the sentimental in culture and criticism. For an overview of appeals to sincerity in contemporary literature, see Twitchell.

²⁸ Sumner develops precisely this critique against Best and Marcus, Brown, and other proponents of surface over symptomatic readings.

performing sleights of hand in clearly “oriental” locales and using his tablet in a sleek contemporary loft. On the voiceover, he says:

I live in the space between appearance and reality. Where the hand sees more than the eye. Where the power of touch has no limit. I tell people, the best magic doesn't trick you; it makes you believe. Believing: it matters. (“The Magic of Touch”)

Technology and magic merge in the final shot, where a little boy behind him on a plane cranes his neck to watch a black-and-white video of a magician sawing a woman in half. White “saws” his tablet from its detachable keyboard and hands it to the boy.

The ad's orientalist aesthetic and technological mystification are predictably rote, and ripe for the unmasking—all the more so if one knows that it was originally called the “Voodoo Envy,” or that its parts are manufactured by the Foxconn Corporation, which has made headlines for labor riots, underage interns, and employee suicides.²⁹ It asks the viewer to forget Envy, however, articulating instead a longing for connection and wonder unmediated by jadedness. The logic it invokes is simply a commercially distilled version of the critical turn outlined above: it suggests that its tactile magic generates human connection, transcending differences between people and inspiring childlike wonder, and that these fruits ultimately depend on the matter of belief.

“The Magic of Touch” thus alerts us to the mainstream traction that notions of affective enchantments possess, and also to their susceptibility to commercial or ideological repurposing. In the discrepancy between its rhetoric and its form, the

²⁹ e.g., Jay Greene, “Riots, Suicides, and Other Issues in Foxconn's iPhone Factories.” CNET. CNET.com 25 September 2012.

advertisement raises the challenge of how to square the apparent virtues of magic with its capacity for misdirection or concealment. It thereby demonstrates the necessity of the self-reflexive stance that I argue is proper to literary illusionism. The texts I consider here, in attesting to the power of magic, also subject it to critical scrutiny both in their content and form. They examine the mechanics of illusionism—how it is produced and consumed, why it works, what it does—while also formally employing its devices. Because their representational tactics self-reflexively mediate their presentation of magic, forms of illusion within the narrative place demands upon and pose dilemmas to the reader, who in reading the text herself enters into the consumption and production of illusion. Magic thereby reflects directly on the workings and uses of literary fictions. These works embed a critical stance towards illusion, even as their own operations show the limits of critique and the desirability (or inescapability) of enchantment. That is, they demand to be read under the terms of the magic they depict, and confront us with its challenges.

A particularly vivid example of this dialectic of illusionism—in which the performance and critique of magic produce a simultaneous insistence on both the generative and treacherous aspects of magic—is found in Christopher Nolan’s film *The Prestige* (2006). I present it here as a prototype of how my chapters will proceed, and also because it directly addresses magic as both phenomenon of and escape from late capitalism. It highlights the violence and disavowal that define the consumption of aesthetic and economic illusions while at the same time working to articulate the place of art within that milieu. *The Prestige* depicts the increasingly vicious rivalry between two

fin de siècle magicians over their “Transported Man” illusion.³⁰ In contradistinction to other films in which magic unambiguously celebrates cinematic illusion, in the *Prestige* magic is a grim affair. Magicians are “showmen . . . who dress up plain and sometimes brutal truths to amaze, to shock,” and who must be willing to “get [their] hands dirty” to perform frequently dangerous or violent tricks (Nolan 28, 16).³¹ A successful illusion, the film asserts, relies ultimately on the willful self-deception of the viewer, who in “looking for the secret . . . won’t find it. Because, of course, you’re not really looking. You don’t really want to know. You want to be fooled” (3, 128). The film shows magic as a product subject to the logic of the market, constituted by unceasing invention and competition, repressed labor and disavowal, a product that requires and conceals the mechanized reproduction and disposal of objects, animals, and ultimately persons: the film’s central secret is that Angier’s transportation machine in fact copies him, and he rigs the stage so as to drown his surplus self each time he performs the trick. The “plain and sometimes brutal truths” the magicians dress up are those of a system that renders persons and things interchangeable and disposable, and viewers are indicted for choosing ignorance.

At the same time, formally *The Prestige* is “a mystery structured as a cinematic magic trick” (Nolan, qtd. in Newman 18), and it makes use of misdirection and lying in presenting its story. As Walter Benn Michaels has observed, “Nolan’s movies, inasmuch

³⁰ A clarifying note: one magician, Borden, is able to perform this trick because he has an identical twin; the two brothers share one life (and wife, and child, etc.), with disastrous consequences. The other magician, Angier, performs the trick by way of a duplication machine he gets from Tesla. Borden is coded as working-class and a purist who sacrifices everything for his art; Angier is clearly aristocratic, and loves spectacular production.

³¹ All quotes from the film are drawn from the published screenplay.

as they are themselves about the conditions of not knowing, require their viewers to replicate the refusal of knowledge required also of their central figures.” Since film (especially narrative film) is itself an illusion that conceals its labor, *The Prestige* must stage its own deceptions in order to expose how the conjured illusion “serves as a fetish allowing spectators to disavow loss and to experience a false sense of wholeness” (McGowan 104). It calls attention to its deceptions, Todd McGowan notes, first by mediating every shot through a fictionalized (that is, intentionally falsified) diary of one of the characters, and second by using misleading cuts to lure the spectator into making an assumption it later exposes as false (McGowan 116-118). An opening monologue describes the parts of a magic trick: the pledge (a canary is shown), the turn (birdcage is crushed, canary disappears), and the prestige (the canary is magically restored to hand). Later we are shown rows of identical canaries in the magician’s workshop, and the crushed remains of the first canary being discarded. This trick gives the blueprint for both the magic trick at the center of the plot (Angier’s “Real Transported Man”) and the putatively happy resolution of Borden’s “miraculous” reunion with his daughter after his apparent execution for the “murder” of Angier (one of the Borden twins has indeed been executed). The film ends with a repetition of the opening monologue, reminding the audience that we “are not really looking” because we “don’t really want to know” (Nolan 3, 128). It preempts an experience of a “false sense of wholeness,” then, by pointing back to the destroyed surplus from which we are averting our gaze.

In presenting itself as a work of illusionism, *The Prestige* counterbalances this critical unveiling of magic with a testament to the power of artistic creation. For this

reason, McGowan reads the film as allegorizing the sacrifice a work of art demands, creating “an illusion that returns us to the sacrifice rather than repressing it” (121). *The Prestige* suggests the magic of artful illusion is our only available source of transcendence, a momentary escape from the crushing strictures of reality. When confronted at the end of the film with the allegation that he caused senseless suffering and death “for nothing,” the dying Angier responds: “The audience knows the truth. The world is simple, miserable, solid all the way through. But if you can fool them, even for a second, then you can make them wonder. Then you got to see something very special. You really don’t know. It was the look on their faces...” (126). The film does not discredit wonder, but relocates its source in the magician and his willingness to dirty his hands (and soul) for the sake of his art. The physical and psychic costs of the magicians’ aesthetic productions become the marvel, and out of a fully commodified system emerges a form of heroic authorship. In this sense, *The Prestige* suggests that private aesthetic commitments can transcend the facts of their material or commercial origins. It transforms crushed birds and drowned bodies into signifiers of aesthetic authenticity, even as it deflects questions of responsibility away from the illusionist and onto the consumer.

The Prestige thus exemplifies the self-reflexive and dialectical aspects of illusionist fictions, which likewise arrive at ambivalent conclusions concerning the use, vitality, and potential of aesthetic deceptions. Its resolution also points towards two recurrent features of the contemporary turn to magic: an assertion of enchantment as fleeting yet indispensable, on the one hand, and a fantasy of artistic potency on the other.

That fantasy is an anxious and a nostalgic one: the magician enacts “in real life” and before an enrapt audience the creations and transformations that the writer effects on the page, but practices an art that was commercially and culturally marginalized in the twentieth century by film and television. Historical illusionism, even as it succeeds, is perpetually shadowed by its obsolescence. Steven Millhauser’s stories involving the arts of deception makes this clear. In “August Eschenberg,” the titular character first witnesses automatons being put to use by “a seedy magician in a drab green tent,” (171) and devotes his life to automaton-making unaware that it is “a quaint art-form whose true place was in museums and in the cabinets of private collectors” and that “the world had no need for him” (174, 208). In “The Knife Thrower,” the art of knife throwing is “really a tame art, an outmoded art—little more than a quaint old-fashioned amusement in these times of ours” (282). In “Eisenheim the Illusionist,” magic thrives in “the fading century” (268) as the Hapsburg Empire nears “the end of its long dissolution,” and Eisenheim vanishes completely after performing disturbingly modern and uncanny magic. His followers feel relief that “the Master had passed safely out of the crumbling order of history into the indestructible realm of mystery and dream” (278).

Millhauser’s stories meditate on the work of art, and in each story art’s power to enchant clashes with its apparent outmodedness. They raise the specter of obsolescence in order to banish it. In so doing, they make clear what is at stake in plots where magicians have seemingly unlimited potency, such as Erin Morgenstern’s *The Night Circus* (2011) and *The Illusionist* (a big budget but second-rate 2006 film adaptation of Millhauser’s “Eisenheim”). The power of magic reasserts the agency of literature, and

thus the agency of the individual, in a time when both are under duress. Just as historical illusionism can betoken nostalgia for lost enchantments, these assertions of the durable value of literary fiction take on a retrograde tint at times. In a recurrent pattern, these texts gravitate towards notions of literary value that are bound up with defunct notions of authorship and canonicity. Almost exclusively by and about white men, we might read them as rehearsing in contemporary fiction the splitting and subsuming of threatening otherness that has marked the relation to enchantment since the Enlightenment. Perhaps part of the draw of magic lies not just in the figurative or discursive pertinence of illusions, but also in the magician himself: the white, male, aristocratic performer who mediates authoritatively between reason and enchantment, popular pleasure and refined tastes.

Illusionist fictions are neither literary wish-fulfillments nor simple apologies for the value of literature, however. They concern themselves with the ways in which illusionism is at once imbricated in economic, political, and ideological fictions and also expressive of deep-seated human desires and needs. My chapters take up the aesthetic, political, and ethical stakes of imaginative engagement with artful deceptions. Moving from the late 1970s to the 2000s, they sketch a shift in emphasis from a critical to a cautiously hopeful stance regarding illusion. In tracing a change in how magic is represented—from its associations with ideological manipulation and political violence (as in *Blood Meridian* and *In the Lake of the Woods*) to connotations of therapeutic escapism in *Carter Beats the Devil* and *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay*—they denote a conception of literary activity that is private and therapeutic in its effects.

That is, the political, social or aesthetic work of illusion is increasingly calibrated in terms of the private experience of the individual reader.

In Chapter One, I show how Cormac McCarthy's famously troubling style conjures enchantment in a bleakly materialist world through its seemingly transcendent language. *Blood Meridian* presents a history in which illusions underwrite not only violent expansion but also aesthetic production: Judge Holden's Barnumesque showmanship, confidence games, and magic tricks facilitate imperial and market violence, yet are also the source of *Blood Meridian*'s aesthetics and distinctive canonical air. *Blood Meridian*'s disconcerting style depicts how treachery is aestheticized as entertaining trickery, and how literature and culture are implicated in that dynamic. While the novel thus displays the reification of art under market capitalism, I argue that it also aims at preserving the particular value of literature against replication and commodification. It challenges us to recognize illusionism as indispensable to capitalist predatory enterprise and to our enjoyment of the novel's artistry. Rather than an invitation to despair, we find in McCarthy's style a productive strategy of literary enchantment. Against the instrumentalization of things, people, and language, it conjures strangeness, mystery, and particularity. Turning to McCarthy's most recent novels, I argue that such aesthetic enchantments, in spite of their illusory and compromised features, can ground artistic vitality and ethical commitments.

Chapter Two shows that in *Mr. Vertigo* (1994) by Paul Auster and *In the Lake of the Woods* (1994) by Tim O'Brien, fiction's "magic" lies in transcending social differences and inspiring empathy, but that the historical residue of racism in American

illusionism obstructs the effort to imagine otherness. In O'Brien's novel, illusionism connotes imagination and disavowal, empathy and brutality, artistry and pathology alike, while *Mr. Vertigo* reveals enchantment to be the domain of whiteness, in which exoticism can be sanitized as entertainment. In each text, the empathic narrative enterprise leads instead to self-interested and exploitative ends, thereby manifesting a history in which rational enchantment serves as a strategy for colonizing exoticism. To escape this limitation, both novels reconceptualize the transformative power of fiction as primarily therapeutic, and present magic as valorizing not authorial creation but the imaginative effort of the reader.

Chapter Three argues that the figure of Harry Houdini embodies literature's status as primarily entertainment, inspiring wonder rather than critique. In contemporary fiction, Houdini idealizes sincere artistry, imaginative belief, and individual experience. His performances embody imaginative liberation divested of commercial or ideological interests, glorifying escapistry as the primary purpose of art. As such, contemporary interest in Houdini is symptomatic of the recent turn from critique toward the virtues of imagination—a shift I trace through contrasting depictions of Houdini in E.L. Doctorow's *Ragtime* (1975) and Glen David Gold's *Carter Beats the Devil* (2000). In the former, Doctorow diagnoses Houdini as unable to recognize the revolutionary implications of his escapistry's utopian longings. In *Carter Beats the Devil*, Gold embraces Houdini's escapistry wholesale, suggesting that the therapeutic and innocent pleasures of such entertainment should be enjoyed for their own sake and on their own terms. The politics and critical limits of escapistry become the central problem of

Michael Chabon's *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay* (2000), which attempts to reconcile the conflicting claims of critique and escapism on literature. Chabon equivocates between celebrating the escapist pleasures of fiction and registering the fragility or inadequacy of that escape. *Kavalier & Clay*'s narrative illusionism presents an understanding of imaginative enchantments that is equivocal but ultimately affirming: while doubting art's efficacy as a vehicle of ideological content or political change, it asserts that the flight from reality can itself be transformative, that fantasy contains a residue of hope and utopian potential.

Cumulatively, these historical fictions attest to the vital and varied legacy of the arts of deception in American history and culture, and help us to reconsider the relations of modernity and enchantment, imagination and critique. Staging historical magic allows them to reimagine the circumstances of literary activity in the present by the light of the past. They present illusionism and imaginative activity as produced within and inextricable from processes of commodification and disavowal, yet still insist on the value (even necessity) of such fictions. "Deadly truths are all too easy to come by," Joshua Landy writes. "What we need in response is not a mechanism for seeing through illusions but, quite the contrary, a technique for producing and sustaining them" (128). The self-reflexive quality of illusionism allows these texts to animate the tensions that press upon literary fiction today. By engaging them on their own terms, we glimpse unlikely, fantastic apparitions: illusion that undoes illusion, escape as resistance, nostalgia as hope, enchantment as a return to the real.

CHAPTER ONE: Imperial Illusionism and Aesthetic Deceptions in *Blood Meridian*

The truth about the world, he said, is that anything is possible. Had you not seen it all from birth and thereby bled it of its strangeness it would appear to you for what it is, a hat trick in a medicine show, a fevered dream, a trance bepopulate with chimeras having neither analogue nor precedent, an itinerant carnival, a migratory tentshow whose ultimate destination after many a pitch in many a mudded field is unspeakable and calamitous beyond reckoning. (McCarthy, *Blood Meridian* 245)

Your heart's desire is to be told some mystery. The mystery is that there is no mystery. (252)

Introduction

Early in Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian* (1985), a troop of American adventurers seeking plunder in Mexico comes upon a herd of livestock, driven by only a few herdsman. Sensing easy plunder, "[t]he captain smiled grimly. We may see a little sport here before the day is out" (McCarthy 51). Plans quickly go awry: a herd of ponies veers towards the Americans, and "from the offside of those ponies there rose a fabled horde of mounted lancers and archers bearing shields bedight with bits of broken mirrorglass that cast a thousand unpierced suns against the eyes of their enemies" (52). Clad in the garments of previous victims—"gaudy and grotesque with daubings like a company of mounted clowns, death hilarious ... screeching and yammering and clothed in smoke like those vaporous beings in regions beyond right knowing where the eye wanders and the lip jerks and drools" (52-53)—this Comanche war party quickly slaughters the Americans, "ripping off limbs, heads, gutting the strange white torsos and holding up great handfuls of viscera" (53). The Comanche attack, described in a few page-long sentences, is often cited as exemplary of *Blood Meridian*'s exuberant,

sensational carnage. However, the passage also indexes concerns and characteristics of *Blood Meridian* that are vitally important yet largely overlooked. Like the riders, *Blood Meridian* robes its prose “in costumes attic or biblical or wardrobed out of a fevered dream” (52). The Comanche flutes of human bone and their vestments—including white stockings and “a bloodstained weddingveil,” a “pigeontailed coat worn backwards,” and the “armor of a Spanish conquistador”—proclaim the novel’s fascination with strange sights and estranged objects (52). This instrumentalized object world is bound up with illusion, deception, and mystified appearances. The “fabled horde” arises from seemingly unmounted horses, bearing shields like shattered mirrors that blind rather than reflect. *Blood Meridian* dwells on the uncanny effects produced as conventions regarding what and how objects can circulate and signify are abolished.

Illusion is not incidental to the narrative, but rather consequential of the conditions of the modernizing world which *Blood Meridian* depicts. Violent deceptions dovetail with uncertainties of vision and objects unmoored from traditional referents. *Blood Meridian*’s representational tactics are the source of widespread critical and readerly discomfort, however. For while McCarthy’s novels are taken as charting the onset of late capitalism in the South and Southwest,¹ they appear (in passages such as the Comanche attack) to offer no critical distance from the violence depicted but rather to revel in it. *Blood Meridian* in particular seems guilty of inciting the wrong sort of affect, rendering historical violence at once “sacred” and also aesthetically pleasurable. Leo Daugherty thus wonders, “How could such a thing be so oddly exuberant and elicit such a

¹ See Holloway and Monk.

pleasurable response?” (169), while Steven Shaviro frets that “Reading *Blood Meridian* produces a vertiginous, nauseous exhilaration . . . its baroque opulence is attended with a frighteningly complicitous joy” (144). Moreover, as various critics have noted, a hallmark of McCarthy’s writing is prose that invokes the sacred, canonical, or transcendent, yet at the same time depicts a bleakly materialist and rationalized world.² *Blood Meridian*’s content stands at odds with its style, a discrepancy that strikes many as disingenuous.

Readings of the novel often elide this tension by treating *Blood Meridian*’s form as a vehicle for historicist excavation and critique, or its subject matter as an occasion for aesthetic experience.³ Critics who do attempt to square *Blood Meridian*’s high style with its violent content fault McCarthy for being something like a literary snake-oil salesman, peddling style rather than substance: James Wood objects to McCarthy’s “mythical afflatus,” while Amy Hungerford argues that *Blood Meridian*’s “biblical” prose is a ploy to fabricate a sense of authority. “We are left,” Hungerford writes,

² “[McCarthy’s] scriptural cadences conjure the tradition, the outline, and the promise of faith. Then, in his sonorous descriptions of the natural world, the promise is rescinded,” Ben Rutter writes. James Wood, like Rutter reviewing *No Country for Old Men*, objects to the “deterministic mythmaking” and “metaphysical cheapness” that he perceives in the discrepancy between McCarthy’s highflown rhetoric and its substantive negation. Others read this dynamic more sympathetically: Lydia Cooper finds in McCarthy the dogged pursuit of apparently unrealizable transcendence. David Holloway likewise reads in McCarthy’s language a promise of rejuvenation or escape from the late capitalist conditions he depicts.

³ For historicizing readings of the novel, see Cant, Eaton, Kollin, Parrish, D. Phillips, and Shaw. For readings that privilege *Blood Meridian*’s aesthetic or metaphysical dimensions over its historical content, see Bloom, Daugherty, Josyph, Spurgeon, and Wallach.

with McCarthy's style standing alone, much as the judge dances alone at the end of the novel... We are left with the presumptuous creation of a prose that sounds like scripture, tempts one to read (for metaphysical structures) as if one were reading scripture, and yet withholds all but the aesthetic and sentimental effects of scripture... *Blood Meridian* is designed to make us feel, above all, like God is speaking, but to leave us in possession only of the unreadable aesthetic object.

(95)

In reading *Blood Meridian* as a forgery—counterfeiting its own aura of canonicity and antiquity—Hungerford accounts for the novel's problematic style by treating its sense of mystery or enchantment as a façade obscuring an empty interior. Its use of historical atrocity becomes cynically self-aggrandizing, and *Blood Meridian* is rendered a fundamentally hollow affair. In this view, McCarthy stages illusions in *Blood Meridian* not as a magician (who calls attention to his deceptions), but as a confidence man attempting to fob them off on an unwitting audience.

Hungerford's and Wood's critiques of *Blood Meridian*'s rhetoric help to illuminate the extent to which showmanly duplicity enfolds its representation of violence. However, their readings miss the crucial respect in which the novel's formal illusionism is informed by the historical deceptions it depicts. In this chapter, I argue that *Blood Meridian*'s aesthetic mystifications become legible against a backdrop of historical practices of “artful deception”—the mid-nineteenth century preoccupation with illusionism, counterfeiting, confidence games, and magic. These forms of rational enchantment arose amidst the disruptions of capitalist modernity, which in restructuring

the relations between people, objects, and commodities created conditions under which deceptions of substitution and exchange could flourish. *Blood Meridian* engages this history self-reflexively, thereby staging the problem of judging its deceptions throughout. In the figure of Judge Holden, it merges the illusionist showmanship of P.T. Barnum with antebellum economic and imperial expansion. The judge is simultaneously an agent of ruthless rationalization and a font of magic tricks, mysterious phenomena, confounding spectacles and rhetoric.⁴ So while Holden's aesthetic deceptions mystify or propagate violence and trickery in the novel, they also extend to the narrative itself, lending the text its particularly literary qualities and pleasures. In demonstrating the historical imbrication of market expansion, imperial acquisition, illusionist entertainment and literature, *Blood Meridian* presents the domain of the aesthetic as at once massively expanded and degraded, its immanent value imperiled. The novel thus articulates a condition of total reification, the impossibility of any essential identity that is outside or beyond mediation and illusion. But in depicting a world wholly given over to illusion, McCarthy conjures in *Blood Meridian* moments of enchantment—of wonder, mystery, or immanence—that in their strangeness and particularity cannot be assimilated into any notion of equivalence or exchangeability. *Blood Meridian* thus demonstrates, both in its aesthetic enchantments and in the affective response and reception it has enjoyed, how “total reification” can be a reversible, potentially liberating concept (Bewes xv). A similar strategy of enchantment, I

⁴ Critics have tangentially approached this aspect in several ways, as Joshua Masters reads the judge as a trickster figure in his paranormal power and rhetorical slipperiness, and Emily Stinson embraces the judge's many roles under the metaphorical auspices of Tarot's Fool. John Rothfork briefly mentions Holden as “a barker who offers mystery in every shape,” arguing that we must “resist his mesmerizing, raconteur charm and rhetoric that turns everyone into his victim” (27).

argue, informs McCarthy's recent fiction in its effort to preserve literary value in the 21st century.

Artful Deceptions and Imperial Enterprise

Like Herman Melville's *The Confidence-Man: His Masquerade* (1857), *Blood Meridian* portrays a world in which all interactions and exchanges, unmoored from traditional signposts, are subject to trickery. It is centrally concerned with forms of illusion, dwelling on themes of visual instability and issues of witnessing and evidence, optical illusion and deception. Sight is given primacy over all other senses, and the novel vividly etches landscapes, optical phenomena, and appearances. But vision is a trickster; as Phillip Snyder suggests, a "disappearance motif" operates within the novel (128). There is a "will to deceive that is in things luminous" (McCarthy 120). Travelers are repeatedly duped by mirages or witness perplexing phenomena:

Far out on the desert to the north dustspouts rose wobbling and augered the earth and some said they'd heard of pilgrims borne aloft like dervishes in those mindless coils to be dropped broken and bleeding upon the desert again and perhaps to watch the thing that had destroyed them lurch onward like some drunken djinn and resolve itself once more into the elements from which it sprang. Out of that whirlwind no voice spoke and the pilgrim lying in his broken bones may cry out and in his anguish he may rage, but rage at what? And if the dried and blackened shell of him is found among the sands by travelers to come yet who can discover the engine of his ruin? (111)

Evidence vanishes, remnants befuddle, and neither divine nor natural causes can be readily apprehended. *Blood Meridian* repeatedly points to discrepancies between what seems, may be, and is, and shows those discrepancies being exploited. Shadows become phantasmagoria: they appear “in the dawn-broached sky a hellish likeness of their ranks riding huge and inverted” (109), “like shapes capable of violating their covenant with the flesh that authored them” (139), “rearing with a terrible redundancy” (151), “[going] begging for referents in any daylight world” (326). The incongruences between objects and their shadows, optical causes and effects, indicate both the uncertainty of visual evidence and its capacity to generate uncanny effects.

As we saw in the Comanche attack, trickery extends as much to human interactions as to as optics. Most encounters in the novel involve sizing up and surmising about others from available evidence. Toadvine’s docked ears and F-branded forehead (the marks of a punished counterfeiter) denote an effort to make criminality legible, but even crimes themselves are subject to counterfeiting: a grizzly scene of murdered settlers is the work not of the Apache but of “white men who preyed on travelers in that wilderness and disguised their work to be that of the savages” (153). Indeed, the brutality of the Glanton Gang’s scalp-hunting shrouds the fact that it exemplifies not atavistic barbarism but market dynamics of speculation and forgery. Toadvine’s counterfeiting merely changes its currency, as the gang moves from cashing in “authentic” Indian scalps to those of anyone with plausibly dark hair. When Glanton is told that the head he has severed is not that of the outlaw Gómez (worth a thousand dollars), he asks, “Will it pass for him?” (160). The gang’s habits of deception diversify as the novel progresses.

Bartering with a band of Apache Indians, they trade a keg of “whiskey” that is in fact a barrel of water with a small bladder of whiskey fitted inside (241). Their final gambit is a deadly confidence game: after tricking a tribe of Yuma Indians into attacking a ferry operation (only to betray them in battle), they install themselves as “ferryman” who plunder travelers bound for California, leaving them to die in the desert.

Such optical, social, and economic uncertainties were prevalent in antebellum American culture, and gave rise to an anxious fascination with forms of deception and systems of legibility. As the United States undertook massive territorial and economic expansion, facilitated by industrialization and technological advances, there ensued unprecedented changes in the organization of time, space, labor, and daily life.⁵ Urbanization fostered anonymity, and the proliferation of banks and banknotes cast doubt on most economic transactions. Moreover, as Charles Taylor and others have argued, enlightenment modernity entailed a fundamental reordering of the cosmos, in which immanent values or properties of persons and things were replaced by instrumental ones, leaving nothing exempt from utilization, valuation, or exchange. Scalps can become banknotes as easily as persons can become commodities. The upheavals accompanying modernization in nineteenth-century America “created an atmosphere in which people could reasonably believe almost anything” (Dennett 29). While such conditions fostered nascent American values of entrepreneurship, invention, competition and unregulated marketing (Leja 20), national expansion and unfettered enterprise also engendered anxieties of being deceived. As the optical emphasis of *Blood Meridian* suggests, such

⁵ See Cook, Halttunen, Mihm, Nadis, and Sconce.

instability served to accentuate the priority granted sight among the senses. Jonathan Crary describes how

the imperatives of capitalist modernization, while demolishing the field of classical vision, generated techniques for imposing visual attentiveness, rationalizing sensation, and managing perception. They were disciplinary techniques that required a notion of visual experience as instrumental, modifiable, and essentially abstract, and that never allowed a real world to acquire solidity or permanence. (24)

Not only did the nineteenth-century observer have to function “within disjunct and defamiliarized urban spaces, the perceptual and temporal dislocations of railroad travel, telegraphy, industrial production, and flows of typographic and visual information” (Crary 11), but s/he also experienced profound changes in the status of vision itself. Advances in visual technologies and a keener understanding of the unreliability of the human eye upended the Enlightenment model of faith in empirical observation and inference. New emphasis was placed on the subjectivity and limitations of sight and the deceptiveness of appearance. This instability contributed to an increased obsession with vision and to the rise of rationalizing strategies such as phrenology, handwriting analysis, and counterfeit detectors. All these “techniques of the observer” invited spectators to see for themselves, lest they be deceived.

The arts of deception—an umbrella term for practices of illusionism, magic, showmanship, and confidence games—flourished in part because they promised viewers practice in discerning fraud. Their illusions were necessarily self-reflexive, for it was by

foregrounding their own illusions that the arts of deceptions offered audiences a staged version of the anxieties attendant to the mysterious workings of such phenomena as machine labor, financial speculation, a more advanced commodity market, and “magical” new forms of communication and representation. Audiences could thus familiarize themselves with and gain a sense of mastery over illusions. At the same time, the arts of deception naturalized the disorienting effects of capitalist modernity. They celebrated novelty and invention, domesticated the uncanny and presented it in “scientific” terms. These arts served to convert threats into amusements, defanging treachery as mere trickery. (A magician, for instance, appears to commit all manner of crimes—destroying things, stealing from his audience, dismembering assistants—yet assures his audience that those deeds are not quite real.) Stage magic, “confidence man” tales, and sensational exhibits thus served to train audiences to consume illusions, to accept the rationality of mysterious exchanges and alternately fungible and fetishized objects.

No man more fully embodied this burgeoning culture of artful deception than did P.T. Barnum. He rose in the 1830s from Connecticut lottery agent to international celebrity as proprietor of the American Museum in New York,⁶ which received upwards of 2,000,000 visitors yearly. There he presented a panoply of spectacles that ranged from freak shows, natural wonders, and menageries to panoramas, magic lantern shows, and ‘scientific’ lectures.⁷ His *Life of P.T. Barnum, Written By Himself* (1854)—essentially a

⁶ See Whelan, Cook, Dennett, Harris, and Reiss.

⁷ See especially Saxon (90-114); also Harrison (These arts muddle into a single gallery of makeshift practices, as one can gather from the resumes of *Huckleberry Finn*’s “low-down humbugs and frauds,” the King and the Duke. Between the two of them, they

confidence man's bildungsroman, in which a knack for deceptions culminates in entrepreneurial triumph and moral legitimacy—was by some estimations second only to the Bible in copies printed in the United States in the 19th century (Adams 33). In 1850 an Englishman writing of Barnum's American Museum exclaimed that Barnum was the quintessential American, "represent[ing] the enterprise and energy of his countrymen in the nineteenth century, as Washington represented their resistance to oppression in the century preceding" (Harris 56). Barnum "fully captured the American imagination with his sharp entrepreneurial dealings and self-admitted bunkum," Karen Halttunen claims, as "in this era of dawning industrial capitalism, the Eastern entrepreneurial sharper got the upper hand of the preindustrial Westerner, and emerged as the dominant symbol, not just of the American confidence man, but of American national character" (31).

As the "architect of the modern culture industry" (Cook, "Architect" 2), Barnum streamlined the arts of deception in the entertainment business. He transmuted the confidence man's fraudulence into respectable illusionism by way of self-reflexive rhetoric. For not only were Barnum's promises outrageous, his advertising relentless, and his trickery shameless, he also constantly called attention to his ruses, making his own double-dealing part of the attraction.⁸ Thus any Barnum exhibit—whether fraudulent as

lay claim to "finding water and gold with a 'divining rod,' "dissipating witch spells," selling patent medicines, practicing mesmerism and phrenology, lecturing, doctoring, "layin' on o' hands," and fortune-telling, not to mention "Preachin' ... an workin' camp-meetin's' and missionaryin' around" (Twain 169, 161).

⁸ Neil Harris dubs Barnum's method the "operational aesthetic": "The objects inside the museum, and Barnum's activities outside, focused attention on their own structures and operations, were empirically testable, and enabled—or at least invited—

the ‘Feejee Mermaid’ (a desiccated monkey torso stitched onto a fishtail) or bona fide as the Swedish opera diva Jenny Lind—was essentially about its own presentation. Barnum defined “Humbug,” his operative principle, as “putting on glittering appearances—outside show—novel expedients, by which to suddenly arrest public attention and attract the public eye and ear” (Saxon 77). Lured in, spectators would be given a “full equivalent” of experience for their money. Terrence Whelan refers to Barnum’s self-reflexivity as “capitalist irony,” a mode of profiting both from his illusions and from their subsequent exposure or mockery (xvi). In subordinating concerns of content to enjoyment of form, “worries about the humbug’s motives could be displaced by preoccupation with his technique” (Lears, *Fables* 70). Barnum’s illusionism thus both profited from and also normalized capitalist forms of consumption—the substitution of “equivalent” for “real,” ironic distance for credulity, and “experience” for things themselves. It encouraged, in short, the mentality Slavoj Žižek ascribes to commodity fetishism: “I know very well that [x] is not the case, but all the same, I’m going to go on pretending as if it is” (*Sublime*, 32).

Halttunen juxtaposes the Eastern sharper to the preindustrial Westerner, but those terms are not properly oppositional. Domestic interests were always imbricated with expansion and conquest, as Amy Kaplan reminds us, but here there is a particular interconnection. Since a milieu of artful deception was primarily a product of rapid expansion and social anonymity, it flourished equally in the west and the east. In fact, recasting treachery as entertainment emerges distinctively in the lawless and

audiences and participants to learn how they worked. They appealed because they exposed their processes of action” (57).

opportunistic spaces of the frontier: the confidence man tales of the Old Southwest made hay with the antics of cons, fast-talkers and profiteers, all glorified for their wiliness and clever, often elevated speech (Lenz 21).⁹ “It is good to be shifty in a new country,” avers the hero of Johnson Jones Hooper’s *Adventures of Captain Simon Suggs* (1845), and his adage captures the ethos of these tales, wherein crafty deception seems a natural, even delightful, feature of an expanding and acquisitive society (Hooper 12).

The best-known (and strangest) iteration of this mid-nineteenth century genre is Melville’s *The Confidence-Man: His Masquerade*. Melville presents “confidence” (and thus the potential for deception) as inextricable from human relations, economic transactions, and literary fictions alike.¹⁰ Melville took up artful deceptions years earlier, however, in “The Authentic Anecdotes of Old Zack” (1847), sketches he wrote for *Yankee Doodle* satirizing soon-to-be president Zachary Taylor’s Mexican campaign. Although critically neglected, the “Authentic Anecdotes” suggestively connects Eastern speculation and acquisition to Western conquest, thereby hinting at continuities between American expansionism, showmanship, and the culture of artful deception.¹¹ Melville

⁹ The term “confidence man” is slightly anachronistic, in that it first appeared in 1849 (in a *New York Herald* article about a watch thief). The figure it describes recognizably arose, however, in various guises in 1840s regional humor writing.

¹⁰ It is with a Marxian understanding of ‘the magic of the commodity,’ Rick Mitchell argues, that Melville proceeds in *The Confidence-Man*, where “the magic of modernity emanates from commodity fetishism” (60).

¹¹ There are good reasons to consider this text alongside *Blood Meridian*: the setting of “Anecdotes” overlaps with that of Samuel Chamberlain’s *My Confessions* (the source-text of *Blood Meridian*), and McCarthy has listed Melville as his most admired author (Woodward).

draws out the affinities between counterfeiting, humbug, and practices of economic speculation and national mythologizing. “Authentic Anecdotes” involves two parallel attempts to bring the Mexican-American War into circulation for profit. One is *Yankee Doodle*’s determination to circulate “authentic” anecdotes about Taylor, in contradistinction to the “anecdote-making editors of the North” (Melville, *Complete* 218). A certificate from “Old Zack,” displayed in “a brass frame cast from a captured Mexican forty-two brass shot,” avows *Yankee Doodle* as “the only true source where an anxious public can procure a correct insight into his private life and little personal peculiarities” (218). This ostensibly literary campaign is mirrored in the efforts of a “Peter Tamerlane Barnum” to acquire for exhibition in his New York museum dubious relics of Old Zack such as his snuff box, a tin pie pan that had been shot onto his head, even his ripped trousers.¹²

Melville satirizes the authenticity of Barnum’s acquisitions and the terms in which they are marketed (“PRODIGIOUS EXCITEMENT!!!!!! / OLD ZACK’S PANTS!!! / GREAT SIGHTS AT THE AMERICAN MUSEUM!!!!”) (*Complete* 222). But while Barnum’s intentions in the “Authentic Anecdotes” are transparently commercial, Melville shows that the showman’s efforts of necessity convert imperial warfare into sanitized entertainment. Barnum’s patriotic “relics” gain their aura or novelty value from their proximity to a reckless hothead waging a predatory campaign

¹² Although there is relatively little scholarship linking the two men, Melville had more than a passing interest in his ambitious fellow New Yorker—he nicknamed his son ‘Barney,’ apparently in homage to P.T., and ghostwrote “A View of the Barnum Property” in *Yankee Doodle* (Robertson-Lorant 161). Melville also returns to the figure of Barnum in *The Confidence-Man* and in his letters.

against Mexico, and his humbug in turn recasts as heroic the detritus of Taylor's violent blundering. This humbug thus promises to legitimize Taylor's political ambitions. As if in admission of this consequence, Barnum promises Taylor the upcoming presidency (and a 500% increase in salary) if he will submit to be caged and exhibited at the Barnum Museum (229).

Blood Meridian amplifies the equation of entertaining deceptions with imperial violence. The showmanship of P.T. Barnum and the slippery rhetoric of the confidence man take shape in the figure of Judge Holden, who becomes a nightmarish vision of the imbrication of illusion, aesthetics and empire. Mirroring Barnum in his diverse interests and rhetorical dexterity, the judge repeatedly stages spectacles of deception. He appears first as a humbugger, derailing the tentshow of an itinerant preacher "playing to a full house" by denouncing him as an impostor guilty of illiteracy, fraud, pedophilia and bestiality. As the ensuing melee subsides, the judge is asked how he came to "have the goods on that no-account" and declares that he has "never laid eyes on the man before today. Never even heard of him" (8). The stunned rabble is reduced to laughter, and someone buys him a drink. In this opening scene, the judge exploits first anxiety about deception, then appreciation for its clever execution. "The public," Barnum once observed, "appears disposed to be amused even when they are conscious of being deceived" (qtd. in Harrison 26). Later the judge gives "an extemporary lecture in geology," and again the punch line is his trickery uncovered: "The squatters in their rags nodded among themselves and were soon reckoning him correct, this man of learning, in all his speculations, and this the judge encouraged until they were right proselytes of the

new order whereupon he laughed at them for fools” (116). Such lectures are frequent events—“[all] in that company had heard the judge on paleontology save for the new recruits” (251). Like Barnum he is a “self-made priest” (Saxon 51), given to pontificating on matters philosophical, vegetable and mineral.

These scenes of verbal legerdemain attest to the judge’s capacities as a showman, as do instances in which he exhibits marvels and magic tricks. He leads revelries and exhibits his spectacular strength in hoisting and then throwing an “enormous iron meteorite.” This display is also framed as a “rational amusement,” as the judge does not pass up on the “opportunity to ventilate himself upon the ferric nature of heavenly bodies and their powers and claims” (240). The judge directs a family of itinerant magicians in a tarot reading, and at the novel’s end is again conducting the evening’s entertainment, fiddling and dancing in a whorehouse. He performs a number of coin tricks, most memorably around the fire with the gang. “The arc of circling bodies is determined by the length of their tether, said the judge. Moons, coins, men” (245-6). Instructing his audience to “watch the coin,” he hurls it into the outer dark:

The coin returned back out of the night and crossed the fire with a faint high droning and the judge’s raised hand was empty and then it held the coin. There was a light slap and it held the coin. Even so some claimed that he had thrown the coin away and palmed another like it and made the sound with his tongue for he was himself a cunning old malabarista and he said himself as he put the coin away what all men knew that there are coins and false coins. In the

morning some did walk over the ground where the coin had gone but if any man found it he kept it to himself. (246)

The judge's magic asserts his mastery over circulation and coining, as well as his capacity to simultaneously demonstrate and deceive. In subconscious recognition of this, the kid will dream later of the judge standing over a "coldforger... contriving from cold slag brute in the crucible a face that will pass, an image that will render this residual specie current in the markets where men barter" (310). He is the producer and arbiter of all deceptions in the text.

Like the Cosmopolitan in Melville's *Confidence-Man*, the judge flourishes in all registers of polite society—bantering with statesmen and politicians in many languages, charming authorities and enemies alike.¹³ In this he is unique among the Glanton Gang, whose other members look like "stone-age savages" and generally seem versed only in depravity and murder (232). For instance, shortly after a desperate flight across the desert (clothed only in strips of meat of uncertain provenance), he visits the kid in his jail cell. Whereas the kid had been arrested on sight, Holden is decked out anew in the garb of a wealthy gentleman. In the novel's final scenes he is "among every kind of man" (325) and "a great favorite" (335).

The judge's showmanship is closely bound with imperial power. Like Barnum, who sought to acquire the world's heterogeneity for his "department store of culture"

¹³ The judge also shares a remarkable family of critical resemblances with Melville's Cosmopolitan who, Laurie Robertson-Lorant notes, "has been identified with God, with Vishnu, and with Buddha, P.T. Barnum, Uncle Sam, and Satan . . . [and] the Deity worshiped by the Orphite sect of Gnostic Christians" (369). One can find McCarthy criticism discussing the judge in virtually all these terms (see Bloom, Daugherty, Spurgeon, and Wallach).

(Harrison 92), Holden displays a passion for collecting and classifying.¹⁴ He also displays an active interest in phrenology, examining the skull of Cloyce Bell, the brother of the idiot whom the judge adopts from his freak-show cage (238). The ledger he carries with him would index a museum, as he fills it with etchings of geological, archeological, and botanical specimens. When queried, he declares that his collecting is motivated by a thirst for absolute possession:

The judge placed his hands on the ground. He looked at his inquisitor.

This is my claim, he said. And yet everywhere upon it are pockets of autonomous life. Autonomous. In order for it to be mine nothing must be permitted to occur upon it save by my dispensation.

Toadvine sat with his boots crossed before the fire.[...] I dont see what that has to do with catchin birds.

The freedom of birds is an insult to me. I'd have them all in zoos.

That would be a hell of a zoo.

The judge smiled. Yes, he said. Even so. (199)

Repeatedly, having sketched artifacts or a selection of ancient cave paintings, he destroys all traces of the originals. He declares that his intention is “to expunge them from the memory of man,” and so also to control their circulation (140).

Holden’s showmanship propagates a multitude of crimes. All eyes are on the judge throughout *Blood Meridian*, yet rarely are his predations seen. Instead, they are

¹⁴ Imperial subtexts were particularly apparent in exhibits like “Barnum’s Indians,” the precursor of Buffalo Bill’s Wild West Show, in which Native Americans would perform stereotypically “Indian activities” before staging a bloody battle with Mexican cavalry (Saxon 100).

shrouded in his aura of mystery. The judge's charm and verbal dexterity occlude his own brutality, drawing attention away from the content of his deeds. While the kid remains largely nondescript, the judge's corporality is rendered in spectacular detail. When the men go to bathe, the gang is described as a general entity, while "none could take their eyes from the judge who had disrobed last of all and now walked the perimeter of the baths with . . . a regal air" (167). Practically speaking, Holden's illusionism sustains the gang's bloodshed. If Glanton embodies the aggression of American expansion—relentless (148), bloodlustful (181), claiming absolute agency (243)—then the judge is the rhetoric and spectacle which conceals and maintains that aggression. This "secret commerce" is the "terrible covenant" they share (126). Holden first saves the Glanton gang from certain death at Apache hands with a mixture of science, rhetoric and performance: he manufactures homemade gunpowder, rallies the men with quasi-mystical speeches, and his theatrical deceptions ("All dead save me!") pave the way for the ensuing slaughter (134). He uses his erudition and sophistry to defuse standoffs with lawmen, and negotiates on Glanton's behalf with Indians and authorities. His rhetoric likewise works to aestheticize and impart an air of mystery to the gang's bloodshed— "If war is not holy, man is nothing but antic clay" (307), all "ritual[s] include the letting of blood" (329), the sanctity of which makes "the dance" "true" (331). His guises and verbal pyrotechnics invite wonder at his dazzling craft detached from its violent content.

Judge Holden thus embodies an aesthetic strategy for transforming political aggression and economic deception into wondrous spectacle. In this respect, *Blood Meridian* captures a latent feature of American entertainment culture from Barnum and

Buffalo Bill to the contemporary “Militainment” industry.¹⁵ The judge’s artful deceptions radicalize the sanitized productions of P.T. Barnum’s Indians, Buffalo Bill’s Wild West, dime novels, and Westerns. These cultural products worked to legitimize expansion and domesticate the frontier by rendering it mythical, theatrical, and stylized.¹⁶ *Blood Meridian*’s primary source, Samuel Chamberlain’s *My Confessions: the Recollections of a Rogue*, epitomizes this tendency, narrating Chamberlain’s coming of age in the Mexican-American War and travels with Glanton’s scalp-hunters as the romantic adventure of a well-intentioned “rogue.” *Blood Meridian* expands the scope of this ideological counterfeiting by presenting scalp hunting as not just adventure but art. It

¹⁵ See Stahl, who documents how “entertainment media have become subject to an invisible hand, a network of corporate and governmental interests that nudges cultural narratives towards profitable bellicosity” and absorbs citizens into the “military-entertainment matrix” (15-18). Similarly, Dyer-Witheford and Peuter argue that the immensely successful war-simulator videogames such as *Call of Duty* and *America’s Army* anesthetize and commodify war by “routinizing the extermination of the enemy; by diminishing the horrors of battle and exalting its spectacle; . . . by investing pleasurable affect in military tactics and strategy; and by making players material partners in, and beneficiaries of, military techno-culture” (118).

¹⁶ Richard Slotkin has demonstrated how Buffalo Bill’s Wild West metamorphosed from trading primarily in nostalgia for a lost “old West” into a celebration of American expansionism. The show grew increasingly dependent on imperialism for its content and relevance, as grand finales included reenactments of Teddy Roosevelt’s charge up San Juan Hill and the “Rescue of Peking” in the Boxer uprising. Audiences could thus “savor the thrill of danger without risking its consequences, could believe that struggle and conflict inflicted no lasting wounds, and could see that the enemy ‘other’ would rise from the dust, wave to the crowd, and sell souvenir photographs at the end of the day” (Kasson 265). Another show-stopper was “The First Scalp for Custer,” a dramatization of how Buffalo Bill had quit the stage to join the fighting in the Plains Indian Wars after Custer’s “Last Stand.” Buffalo Bill had donned a theatrical buckskin costume prior to shooting and scalping a (real) warrior named Yellow Hand—which then became a main piece reenacted in his theatrical show. It is a striking episode of real violence being presented and abstracted as spectacular entertainment. See also Davis 15-36.

presents, in other words, the conversion of treachery into aestheticized trickery as a crucial feature of the political and literary history it engages.

Written in the aftermath of the Vietnam War, *Blood Meridian* in this sense offers a genealogy of American warfare turned into mediated spectacle.¹⁷ As Michael Rogin and others have demonstrated, American foreign policy is largely enacted through spectacle: covert operations are packaged as entertainment and symbolic gesture, and, the deeds, hidden in plain sight, are selectively forgotten. Rogin characterizes the principle at work in terms that echo Barnum's operational aesthetic:

Production is not hidden as the real source of power; it rather appears on the surface as one more display. Taking pleasure from production numbers, in film terminology, from the special effects of spin doctors, in the language of political campaigns, audiences enjoy at once the effects produced on them and the way those effects are produced. (Rogin 119)

Style subsumes content, allowing for illusion to be consumed with self-reflexive gusto. Perhaps the purest realization of this principle was the "Shock & Awe" campaign of the 2003 invasion of Iraq, which explicitly conscripted aesthetics to package imperial aggression as spectacular display, not only for the benefit of "viewers at home" but for the enemy targets as well. The rhetoric of the aesthetic lends particular force, David

¹⁷ Several critics have argued for *Blood Meridian*'s resonance in contemporary contexts: Jonathan Imber Shaw finds in the novel anxieties surrounding American intervention in El Salvador in the early 1980s. John Cant connects *Blood Meridian*'s violence to images from the Vietnam War, and Barclay Owens pairs it with Vietnam-era historical revisionism and escalating violence in entertainment (21). In the next chapter I will consider Tim O'Brien's investigation of American aggression in Vietnam through the lens of illusionism.

Palumbo-Liu argues, to antihumanist and destructive modes of thinking, which “would be far less lethal and much more contained without the compelling force of the humanistic imagination behind it” (“Preemption” 154).

Although much has been made of the theological and neoconservative rhetoric of American empire, *Blood Meridian* indicates that the normalization and concealment of imperial violence comes not in rhetorical content but in commodified forms. Ideological appeals require buttressing from spectacular or consumable ones, which depend not on political or intellectual assent but on mere enjoyment, a willingness to consume a product as its presentation dictates. In *Blood Meridian*, the mouthpiece of Manifest Destiny is the aptly-named Captain White, who early in the novel recruits the kid for a bootleg campaign against Mexico. White earnestly parrots the racial logic of Western conquest, telling the kid that they will be “the instruments of liberation in a dark and troubled land” which they will rescue from “a race of degenerates... A mongrel race little better than niggers” (34). Yet White is little more than a parody of this rhetoric, however, a weak imitation of Glanton, quickly slaughtered by the Comanche. In contrast, the Glanton Gang—a multiracial group devoid of national allegiances or interest—is driven by Glanton’s ruthless pursuit of profit and the charisma, legerdemain and portentousness of the judge. The kid last sees the head of Captain White on display at “a primitive circus” in a jug of mezcal (69); the judge “dances in light and in shadow and he is a great favorite ... He says that he will never die” (335). The contrast is telling: McCarthy anchors the genesis of American capitalist empire not in the “metaphysics of Indian-hating” but in

imperial illusionism—linking entertainment to empire, spectacle to concealment, magic tricks to violent erasure, and showman’s humbug to the machinations of conquest.

Blood Meridian’s Contaminated Aesthetics

An account of aesthetic deceptions in *Blood Meridian* cannot end there, however: in depicting a world of deception and spectacular violence, the novel provides scant critical distance. Instead, it adopts those same features, seemingly becoming complicit in the state of affairs it represents. In particular, it affords no clean distinction between Holden’s craft and McCarthy’s own—it lacks, as James Wood puts it, “internal borders” to cordon off the judge from the narrative voice.¹⁸ *Blood Meridian’s* literary-aesthetic qualities, and the pleasures they offer, are thus entangled with the judge’s illusionist treachery. The judge serves both as canny pitchman and uncanny exhibit, and is also the novel’s most (perhaps only) distinctive character. It becomes increasingly difficult to distinguish his words and claims from those of the narrator. Even McCarthy’s most pronounced stylistic tic—“[X] like some [monstrous/mythical] [Y]”—functions practically as a grammar of sensational exhibit or mystifying equivalences. *Blood Meridian* evokes a catalogue of wonders that would put Barnum’s American Museum to shame, containing things like some “fairybook beast” (4), “wholly wretched baptismal candidate” (29), “reeking issue of the incarnate dam of war herself” (58), “loutish knight beriddled by a troll” (107), “drunken djinn” (117), “fabled equine ideation out of an Attic

¹⁸ In a similar vein, Guillemin labels the narrative voice as “posthumanist” and “without ethics,” a claim which Dana Phillips develops in his reading of *Blood Meridian* as occupying a radically non-anthropocentric position.

tragedy” (121), “ignis fatuus” (126), “reeking outland nurse” (165), “changling” (167), “more ancient ossuary” (182), “egregious saltland bard” (228), “great balden archimandrite” (284), “immense and naked barrister whom the country had crazed” (296), “naked species of lemur” (310), and “monster slain in the commission of unnatural acts” (334), to cite a few. In its luxuriant language and extraordinary images, the text infuses a sense of mystery into its desacralized content.

“Everything’s for sale,” the judge announces late in the novel, “What will you take?” (282). More assertion than question, this statement resonates throughout *Blood Meridian*: the novel depicts a period of extreme commodification in which death becomes a tradable good. The point is driven home not just by the gang’s scalping enterprise but by the “bonestrewn wasteland” the west becomes as the extermination of the buffalo continues the evisceration of life by market forces.¹⁹ The judge’s illusionism provides the aesthetic and intellectual cover for the brutalities incurred by acquisition and exchange. This alignment is not coincidental but rather articulates a necessary relationship in capitalism: namely, that market imperatives of innovation and manufactured desire require aesthetic productions to infuse commodities with a (fetishistic, illusory) value beyond simple use-value. Melville’s multiple valences of “confidence” illustrate how trust and human relations are made subject to speculation and exploitation, with aesthetic or literary appeals being one instance of the general principle.

¹⁹ This final wasteland expresses the catastrophe awaited by the Diegueños as they witness westbound “pilgrims” on their desperate plight through the California desert: “they knew that nothing excepting some savage pursuit could drive men to such plight and they watched each day for that thing to gather itself out of its terrible incubation in the house of the sun and muster along the edge of the eastern world [...] whether it be armies or plague or pestilence or something altogether unspeakable” (301).

The demands of capitalism are such that “Every expression which gains the trust of the masses or, in the jargon, ‘has credit,’ will be brought into play and stripped of the concrete endeavors it once expressed” (Haug 134). That is, any “authentic” thing will be marketized and thereby drained of its original significance.

Holden’s illusionism in *Blood Meridian* serves not simply to aestheticize violence but to mystify a wholly marketized world through the creation of a style that appropriates “‘high culture’ or whatever is ‘sacred’” (Haug 129). Hence notions of particularity, novelty, or originality—bedrock criteria for modernist notions of art—are particularly vulnerable to being co-opted. Indeed, a wealth of recent scholarship has shown that modernist authors were always involved in a complex relation with markets and commodification.²⁰ As Timothy Bewes argues, the uniqueness of the autonomous artwork “becomes an expression of authenticity and ‘non-reifiability’ which translates with perfect ease into exchange value”:

²⁰ The “art novel,” a tradition originating in Henry James’s efforts to raise the novel’s cultural prestige (and in which McCarthy clearly writes), itself followed the logic of commodity differentiation:

It was in dialectical relation to this [mass-cultural] audience, and working for the most part within the institutions of an expanding mass market, that the novel would attempt to reinvent itself as fine art. The rise of the art-novel thus becomes visible as a version, of sorts, of the widespread contemporaneous phenomenon of product differentiation—that status-conscious aspect of mass consumerism in which, for famous instance, the mass-produced regularity of the black Ford Model T gives way in the 1920s to the multicolored hierarchies of automotive distinction. (McGurl, *Novel 5*)

See also Glass and Rainey. Rainey argues that “modernism, among other things, is a strategy whereby the work of art invites and solicits its commodification, but does so in a such a way that it becomes a commodity of a special sort, one that is temporarily exempted from the exigencies of immediate consumption prevalent within the larger cultural economy, and instead is integrated into a different economic circuit of patronage, collecting, speculation, and investment” (3).

In the unique, ‘non-reified’ and ‘non-reifiable’ artwork we see the emergence of something close to an absolute commodity... The unique artwork is the ultimate object of fetishism; the cult of genius, the aura of individuality, the chimera of authenticity, all are attached to the autonomous artwork, which reveals itself to be the reliquary and vehicle of reified consciousness. (Bewes 130)

This aura of genius, individuality, or authenticity is precisely Judge Holden’s contribution to *Blood Meridian*, and for that reason the novel’s artistry seems contiguous with his imperial illusionism. He lends it its elevated and portentous language, its preoccupation with grand themes, its fascination with relics and ruins. The judge ventriloquizes the tenets of high modernist artistry for his own rhetorical purposes. He emphasizes the power of storytelling and the importance of witnessing, catering to fantasies of authorial power and the vitality of artistic originality. In one scene, he tells his listeners that

The man who believes that the secrets of the world are forever hidden lives in mystery and fear. Superstition will drag him down. The rain will erode the deeds of his life. But that man who sets himself the task of singling out the thread of order from the tapestry will by the decision alone have taken charge of the world and it is only by such taking charge that he will effect a way to dictate the terms of his own fate. (199)

He pantomimes these teachings throughout the novel as he occupies the positions of author and exegete, recording the details of the earth in his ledger, offering and interpreting cryptic parables, laying claim to that which he sees and depicts. As such,

what Hungerford perceives as the hollowness of *Blood Meridian*'s biblical-cum-high-modernist form in fact points towards the limitations of the modernist enterprise itself—broadly understood as an attempt to establish “in aesthetic form an alternative set of standards or experiential states whose notional ‘autonomy’ from the world at large was simultaneously a critique and a condemnation of that world” (Holloway 146). It casts the author-figure as a monster, predatorily manipulating high-culture and aesthetics to mask or profit from material conditions.

It is symptomatic of this phenomenon, then, that the novel's canonical overtones cluster particularly around the judge, who elicits comparisons to everyone from Milton's Satan to Melville's White Whale.²¹ He quotes lines from *Henry V* to the kid (327), and, in a seeming parody of *King Lear*, the judge and the idiot in the desert resemble “some scurrilous king stripped of his vestiture and driven together with his fool into the wilderness to die” (282). In this light, Michael Herr's blurb on the cover of the Vintage International edition of *Blood Meridian* is illuminating in how it mischaracterizes the novel. Calling it a “classic American novel of regeneration through violence,” Herr declares that “McCarthy can only be compared with our greatest writers, with Melville and Faulkner, and this is his masterpiece.” While I would argue that the novel's violence is far from regenerative, such mystification of bloodshed is closely bound up in the novel

²¹ *Blood Meridian* begins with a compressed retelling of *Huckleberry Finn*, with the 14-year-old kid fleeing his drunkard father to drift down the Mississippi, get in trouble, and light out for the territories. As Bloom notes, McCarthy also quotes *Moby-Dick* in the appearance of an “old disordered Mennonite” who warns the kid and his companions against starting out on their journey (Josyph 8).

with literary-canonical posturing.²² Harold Bloom likewise anchors the novel's greatness in the judge, calling Judge Holden "the real bedrock of McCarthy's genius," and the one thing that sets *Blood Meridian* apart from "everything else by anybody still alive in the United States" (Josyph 19). The novel's high literary aesthetic becomes in this sense an effect of the judge's rhetorical performance.

The judge's stylistic dominion is compounded by the way in which he assumes the position of critic and exegete within the narrative, thereby making critical hermeneutics a weapon he uses rather than one that could be used against him. He challenges and critiques prevailing assumptions, interprets and historicizes evidence, and seeks to defamiliarize the commonplace. (Consider, for instance, how in the passage that appears as the epigraph to this chapter the Judge seeks to puncture reified perceptions—to restore the world's lost "strangeness" so that it "would appear to you for what it is" [245]). This exegetical work is dramatized in a number of scenes of excavating and explicating archeological evidence, in which the judge "answer[s] [his audience] with

²² Herr's praise encapsulates a great deal of writing about *Blood Meridian* that embraces the "sacred violence" in its mythical dimensions (*Sacred Violence* is even the title of a two-volume collection of essays on McCarthy's Western fiction, edited by Wade Hall and Rick Wallach). Fittingly, known canon-thumper Harold Bloom is the most enthusiastic celebrant of *Blood Meridian* as a "universal tragedy of blood," but a number of commentators exemplify Wood's "disquieting sense that McCarthy's fiction puts certain fond American myths under pressure merely to replace them with one vaster myth—eternal violence" ("Red Planet"). This tendency is at work in the widespread impulse to read the judge as embodying various abstract or supernatural elements. Daugherty and Wallach spearhead interpretations of Holden as Gnostic archon, and Sepich and Bell likewise view him as supernatural force. In more metaphorical veins, the judge is read by Parrish as "human history incarnate" (103), Cant as "a metaphor for culture itself" (171), Shaviro as the embodiment of Enlightenment rationalism, Jarrett as representative of Manifest Destiny and the ideology of conquest, and Spurgeon as the mythic "Sacred Hunter."

care, amplifying their own questions for them, as if they might be apprentice scholars” (251). Throughout the narrative, Holden takes up critical positions only to subsume them under his rhetoric, and his enigmatic words are frequently the only markers in *Blood Meridian* that gesture towards hidden meaning. David Holloway suggests that “[s]ince the judge is an agency who expropriates and totalizes all meaning—who owns, we might say, the ideological capital—in the text . . . we are left with little choice but to accept at face value the world as revealed to us through the words that he uses” (195). The peremptoriness of the judge, his colonization of all positions of judgment or points of resistance, explains his preternatural manner of anticipating the movement of his audience. The Glanton gang first encounters him, for instance, “set on a rock in the middle of the greatest desert you’d ever want to see . . . Just him and his legs crossed, smilin as we rode up. Like he’d been expectin us,” Tobin tells the kid (124-5). Similar appearances bookend the novel. After disrupting the Reverend Green’s tent-show, the judge is somehow “already at the bar” when the first to escape the tent take shelter there (7). The kid then meets his end when he goes out to use an outhouse and encounters the judge “seated upon the closet. He was naked and he rose up smiling and gathered him in his arms against his immense and terrible flesh and shot the wooden barlatch home behind him” (333). Wherever one goes to evade him, there he is.

By the novel’s end the judge’s “immense and terrible flesh” seems all-encompassing and unfathomable. There is, we are told, no system nor science nor “unraveling of loins and ledgerbooks” that could “reckon his commencing” (310). In the kid’s dream, he stands as the final and eternal arbiter of value, inspecting counterfeit

currency for use in “the markets where men barter”: “Of this is the judge judge and the night does not end” (310). In his last meeting with the kid, he tells him, “There is room on the stage for one beast and one alone. All others ... will step down into the darkness before the footlamps. Bears that dance, bears that don’t” (331). The novel ends, literally, with him dancing alone. The judge’s domination of the text is symptomatic of the aesthetic contamination the novel stages, what Palumbo-Liu in a different context describes as “the enlistment of the Beautiful... in the interests of hegemony” (“Preemption” 166). Inasmuch as it is conscripted for imperial and economic ends, the realm of the aesthetic is simultaneously degraded and expanded. *Blood Meridian* thus demonstrates in its own narrative deceptions and mystifications what Adorno calls “total reification,” a feature of late capitalism in which “the subjectivity of men and women is completely dominated by consumer society, removing the possibility even of subjective, interior resistance” (Bewes 9). This totalization means that any marginal or external position is already colonized, and any resistance subsumed.²³ The judge asserts as much when Tobin, the member of the Glanton gang most antagonistic toward the judge, refuses to “secondsay [the judge] in [his] notions”: “Ah priest, said the judge. What could I ask of you that you’ve not already given?” (McCarthy 251).

As the judge assumes dominion over the narrative, however, *Blood Meridian* becomes increasingly preoccupied with the problem of what to make of his egregious

²³ This state of affairs leads some critics to argue that *Blood Meridian* ultimately recapitulates the conditions it displays. “Although *Blood Meridian* and the Border Trilogy attempt to chart an escape from the deterministic imperatives of modernity,” Nick Monk writes, “this movement is doomed to failure from the moment of its genesis,” ultimately attesting only to “the very inescapability of the modern” (83). See also Holloway.

portentousness. When the judge silently sits before the fire with eyes like “empty slots,” “[n]one among the company harbored any notion as to what this attitude implied, yet so like an icon was he in his sitting that they grew cautious and spoke with circumspection among themselves as if they would not waken something that had better been left sleeping” (147). Later, the judge and his fool appear as “things whose very portent renders them ambiguous” (282). Implicitly, *Blood Meridian* calls attention to the difficulties of interpreting or responding to the judge. The last two survivors of the Glanton gang, the kid and the “expriest” Tobin, represent antithetical approaches to the interpretive challenges and temptations posed by the judge (ones that, incidentally, anticipate primary tendencies of *Blood Meridian* criticism). The skeptical kid seeks a materialist understanding of the judge, whereas Tobin mystifies him. It is the religiously-inclined Tobin who describes discovering the judge like “a mirage” in the desert, and narrates Holden’s subsequent conjuring of gunpowder as a satanic inversion of gospel miracles. Tobin presents the judge as unfathomable and possessing demonic powers, and resorts to opposing him with religious incantation—“the expriest stumbling among the bones and holding aloft a cross he’d fashioned out of the shins of a ram and he’d lashed them together with strips of hide and he was holding the thing before him like some mad dowser in the bleak of desert and calling out in a tongue both alien and extinct” (290). In contrast, the kid remains obsessively attentive to yet suspicious of Holden, repeatedly “studying” and asking questions about him. While all others sleep, Glanton sees the kid “across the fire from him, squatting in his blanket, watching the judge” (243). This scene captures the kid’s curiosity concerning the judge, yet he rejects Tobin’s mystifications,

insisting rather that the judge is “a man like all men” (297). He reiterates his unbelief in his final conversation with the judge, telling him, “You aint nothin” (331). By refusing to engage Holden in his “craziness” he seeks also to expose and reject his illusions.

Neither the kid’s critical suspicion nor Tobin’s theologizing are sufficient, however. The kid is uncomprehending and inarticulate, and his resistance culminates in being smothered in an outhouse. “Even if you should have stood your ground,” Holden asks him, “yet what ground was it?” (307).²⁴ Tobin, meanwhile, goes unheeded even by the kid and ominously disappears from the narrative: “[The kid] never saw the expriest again. Of the judge he heard rumor everywhere” (313). This conclusion signals the limits of these interpretive approaches. Indeed, neither position can recognize at the same time the power and the falsity of Holden’s illusions. If Tobin succumbs to their power, the kid in attempting to see through the judge’s deceptions implicitly falls back upon some essence prior to and beneath deception which the novel itself denies. Hence his attempt to do away with illusion is as reifying as unquestioningly accepting the illusion itself. Timothy Bewes suggests that “[t]o try to strike through the mask is to recognize it, in all its pasteboard reality; to bestow reality upon it... Leaving the mask intact, conversely, demonstrates freedom from it, annihilating it all the more thoroughly” (Bewes 153). In both its content and narration, *Blood Meridian* frustrates any effort that would “labor under the illusion of eliminating trickery on the assumption that there is some world out

²⁴ Committed to a tragic understanding of *Blood Meridian*, Bloom characterizes the kid’s resistance as a redemptive act of “heroism.” This ignores, Hungerford aptly points out, the fact that nowhere in the novel is there “the sort of structure that can sustain the notion of the heroic act” (93).

there beyond and bereft of trickery” (Taussig 278). It thus implies that any aspirations of literature to stand apart from commodification are themselves illusory.

In Pursuit of Re-enchantment

In considering the deceptive or mystifying qualities of *Blood Meridian*, I have sought to show first that through the figure of the judge the novel portrays illusionism as central to the development of American capitalist empire from the mid-nineteenth century to the present, and second that it demonstrates the subordination of aesthetic productions to the totalizing demands of market capitalism. It thereby presents in its own reification a world devoid of any “outside” or alternative to the judge’s deceptions. Preoccupied with the question of whether any form of the sacred or of humanistic value can withstand marketization, *Blood Meridian* seems to answer negatively even as its affective force and reception suggest otherwise. In fact, it is precisely because the “crust between reality and all representation”—what might be described variously as reification, illusion, mystification, commodification, or objectification—is totalized within the novel that it also becomes “a reversible concept, potentially as liberating as it is oppressive” (Bewes xvi). In fact, *Blood Meridian* arrives not at a negation of literary value but at a recovery of enchantment, upon which the affective power of McCarthy’s style is grounded.

The crucial theoretical insight that Bewes makes is that a totality of illusion, which *Blood Meridian* embodies historically and aesthetically, necessitates a rejection of hermeneutical distinctions between surface/depth and illusion/reality. Hence the initial

distinction made by *Blood Meridian* critics—between McCarthy’s style and the substance contained therein—is abolished. Instead, the novel pushes us to recognize how, as Bewes explains,

The figure of ‘total reification’ is ... an appropriate one for a world in which a new generation of specters is proliferating before our eyes. ‘Advanced capitalism’ is a totally reified society which mystifies everything, including all manifestations of otherness, which it *produces* in forms which appear completely alien to itself ... Recognizing the totality of this situation is necessary for any real change. Not only is the pasteboard façade an illusion, but the grotesque reality beneath as well; not only the reified manifestation, but the critique of reification which exposes it.

(Bewes 267)

Blood Meridian’s power derives from the way it both historically charts and formally internalizes the emergence of this illusionism so as to make it troubling and recognizable. I have dwelt thus far on the dominant strain of the novel, how the arts of deception outline imperialist or capitalist mystifications. However, in denying the distinction between pasteboard façade and grotesque reality, the novel recovers the affective power of illusions and enchanted properties of reified or instrumentalized things. *Blood Meridian* displays what Bewes calls a “poetics of objectification,” marked by its “refusal to posit some essential identity outside reification to counterpose it” (xv). In dismissing questions of depth and essence, commodification and authenticity, the novel invests these fleeting or apparitional moments with renewed immediacy and wonder. McCarthy’s style enacts a productive strategy of literary enchantment, one

which provides glimpses of mystery, enchantment, or non-material value in a world in which marketization dehumanizes and particular objects are reduced to brute matter.

There is a sense in which this impulse is encoded within the arts of deception themselves. As Jameson has shown (following Ernst Bloch), mass cultural forms, while ideological or commercially degraded, nevertheless encode utopian longings. It follows that inasmuch as magic shows helped to normalize commodity mystification and industrial capitalism, they also offered a compensatory fantasy in which instrumentalized objects regained immanent value, became wondrous and unique. As Melville's "Authentic Anecdotes" demonstrates, Barnum's art arises particularly as notions of authenticity are put under duress.²⁵ His ploys aimed to produce singularity, novelty, or wonder within a commercial and industrial milieu that rendered any particular good exchangeable and reproducible. The attempt to individuate and re-enchant mass produced objects for commercial ends would be more fully realized in the growth of advertising, as scholars have shown.²⁶ But while advertising seeks to elicit desire for possession, Barnum's exhibits and illusions generated fantasies not of ownership but of experience of the extraordinary. Even as they were nakedly commercial spectacles, the showman's

²⁵ *Blood Meridian* depicts just such a crisis in authenticity late in the novel, when the kid (now the man) is asked about his necklace of ears. He replies that they are Indian ears, and that he rode with the man who docked them. The boy he is speaking to doesn't believe him: "Them ears could of come off of cannibals or any other kind of foreign nigger. They tell me you can buy the whole heads in New Orleans. Sailors brings em in and you can buy em for five dollars all day long them heads" (321). The boy's skepticism indicates how the 'primitive' war trophy has become an easily-obtainable commodity, throwing its origins and significance into dispute.

²⁶ See especially Lears' *Fables of Abundance*, in which he positions the advertising industry as nostalgically harkening back to a carnivalesque, magical past that is lost under industrialization.

rarities and illusionist's tricks insisted on the exceptional properties of things, momentarily exempting them from the abstractions of production and exchange.

As we have seen, in this respect too the judge darkly mirrors Barnum's activities as he claims exclusive possession of things through violence and erasure (while being himself a singular creature). However, *Blood Meridian's* stylistic enchantments are crucially distinct from both Holden's coercive and Barnum's commercial mystifications. Repeatedly the novel conjures moments of strangeness, wonder, or particularity that are shown to be subject to the dynamics of illusion and yet not reducible to "mere illusion." Consider the following passage, which I will quote at length. It comes as the kid treks across the winter desert alone, trying to rejoin the Glanton gang:

In the distance before him a fire burned on the prairie, a solitary flame frayed by the wind that freshened and faded and shed scattered sparks down the storm like hot scurf blown from some unreckonable forge howling in the waste... It was a lone tree burning on the desert. A heraldic tree that the passing storm had left afire. The solitary pilgrim drawn up before it had traveled far to be here and he knelt in the hot sand and held his numbed hands out while all about in that circle attended companies of lesser auxiliaries routed forth into the inordinate day, small owls that crouched silently and stood from foot to foot and tarantulas and solpugas and vinegarroons and the vicious mygale spiders and beaded lizards with mouths black as a chowdog's, deadly to man, and the little desert basilisks that jet blood from their eyes and the small sandpipers like seemly gods, silent and the same, in Jeda, in Babylon. A constellation of ignited eyes that edged the ring of

light all bound in a precarious truce before this torch whose brightness had set back the stars in their sockets.

When the sun rose he was asleep under the smoldering skeleton of a blackened scrog. The storm had passed off to the south and the new sky was raw and blue and the spire of smoke from the burnt tree stood vertically in the still dawn like a slender stylus marking the hour with its particular and faintly breathing shadow upon the face of a terrain that was without other designation. All the creatures that had been at vigil with him in the night were gone and about him lay only the strange coral shapes of fulgurite in their scorched furrows fused out of the sand where ball lightning had run upon the ground in the night hissing and stinking of sulphur. (214-215)

The burning tree is, like Adorno's description of fireworks, apparitional, ominous yet unreadable (Bewes 77). Though a natural accident, the language in which it is described is imbued equally with poetry ("a solitary flame frayed by the wind that freshened and faded and shed scattered sparks"), portent ("hot scurf blown from some unreckonable forge"), and religion ("The solitary pilgrim ... knelt"). The tree itself seems a wondrous sight, for which the pilgrim kid has indeed "traveled far," and in its "inordinate" light it captures a diversity of remarkable creatures in a "precarious truce." The assembled company encompasses not just variant species but places and ancient times ("silent and the same, in Jeda, in Babylon"), and even the universe itself, as the fire eclipses the stars in the sky and replaces them with "a constellation of ignited eyes."

The scene unmistakably echoes the Biblical account of God speaking to Moses

from the burning bush, and one recalls Hungerford's contention that *Blood Meridian* "tempts one to read ... as if one were reading scripture, and yet withholds all but the aesthetic and sentimental effects of scripture" (Hungerford 95). The spell cast in this scene is indeed fleeting, as the light of day reveals the "heraldic tree" to be "the smoldering skeleton of a blackened scrog," and those who kept vigil vanished. But in contrast to an earlier cited passage which invokes the Bible while denying the presence of the divine—the destructive whirlwind "out of which no voice spoke" (111)—the affective power or import of the burning tree is not entirely negated. Instead it leaves a remainder, a "spire of smoke ... like a slender stylus" that retains particularity and animation: in a terrain "without other designation," it "mark[s] the hour with its particular and faintly breathing shadow." The illumination of the burning tree thus lingers residually in this slender stylus, and with it the momentary brilliance and hiatus from conflict and division that it occasioned.²⁷

A few hours later, the kid comes upon the remains of another desert fire, this time "a strange blackened mass in the trail like a burnt carcass of some ungodly beast" around which the tracks of wolves and coyotes "fetched up to the edge... and flared away again"

²⁷ See also the passage in which the kid extends empathy to the old indigenous woman he finds at the scene of a massacre:

He spoke to her in a low voice. He told her that he was an American and that he was a long way from the country of his birth and that he had no family and that he had traveled much and seen many things and had been at war and endured hardships. He told her that he would convey her to a safe place ... [that] he could not leave her in this place or she would surely die. (315)

He mistakes her for a living person, when in fact she "was just a dried shell and she had been dead in that place for years" (315). And yet, I would argue, that deflation does not abrogate the affective power of his attempt at kindness, nor the substance of his confession.

(216). Like these tracks, the narrative description suggests repulsion rather than captivation concerning this fire: “It was the remains of the scalps taken on the Nacozari and they had been burned unredeemed in a green and stinking bonfire so that nothing remained of the poblanos save this charred coagulate of their preterite lives” (216). Throughout the novel, scalps have functioned as currency, “receipts” to be “collected” (98). In this scene, however, the strange, even unnatural materiality of these remains reverses that abstraction: the scalps’ economic function is denaturalized in the “green and stinking bonfire.” Having been “burned unredeemed,” the “charred coagulate” becomes synecdochal of the lives of the dead—in other words, it calls attention to the scalps’ particular origins. These two juxtaposed desert fires, taken together, evoke notions of order or significance completely removed from the economy of deception and violence propagated within the novel, even as they partake in that same language of mystifications and fleeting enchantment. In such moments, the novel’s style attests to something in excess of a rationalized and marketized world that it disrupts, even if only momentarily or illusorily.²⁸

In a related vein, Raymond Malewitz has shown how misuse functions in

²⁸ Cooper and Holloway both present McCarthy’s Border Trilogy as structured around quests for transcendence; Cooper presents these quests as moral/heroic, while Holloway casts both quest and failure in Marxian terms. He argues that the “the collapse of the quests [in the Border Trilogy] ... is compensated for in these novels by McCarthy’s resurrection of language itself as a more or less modernist aesthetic space. ... McCarthy’s mature style has developed into a kind of writing that *simulates* a disentangling of language from the appropriating energy of the ‘text,’ a returning of words to some ‘natural’ or ‘original’ pristine condition where they are stripped of their ‘thingness,’ or their status as objects of textual exchange” (Holloway 148). In spite of the scare-quotes and the dialectics, however, Holloway’s account frequently seems to revert back to reified notions of nature and essence.

McCarthy's novels to wrest objects from their calcified functions or significations.²⁹ This purposive misuse functions as a means of estrangement—akin to Heidegger's point about turning a painting upside down—that reveals the “thinginess” of objects hidden under their commodified status. Tent poles need not pitch tents, nor cattle guns be used on cattle. For Malewicz, though, misuse in McCarthy's novels betokens a form of “rugged consumerism,” in which characters reclaim rugged masculine agency by finding uses for objects that defy their social construction. This is consequently not a removal from circulation but a different form of consumption and use. The tactics of re-enchantment that I call attention to here are related but distinct, for they lead not to the creative repurposing of things but to a recognition of their strangeness, particularity, or wonder—a sense of things as immanently charged with value distinct from use- or market-value. For if Barnum's enchantments aim at exchange (i.e., the production of occasions equivalent to the price of admission) and Holden's at domination (to the point of “expung[ing] [the things in his sketchbook] from the memory of man” [140]), we might best characterize McCarthy's stylistic enchantments as aiming at preservation. From its opening page, on which “darker woods beyond... harbor yet a few last wolves” and the drunken father “quotes from poets whose names are now lost,” the novel concerns itself with things and creatures that are being erased.³⁰ It ends with the extermination of the

²⁹ See Malewicz's *The Practice of Misuse* 147-190.

³⁰ This erasure is most sharply articulated in the following description of a tribe the Glanton Gang has slaughtered: “In the days to come the frail black rebuses of blood in those sands would crack and break and drift away so that in the circuit of few suns all trace of the destruction of these people would be erased. The desert wind would salt their

buffalo. “They’re gone,” an old hunter tells the kid. “Ever one of them that God ever made is gone as if they’d never been at all” (317). This is the logical terminus, the novel suggests, of a world in which “everything’s for sale.” The old hunter himself seems to grasp the implications of his trade: “I wonder if there’s other worlds like this, he said. Or if this is the only one” (317).

One can draw a straight line between this scene and McCarthy’s most recent novel, *The Road* (2007), which likewise envisions contemporary society as ending in a wasteland of ash and sterility. Against this bleak backdrop, *The Road* adopts *Blood Meridian*’s aesthetic of momentary enchantments. As such, *The Road* at times appears less a terminal nightmare than a dream of scarcity, in which stories, names, and objects can regain value and mystery. Against the looming cataclysm of cultural overabundance, the novel seeks through what Andrew Hoberek calls its “aesthetics of exhaustion” the sparseness to recover value. Objects in *The Road* become re-enchanted through their singularity—such as when the man finds for the boy his first (and probably last) can of Coca Cola.

He slipped the boy’s knapsack straps loose and set the pack on the floor behind him and he put his thumbnail under the aluminum clip on the top of the can and opened it. He leaned his nose to the slight fizz coming from the can and then handed it to the boy. Go ahead, he said.

The boy took the can. It’s bubbly, he said.

Go ahead.

ruins and there would be nothing, nor ghost nor scribe, to tell to any pilgrim in his passing how it was that people had lived in this place and in this place died” (174).

He looked at his father and then tilted the can and drank. He sat there thinking about it. It's really good, he said.

Yes. It is. [...] You drink it. Let's just sit here.

It's because I wont ever get to drink another one, isnt it? (23-24)

Malewitz points out that the Coke “emanates a greater authenticity or aura” because it “appears to be the last of its kind” (“Regeneration” 538). An “original, authentic encounter with the thing” becomes possible when the object “has been removed from the networks of production, distribution, and advertisement that inform behaviors in an age of mass commodification” (539). This scene is another instance in which total reification collapses into its antithesis; the quasi-scripted consumption of a commodity suddenly transcends commodification. It is emblematic of the novel’s project of regaining vitality for worn out words, stories and sentiments.

The Road famously closes with the apparitional description of a now extinct creature:

Once there were brook trout in the streams in the mountains. You could see them standing in the amber current where the white edges of their fins wimpled softly in the flow. They smelled of moss in your hand. Polished and muscular and torsional. On their backs were vermiculate patterns that were maps of the world in its becoming. Maps and mazes. Of a thing which would not be put back. Not be made right again. In the deep glens where they lived all things were older than man and they hummed of mystery. (*The Road* 287)

The trout is shown but also vanished, the wondrous remainder of a lost world, and

wondrous because we recognize it as lost. In contradistinction to the tonal austerity of *Blood Meridian*, moments such as these in *The Road* seem loaded with affective sentiment. As such, *The Road* has been read as an ecological warning, a cautionary tale that we preserve the world we have. Inasmuch as these calls derive from moments of enchantment, we see at work in them what Jane Bennett calls an “ethics of minor experiences.” Bennett argues that aesthetic enchantments, even in commodified forms such as television advertisements, produce an immediacy of experience that holds the potential to spur social and ethical commitments in a way that reason or information cannot: “without modes of enchantment, we might not have the energy and inspiration to enact ecological projects, or to contest ugly and unjust modes of commercialization, or to respond generously to humans and nonhumans that challenge our settled identities” (Bennett 174).

It is my contention that the gap between *The Road*'s affect and *Blood Meridian*'s aesthetics is not in fact so great. Both seek to re-enchant reified forms through a dialectic of illusionism. This is an abiding element of McCarthy's recent fiction, in which fully commodified and fungible objects such as cans of Coca-Cola or quarters are imbued temporarily with particularity and aura. In adapting these tactics, McCarthy's aesthetic elevation of Barnum's techniques appears as a strategy for preserving literary value in the contemporary world. For the information age stands in relation to knowledge and text the way the industrial age did to things: technologies of production, replication, and transmission corrode the possibility of any one thing seeming singular, original, or

distinctively valuable.³¹ McCarthy clearly perceives the digital age as corrosive of literary value. In a recent interview, he expressed deep misgivings concerning the implications of the digital age for the longevity of literature:

Well, I don't know what of our culture is going to survive, or if we survive. If you look at the Greek plays, they're really good. And there's just a handful of them.

Well, how good would they be if there were 2,500 of them? But that's the future looking back at us. Anything you can think of, there's going to be millions of them. Just the sheer number of things will devalue them. I don't care whether it's art, literature, poetry or drama, whatever... This is just entry level to what's coming. Just the appalling volume of artifacts will erase all meaning that they could ever possibly have. (Jurgensen)

McCarthy's claim is that the overproduction of the information age strips from literature any claims of exclusivity or canonical prestige, reducing it to another form of cultural information. His words echo Susan Sontag's lament that "the sheer multiplication of works of art" in our culture of "excess" and "overproduction" results in a loss of sensory sharpness (Sontag 9). The challenge is to how to recover the strangeness of immediacy under such conditions.

Had this interview taken place twenty years earlier, McCarthy's fears for survival would perhaps have had greater personal urgency: as of 1992, none of McCarthy's novels had sold more than 1500 copies (Woodward). Since then, of course, he has become one of the most widely-regarded and bankable living novelists—winning the National Book

³¹ See Benjamin's "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction."

Award (for *All the Pretty Horses*) and a Pulitzer Prize (for *The Road*), appearing on Oprah and at the Academy Awards, where the Coen Brothers' adaptation of his *No Country for Old Men* won Best Picture. The critical and popular acclaim McCarthy has enjoyed in recent decades attests to his success in aesthetically reinvigorating commodified literary forms (the Western, the crime thriller, and the post-apocalyptic novel). It also seems due in no small part to the way his fiction encourages an aura of distinction that presents his works as canonical artifacts and McCarthy as Great Author.³² McCarthy's writing is often discussed as if his contemporaries were Dante and Shakespeare rather than Roth and DeLillo. In fact, as Christian Kiefer shows, McCarthy started to enjoy widespread success only when his novels were reprinted in the Vintage International imprint, thereby placing him (literally) alongside Faulkner, Thomas Mann, and James Joyce in bookstores. His late career thus manifests his novels' aesthetics: the methods by which he pursues in his novels the regenerative/elevating properties of art in an age of its commercial degradation realize their success ultimately by elevating the

³² Nowhere is the merger of authorial aura and Barnum's peddling of "unique" objects more clear than in the sale of McCarthy's Olivetti typewriter, auctioned by Christie's in 2009. "When I grasped that some of the most complex, almost otherworldly fiction of the postwar era was composed on such a simple, functional, frail-looking machine," the auctioneer gushed, "it conferred a sort of talismanic quality to Cormac's typewriter. It's as if Mount Rushmore was carved with a Swiss Army knife." In his authenticating note, McCarthy averred that "it has never been served or cleaned other than blowing out the dust with a service station hose" (P. Cohen). This "talismanic" machine, enriched by the residue of "almost otherworldly fiction," sold for \$254,000. In a touch that Barnum (and Melville) would surely appreciate, McCarthy in the interim acquired an identical model for about \$30, shipping included. In the Jurgensen interview, he also told how he has signed a limited number of copies of *The Road* and stashed them all in a box for his son to sell when he comes of age. These anecdotes confirm how highly attuned McCarthy is to the interplay of literary and economic value, and to the role that scarcity or particularity plays in those exchanges.

profile of the novels themselves in contemporary culture.

There is a growing critical sense that McCarthy's corpus is not in fact an exercise in grim naturalism, but rather is invested in the generative power of imaginative fictions.³³ The importance of *Blood Meridian*'s treatment of illusion, then, lies not simply in its exposure of the dark realities of imperial violence and capitalist expansion, but in the novel's reclamation of aesthetic and literary value, in spite of and through those circumstances. The historical and theoretical lens of artful deception helps us understand the dialectic of enchantment and demystification that marks his prose, as McCarthy both critiques illusion and attests to its vitality. The power of McCarthy's engagement and repurposing of Barnumesque illusion lies in its critical and affective function; it generates forms of enchantment that, while depicted as working to conceal the material conditions of capitalism and to promote commodity fetishism, also contain the potential to reimagine things as materially particular and outside marketization. *Blood Meridian* remains his most extensive engagement with the problematic doubleness of illusion. The novel admits no clean distinction between commodification and imaginative enchantment, but instead forces us to recognize that the potency of literature is bound up with deception.

³³ In addition to Malewicz's notion of creative misuse in McCarthy's fiction, Hoberek reads in *The Road* a sense of language as filled with "potential": in contrast to what he calls "*Blood Meridian*'s residual suspicion of style," *The Road* "embraces it as the site of the world's imaginative reconstruction" (Hoberek 497). Holloway locates the phenomenon of "optical democracy" in *Blood Meridian* and the Border Trilogy, in which McCarthy's language reaches for a utopian recovery of nature so as to "breach[] the late capitalist containment of culture" (158).

CHAPTER TWO: White Magic: Imagination, Empathy, and the Limits of Enchantment

“The acrobat clown literally and materially realizes what remains an ideal and a metaphor for the verse-maker... It can be strictly identified with the dream, since, along with the distance between the thought and the act, it overcomes the distance from the possible to the impossible” – Jacques Rancière, *Aisthesis* (78).

Introduction

On October 28, 1857, an assembly of Algerian tribal leaders were treated to a magic show from the French magician Jean Robert-Houdin. Almost certainly the most influential illusionist of the 19th century (from whom Houdini drew his stage name), Robert-Houdin had retired from magic two years earlier to devote himself to scientific inquiry. In his *Confidences d'un prestidigitateur* (1859), he recounts how he was coaxed into this performance by Colonel de Neveu, the head of French administration in Algiers. It had what he calls “a quasi political character”: his magic would convince the natives of the superiority of French magic to the “sorcery” practiced by the insurrectionist mystics the French called “marabouts,” and thereby contribute to their “pacification” (Robert-Houdin 372). To this end, Robert-Houdin staged illusions that readily suggested French supremacy. Using hidden magnets and wires, he rendered an Arab strong man unable to lift a box and sent an electrical current through him; he caught a bullet fired at him by a marabout, to demonstrate his own invincibility; lastly, he vanished a Moorish volunteer. The effect, in Robert-Houdin’s telling, was overwhelming:

The Arabs were so affected by this last trick, that, impelled by an irresistible feeling of terror, they rose in all parts of the house, and yielded to the influence of

a general panic... Vainly did one of them, the Caïd of the Beni-Salah, more courageous than his colleagues, try to restrain them by his words:

‘Stay! Stay! We cannot thus lose one of our co-religionists. Surely we must know what has become of him, or what has been done to him! Stay! Stay!’

But the co-religionists only ran away the faster, and soon the courageous caïd, led away by their example, followed them. (Robert-Houdin 386)

Having been thus cowed, the credulous natives were assured by translators that the Frenchman’s sorcery was in fact the art of prestidigitation, and the magician won their esteem. Before Robert-Houdin returned to France, de Neveu assured him that his “performances in Algeria had produced the happiest effect in the minds of the natives” (395).

It is a striking anecdote of art achieving political effects. In his review of Robert-Houdin’s *Memoirs*, Charles Dickens recounts the episode at length, calling it “the crowning act of [Robert-Houdin’s] public life [and] ... one of the most honourable in his whole career” (Dickens 435). An amateur magician himself, Dickens reads the event as a triumph of artistry. Indeed, Robert-Houdin had been a driving force behind the elevation of magic from “an amusement for children or fairground ruffians” to the theatre (Steinmeyer 144), and this “mission of diplomacy” bespoke both the legitimacy and the power of his craft. As the Algiers episode shows, Robert-Houdin’s art lay not just in producing uncanny illusions but in framing them within narrative—his other, related, contribution to 19th century magic. In France, for instance, he presented the “Light and Heavy Chest” illusion as a magical way to secure valuables (Jones, “Modern Magic” 72);

in Algiers, it became a spell on the lifter, making a strong man “weaker than a woman” (Robert-Houdin 382). Robert-Houdin before the marabouts embodies a triumph of fiction—narrative illusionism perfected and dignified with real power, the artist for once acknowledged as legislator of the world.

If Dickens found such a demonstration marvelous, from a contemporary perspective we are rightly discomfited by this disciplinary spectacle in which art (as we see in *Blood Meridian*'s Judge Holden) so clearly serves as the handmaid of imperial exploitation. The colonial aggression of de Neveu's scheme and Robert-Houdin's performance is couched as innocent fun—the magic causes minimal physical harm, and the emotional responses of the spectators are comically misguided. Robert-Houdin's account itself depends upon a discourse of illusionism which, in colonial contexts, served in “making an invidious comparison between an indigenous ritual system caricatured as pathologically enchanted, and a European entertainment genre figured as normatively disenchanting” (Jones, “Modern Magic” 94).¹ It thus operates according to the logic of Orientalism, as described by Edward Said. Robert-Houdin's narrative illusionism subordinates the exoticized other both discursively and, in its performance, literally.

The Robert-Houdin episode echoes through Tim O'Brien's *In the Lake of the Woods* (1994), but in O'Brien's telling the imperial violence that underwrites its magic is laid bare:

¹ Jones shows how this principle applies in Robert-Houdin's *Confidences* not just to his depiction of the reception his magic received—which suppresses, Jones demonstrates, clear indications that the Algerian elites in fact viewed him as a skilled entertainer—but also to his depiction of the marabout mystics ('Isawiyya) as practicing fraudulent conjuring rather than religious ritual.

It took almost an hour to round everyone up, maybe a hundred women and kids and old men. There was much chattering, much consternation as the villagers were ushered down to the beach for a magic show. With the South China Sea at his back, Sorcerer performed card tricks and rope tricks. He pulled a lighted cigar from his ear. He transformed a pear into an orange. He displayed an ordinary military radio and whispered a few words and made their village disappear. There was a trick to it, which involved artillery and white phosphorous, but the overall effect was spectacular... Everyone sat on the beach and oohed and aahed at the vanishing village.

“Fuckin’ Houdini,” one of the guys said. (65)

This Vietnam performance closely resembles Robert-Houdin’s, from the compulsory attendance to sleights of hand with cards and fruit, culminating in a vanishing act that awes the natives. But *In the Lake of the Woods* goes beyond registering the complicity of illusionism with imperial violence that we saw in *Blood Meridian*; in it, O’Brien worries that storytelling itself, despite seeming an indispensable, humanizing activity, in fact reinforces the power of fantasy to misrepresent or escape from social and political realities. For O’Brien, magic at once describes the creative effort through which we transcend the limits of the self and seek an understanding of others, and can be a violent or manipulative strategy for deceiving others and ourselves. *In the Lake of the Woods* thus calls into focus a problem implicit not just in Robert-Houdin’s *Confidences* but in the history of Western illusionism, wherein a rhetoric of imaginative freedom and universality trips up against its uses in securing and extending imperial epistemology. At

root, “magic” within rational enchantment both connotes imaginative expansiveness and asserts the dominion of Reason over the exotic or unfamiliar. For this reason it serves to test and clarify claims concerning the function and ethics of imaginative fiction.

In this chapter, I examine *In the Lake of the Woods* along with Paul Auster’s *Mr. Vertigo* (also published in 1994), showing how tropes of magic simultaneously ground and undermine an understanding of storytelling as a fundamentally human and ethical activity. I first show how both Auster and O’Brien use the language of magic to represent the work of the imagination and the ability of fiction to inspire empathy, and how this conception of fiction is central to the texts in question. In both novels, illusionism is inseparable from the ethical power of the imagination to animate and empathize with the experience of others. However, each text also grapples with features of imaginative enchantments that corrode the ethical effects of literature to which they are committed. In my second section, I explore how these novels invite what Edward Said calls a “contrapuntal reading” which makes visible “those other histories against which (and together with which) the dominating discourse acts” (*Culture* 51). *Mr. Vertigo* displays the racialized logic of rational enchantments, while *In the Lake of the Woods* freights magic with a host of malign associations, including disavowal, deception, cruelty, and violence. Imagining others grades into solipsism and self-interest, as both novels demonstrate the limits of the imagination. In my final section, I argue that, having demonstrated the limits and pitfalls of illusionism, both seek to redeem the magic of fiction by reconceiving it as a therapeutic, readerly activity. In so doing, however, they

appear to abandon the dream that art can have tangible social or political effects beyond the private experience of the individual.

Flights of Imagination

As Charles Dickens was before him, Tim O'Brien is an amateur magician as well as a professional novelist. He practiced magic tricks as a child, and stage magic fundamentally informs his conception of fiction: he frequently returns to comparison between magic and fiction in interviews and his writing. Moreover, just as "the modern magic effect is an index through which the spectator should discern the magician's agency," O'Brien's fiction continually directs attention from the trick back to its perpetration (Gell qtd. in Jones 71). The frame of his metafiction thus almost always includes an author figure working to bring them to life: *Going After Cacciato* is the volitional dream of a soldier on night watch; *The Things They Carried* the work of the Vietnam memoirist laboring to make himself understood; *In the Lake of the Woods* the imaginative reconstruction of a self-identified "biographer, historian, medium" (*Lake* 30). In each novel the imaginative labor is both illusionist and generative. In *Going After Cacciato*, Paul Berlin feels an urgent need to imagine a viable alternative to the Vietnam War, and *The Things They Carried* professes the therapeutic, even salvific power of storytelling ("This also is true: stories can save us" [*Things* 225]). In an interview O'Brien explains how "[d]oing fiction is a kind of magic trick... You can make the dead talk, you can make tigers appear and disappear as if they're on a stage, you can do it in a few words" (Wharton 131-132). He develops these parallels at length in "The Magic

Show” (1991), an essay in which he characterizes magic, and by extension fiction, as expressing the “human craving to know what cannot be known” (“Magic” 176)—mysteries, the future, the minds and hearts of others. Throughout the essay, O’Brien uses the language and example of magic to assert the universal or timeless dimension of storytelling. Fiction is “a magic show of the imagination” which can “shine light into the darkness of the great human mysteries” (177). This magic show is fundamental to human experience, since people everywhere will respond to these “abiding mysteries” with the “high—even noble—human craving to *know*” (176, 180). Implicitly, magic appeals to O’Brien because it furnishes him with a way of presenting fiction as timeless, transcending historicist concerns.²

Foremost among the motives for illusion, O’Brien writes, is “a deep and specific desire for the miraculous: to enter another human soul, to read other minds and hearts” (“Magic” 181). “When writing or reading a work of fiction,” he writes, “we are seeking access to a kind of enigmatic ‘otherness’—other people and places, other worlds, other sciences, other souls” (177). Fiction thus mitigates our basic isolation, helping us to overcome our natural sense that “[a]ll else is other, and otherness is suspect” (181). It seeks, by means of imagination, to overcome the boundaries between self and other, albeit limitedly. As such, it should speak toward shared bonds rather than differences; O’Brien comments elsewhere that “Art has very little to do with the differences among us” because its purpose is “to touch the human heart in its solidarity and solidity”

² E.g., whereas Said critiques Joseph Conrad’s work in *Culture and Imperialism* as implicitly imperialist, O’Brien approvingly invokes *Lord Jim* and *Heart of Darkness* as examples of imaginative works that realize universal experiences.

(McNerney 98-99). If this activity depends partly upon emphasizing continuity between self and other, it also requires an enlargement of that self: O'Brien suggests that "[g]ood stories somehow have to do with an awakening into a new world, something new and true, where someone is jolted out of a kind of complacency and forced to confront a new set of circumstances or a new self" (Kaplan 61). Good stories are thus implicitly ethical, inasmuch as they allow us to transcend the limits of the self and inhabit the experiences of others in a way that promotes sympathy rather than suspicion.

In recent years, this notion that the function or value of fiction lies particularly in encouraging imaginative engagement with otherness has enjoyed renewed currency.³ If fiction has the power to animate for us the lives and thoughts of others beyond our immediate experience, the thinking goes, it can thereby inspire feelings of empathy, which in turn can translate into ethical attachments and actions. As Sean McCann notes, "The discourse of sentimentality is not in decline in our world; it is ubiquitous" and very much tied up with the belief that literature can distinctively effect "benevolent social transformation" (328). The notion that stories can change people's beliefs or behaviors is attractive; it makes intuitive sense, confirms what we might hope to be the case, and gives a clear purpose and power to literature. Within such accounts of fiction, "imagination" falls into two closely related categories—what we might call the "visionary imagination" and the "empathic imagination." The former emphasizes

³ See Brittan, who cites theorists of globalization such as Kwame Anthony Appiah and Arjun Appadurai, as well as a number of critics who link literary imagination to empathy.

transcending the limits of the self and of narrow understandings of reality or possibility; the latter involves an act of identifying with and feeling for others.

A belief in the visionary imagination shines forth in the writings of Paul Auster who, although in a less explicitly illusionist lexicon, presents the nature of fiction and the role of imagination in terms very similar to O'Brien. In particular, he asserts the timelessness of storytelling, characterizing fiction as "the fundamental food for the soul" and detached from the theoretical or sociological concerns of the present (*Art* 336). For this reason, he says, his fiction has become less engaged with any "theoretical problems" than with attending to "some human call" (283). He explains, "I've never really been able to write about what most novelists seem to concentrate on—what we might call the sociological moment, the world of things around us, the world of tastes and fads" (335). Instead, he characterizes his fiction as being "about living and dying and trying to make sense of what we're doing here" (335). Auster conceives of storytelling, in other words, not as decisively embedded within a particular milieu but as an avenue for addressing universal questions of existence and purpose.

In abandoning the "sociological moment" for a more capacious understanding of fiction, Auster, like O'Brien, turns for exemplification to antiquated illusionist entertainments. *Mr. Vertigo* involves the vaudeville circuit of the late 1920s, while *The Book of Illusions* (2002) mines for inspiration the last days of silent film. Like O'Brien, he finds in these old illusions the simplicity that he attributes to fiction—they elicit curiosity and wonder, unmediated by context or critical sophistication. Auster presages

the motivating logic for *Mr. Vertigo* in a 1985 introduction to *On the High Wire*, a book by the French high-wire virtuoso Philippe Petit that Auster translated into English:

No art, it seems to me, so clearly emphasizes the deep aesthetic impulse inside us all. Each time we see a man walk on the wire, a part of us is up there with him. Unlike performances in the other arts, the experience of the high wire is direct, unmediated, simple, and it requires no explanation whatsoever. The art is the thing itself, a life in its most naked delineation. And if there is beauty in this, it is because of the beauty we feel inside ourselves. (*Art* 253)

The aesthetic immediacy of Petit's art thus grounds its universality, which in turn generates a powerful sense of human connection. Watching Petit perform at the opening of the Cathedral of St. John the Divine in Manhattan, Auster reflects, "It was then that I understood the most important aspect of the high wire: it reduces us all to our common humanity. A Secretary of state, a poet, a child: we became equal in each other's eyes, and therefore a part of each other" (259). The effect of such levitation, as of O'Brien's magic and fiction, is to erase the invidious distinctions between people by imagining and asserting a common humanity.

In short, both novelists put the ancient affinities between storyteller and enchanter to rhetorical use: by presenting magicians and high-wire walkers as exemplars of storytelling and imagination, they lay claim to a notion of fiction as indispensable because universal and timeless. They suggest that imaginative engagement with illusions contains ethical potential inasmuch as it binds us to others through identification and empathy, shared experience and desires, and through illuminating and then transcending

the limits of the self. The role of the imagination is paramount: “In the end,” Auster says, “The text is no more than a springboard for the imagination” (*Art* 311).

Both Auster’s *Mr. Vertigo* and O’Brien’s *In the Lake of the Woods* use magic to elaborate this vision of art. Each novel, in presenting the illusionism of storytelling as timeless, promotes certain imaginative modes of reading or engagement marked particularly by empathy towards others. Auster describes *Mr. Vertigo* as a novel of enchantment, primarily concerned with “the contrast between what you might call the mythical and the everyday, how they combine and live side by side in the same world” (Applewhite). The novel is the autobiography of Walter “the Wonder Boy” Rawley,⁴ a St. Louis gutter urchin who masters the art of levitation on the 1920s Vaudeville circuit. His mentor, Master Yehudi, closely resembles Harry Houdini in biography—“A Hungarian. He was born in Budapest and came to America as a young boy. He grew up in Brooklyn, New York, and both his father and grandfather were rabbis” (*Mr. Vertigo* 22)—and P.T. Barnum in his entrepreneurial disposition and extravagant, persuasive speech. Decked out like a magician in a black tuxedo and top hat, he meets Walt one night and promises to train him up to defy gravity and make millions (4). Later, when Walt has become a vaudeville sensation, Master Yehudi handles the sensational controversy in a Barnumesque manner. “The master took no part in” the newspaper debates, Walt says,

⁴ In his essay “The Death of Sir Walter Raleigh,” Auster meditates on the Elizabethan nobleman as existential artist par excellence: “If there is such a thing as an art of living, then the man who lives life as an art will have a sense of his own beginning and his own end. . . . Every act will count, even to the last act, because nothing will matter to him anymore. He will live because he is able to die” (*Art* 81). That Raleigh embodies “the art of living as the art of death” no doubt informs his choice of names in *Mr. Vertigo*, where Walt will gain artistic transcendence through self-abnegation (81).

but “stood outside the fray, grinning happily as the box-office receipts rolled in, and when reporters pressed him to give a comment, his answer was always the same: “Come to the theater and judge for yourself” (185).

Although attuned to concerns of profit, Yehudi differs from Barnum in that he presents monetary success as secondary to—even conditional upon—the “uplift” art can provide. Walt recalls his words:

To watch a twelve-year-old do what only saints and prophets had done before him was like a jolt from heaven, and my performances could bring spiritual uplift to thousands of suffering souls. That didn’t mean I shouldn’t make a bundle doing it, but unless I understood that I had to touch people’s hearts, I’d never gain the following I deserved. (129)

In strikingly religious terms, Yehudi implies that the primary aim of Walt’s art must be to communicate hope and compassion. His training of Walt makes clear, moreover, that the art of levitation is possible only through the annihilation of the self—a necessary precondition for the empathy and imagination that are essential to artistry. Yehudi tells Walt that he chose him because he is “the smallest, the dirtiest, the most abject . . . piece of human nothingness,” merely “a molecule or two above the vanishing point of what constitutes a human being” (3, 16). Walt experiences his training as a “dumbfounding assault on [his] person” marked by senseless trials of deprivation and endurance (45)—mindless labor, sensory deprivation, living with animals, being buried alive and cut, taught to cry on command, forced to slither like a serpent, and so forth. But what appears to be degradation is in fact a means of attaining self-transcendence. Walt is compelled to

tear down his internal barriers, and particularly his hatreds and prejudices. Under Master Yehudi's tutelage, he transforms from an illiterate hick spewing racial slurs to one who shares his life with a European Jew, a crippled African American boy named Aesop, and an old Oglala Sioux woman he calls Mother Sioux. His training in levitation demands, in this respect, the cultivation of empathy.

Walt's first levitation comes in a moment of despair, when he has wrung from himself all thoughts and feelings. He experiences it as an estrangement from himself: "I didn't know myself any more. I was inhabited by something that wasn't me... so terrible, so alien in its newness" (*Mr. Vertigo* 63). If self-abandonment is the necessary precondition for levitation, imagination raises it into an art form. Having mastered loft and locomotion, Walt develops a creative routine through the exercise of the imagination: "As long as I could imagine the thing I wanted, as long as I could visualize it with a high degree of clarity and definition, it would be available to me for the performance" (136). This insight makes Walt an artist, "a true creator who performed as much for his own sake as for the sake of others," rather than a "wind-up baboon" (136). Auster emphasizes the thrilling inventiveness of Walt's vaudeville routine, which resembles *Mr. Vertigo* in its narrative arc and four-part division. Similarly, in the detailed recounting of Walt's training and perfecting of his craft, it is clear that his levitation is not a paranormal novelty but transcendent art, springing forth from empathy and imagination alike.

Like Philippe Petit on the high-wire, the levitation act of Walt the Wonder Boy transcends social divisions. Against the looming Great Depression, "[Walt's] act was universal, and it floored everyone in the same way, rich and poor alike" (144). This

leveling effect is not merely incidental or good business, but integral to Yehudi's vision. While Walt learns levitation, his black counterpart Aesop undergoes a project of 'uplift' in the Du Boisian sense of the word, learning the classics, languages, and piano, and winning a scholarship to Yale. Master Yehudi likewise rescued Mother Sioux from poverty, alcohol, and domestic abuse. It seems that the unifying motive of all his schemes is to pursue what Christopher Castiglia calls "an ethics of enhancement" (160). In raising the abject and confounding conventions, he works to imagine and enact new social possibilities. Walt's initial skepticism about his motives gives way to total devotion.

Mr. Vertigo also indicates the interdependency of empathy, imagination, and art through their concomitant failures. A lack of empathy leads to bad art, which precludes imagination. When Walt's career is derailed and Master Yehudi is killed—the latter by bandits, the former by migraines, "gravity's revenge" on his levitation (199)—Walt cultivates forgetting and denial, and failures of empathy and imagination ensue. As Walt surrenders to the forces which have felled him (gravity, greed, prejudice), he trades in his artistry for plots both risible and vindictive. He ham-handedly stages a revenge murder for Yehudi's death, forcing his victim to drink poisoned milk from an ornate goblet. He subsequently becomes a Chicago gangster, and loses his *Mr. Vertigo's* nightclub when he is disgraced after attempting to convince faded baseball great Dizzy Dean to kill himself. Walt views Dean as his double, and is mortified by Dean's refusal to retire with dignity. But his desire for Dean's death is overdetermined: in it he desires both to kill himself and to exorcise his earlier failure to fulfill Master Yehudi's dying request to be put out of his misery. In attempting to kill the comically content and good-natured Dean, Walt erases

the distinction between self and other in a way that is tyrannical rather than empathetic. In these schemes he is tone-deaf to context, prone to heavy-handed symbolism, and sloppy in pacing. His redemption comes only with a return to his origins, taking up with Master Yehudi's sponsor and lover Ms. Witherspoon and reliving his days as Walt the Wonder Boy, first in dreams and then in writing. It is in the act of writing and reading, I will show, that Walt will finally locate transformative levitation.

While *Mr. Vertigo* asserts the centrality of imaginative empathy to the magic of art, *In the Lake of the Woods* dramatizes Tim O'Brien's suggestion in "The Magic Show" that crossing the chasm between self and other entails an act of imagination at once vital and illusory. In it, the longing for love and understanding compel both its un-named Vietnam veteran narrator and its main character, John Wade, towards narrative invention, or magic tricks. The Lake of the Woods, the setting of the novel, looks "like a great curving mirror," and like a magician's stage contains "secret channels and portages and bays" (*Lake* 1). Against this mysterious backdrop the narrative is presented as a realistic illusion, or an "imaginative reconstruction of events" surrounding the disappearance of Kathy Wade and the strange behavior and subsequent vanishing of her husband John (30). Chapters labeled "Evidence" and "Hypothesis," punctuated with footnotes and metacommentary, maintain a magician's distinction between reality and the illusions that he labors to produce. *In the Lake of the Woods* lifts entire passages from "The Magic Show" verbatim, and in some respects simply illustrates the essay's primary claims: that magic expresses our hunger for human connection, our love of mystery, our desire to know others and events beyond our grasp. The narrator's project is just such an act of

illusionism. Helplessly drawn on by mystery, he uses the creative imagination to grasp after the unknowable—both to uncover what happened to Kathy and John Wade, and to understand John Wade’s heart. (The two mysteries are interlocked, as Wade is under suspicion for his wife’s murder, and our judgment of his actions and culpability hangs on our understanding of his traumatic past, particularly his complicity in Vietnam war crimes.) Magic in turn is the lens through which the narrator understands his subject. He presents Wade’s interest in stage magic as originating as his childhood refuge from his father’s coldness and suicide, and it becomes metaphorically integral to his relationships, political career, and time in Vietnam.

The narrator repeatedly insists that the motives for illusionism (hunger for love, obsession with mystery) are universal conditions. The “Evidence” sections, for instance, extend far beyond the narrator’s investigation into Wade’s case and court documents on My Lai to encompass quotes from novelists, presidents, fictional characters and historical documents attesting to the perdurable nature of those motives and how they are bound up with illusion, deception, and self-deception. On the basis of this human commonality, *In the Lake of the Woods* demands imaginative investment and empathy from its readers, inviting them to reconstruct events and extend understanding to others.

This appeal to empathy carries an explicitly ethical intent. Much of *In the Lake of the Woods* focuses on historical recovery, particularly in its imaginative confrontation with the atrocities committed at Thuan Yen (known as the My Lai Massacre). Hence critics have read the novel as an interrogation of American historical amnesia and

disavowal.⁵ O'Brien himself describes it as portraying "the consequences of sin... [and] of telling lies to and about yourselves" (Tambakis 154). He locates the novel's impetus in the desire to "bear witness" to "the 504 Vietnamese who were slaughtered at My Lai that Saturday morning in March" (153). What *In the Lake of the Woods* demands, in this respect, is imaginative recognition of the lives and suffering of the Vietnamese. Such imaginative effort is ethically imperative particularly because of the American literary focus on American trauma, which, O'Brien argues, is grossly unfair to the Vietnamese:

There hasn't been enough written about the impact of the war on those who suffered most, the millions of Vietnamese who died or who were wounded... The devastation in terms of human life that the war caused the Vietnamese hasn't been faced by America. It's sort of been acknowledged in a general abstract sense, but not in a visceral sense. A lot of visceral suffering of Americans has been examined in our writings about the war, a lot of hand wringing... Confession about the suffering of Americans and American soldiers. But that stuff is way out of scale to what we ought to be looking at from the other side. (Herzog, "Interview" 113-114)

The narrator of *In the Lake of the Woods* is not merely impelled by curiosity, then, but by justice, calling attention to the disavowed atrocities of My Lai. His investigation of the 1986 disappearance of John and Kathy Wade in Minnesota leads him inexorably towards a reckoning with American atrocities and Vietnamese suffering in 1968. Both aspects of the novel are underwritten by an assertion of common humanity, which makes it possible

⁵ See Melley and Franklin.

to imagine and empathize with war criminals and foreign victims alike. His illusions therefore are of a different order than those of Wade, in that they entail imaginative engagement whereas Wade's are too often associated with self-deception and disavowal. The narrator's magic, bent on imaginatively reconstructing the lives of others, is a corrective to Wade's more solipsistic forms of illusion. Thus while Wade remains alone and enigmatic—a "pro" who "did his magic, then walked away" (*Lake* 266)—the narrator salvages magic as that which bridges the gap between self and others, through which the imaginative flight necessary to an empathic understanding of our shared humanity takes place.

The Dark Side of White Magic

Magic in these novels is conspicuously tied to ethical aspirations—anti-racist and prosocial in *Mr. Vertigo*, witnessing to injustice and revealing shared humanity in *Lake of the Woods*. But the appeal to magic can also sound nostalgic in its assumption of the timelessness and universality of art, notions that have fallen under widespread suspicion. In this light, the equation of writing with magic might be seen as anxiously asserting the power of authorial creation, rather than describing its actual efficacy: to invoke magic is also to wish something were true, or to paper over gaps between causes and effects. The narrator of *In the Lake of the Woods* uses magic in precisely this sense when he attempts to make a happy ending to the mystery plausible: "John Wade was a magician" is the explanation proffered for how he and his wife could have escaped without a trace and acquired money and passports (296, 300, 301). Both novels implicitly raise questions

concerning the politics of illusionism, how it is produced and whom it benefits. We might simplify these issues into two related strands of critique: a critique of the imagination, holding that imaginative representations of others tend to colonize rather than recognize difference; and a related historicist critique, in which illusionism and rational enchantment reinforce hegemonic racial structures. In both novels, the discourse or practice of magic favors the white male narrators and main characters at the expense of others. Auster and O'Brien thereby make visible and critically reflect upon the limits of imaginative empathy.

In "The Magic Show" and in interviews, O'Brien cites *Heart of Darkness* and *Lord Jim* as exemplifying the notion that fiction can imagine others in a way that transcends specific times and subjectivities. Conrad is an interesting choice, inasmuch as his work has been a lightning rod for postcolonial critique. Even leaving aside Chinua Achebe's famous assessment of Conrad as a "bloody racist," O'Brien's invocation of Conrad as poster-author for the literary imagination at work flies in the face of Edward Said's diagnosis of Conrad. Said finds in Conrad a "crucial limitation in vision" that is unavoidably imperialist (*Culture* xviii). In *Heart of Darkness*, for example,

neither Conrad nor Marlow gives us a full view of what is *outside* the world-conquering attitudes embodied by Kurtz, Marlow, the circle of listeners on the deck of the *Nellie*, and Conrad. By that I mean that *Heart of Darkness* works so effectively because its politics and aesthetics are, so to speak, imperialist.... For if we cannot truly understand someone else's experience and if we must therefore depend on the assertive authority of the sort of power that Kurtz wields as a white

man in the jungle or that Marlow, another white man, wields as narrator, there is no use looking for other, non-imperialist alternatives; the system has simply eliminated them and made them unthinkable. (24)

What Said's work illuminates is the political stakes of imagining others. He denies the possibility of quarantining literary representations from the imperial structures that shape their milieu; therefore, to imagine and represent others in fiction potentially extends not empathic recognition but rather the processes of imperialism which in turn shape the national culture (12-13). More generally, there exists the possibility that to imagine something may be primarily to reify it for consumption. Suzanne Keen in *Empathy and the Novel* asks,

How can we know that readers' passionate involvement with fictional others didn't inspire a desire to collect and control people they did not personally know? Or, perhaps closer to the bone, might not novel reading enable individuals living on incomes from the investment funds that profited from the slave trade to feel moral indignation on the behalf of imaginary others brought near by fiction, while indirectly exploiting the suffering of real people far away? (Keen xx).

Even if these fears are misplaced, she maintains, "the case for altruism stemming from novel reading [is] inconclusive at best and nearly always exaggerated in favor of the beneficial effects of novel reading" (vii). As I discussed in my previous chapter, imaginative fictions can equally well serve deleterious ends: as David Palumbo-Liu argues, "recent U.S. foreign and domestic policies have appropriated and instrumentalized the basic humanistic and ethical character of the Imagination"

(“Preemption” 152). We see evidence of this in the state of anxiety cultivated for the War on Terror, and in Robert McNamara’s remarkable declaration that “Empathy must be deployed urgently and massively” to effectively wage counterterrorism (qtd. in “Preemption” 163). Even the impulse to find a salutary ethical function in literature has been critiqued as potentially pernicious: the “idea that literature has something to do with antiracism and being a good person enters into the self-care of elites, who learn to see themselves as ... enlightened multicultural global citizens and to uphold certain standards as (neoliberal) multicultural universals” (Melamed 141, 159). These critiques share the suspicion that claims of universality and empathy in imaginative fictions often serve to mask hegemonic ends.

The history of illusionism in Western culture intensifies rather than dispels these suspicions. As Robert-Houdin’s account of his trip to Algiers illustrates, illusionism’s rhetoric of aesthetic pleasure and rational wonder mixes readily with an imperialist framework. Historically, rational enchantment has served to co-opt “exotic” beliefs and practices, bringing them under the domain of scientific rationalism and commodified entertainment in order to enjoy them from a position of superiority. What Said ascribes to novelists and theoreticians applied directly to magicians: they served “to deliver the non-European world either for analysis and judgement or for satisfying the exotic tastes of European and North American audiences” (Said, *Culture* xviii). Marina Warner has shown that, from the Enlightenment onward, orientalism has been a primary mode of consuming enchantment, which can be both enjoyed and disavowed when packaged in exotic forms. (This is one reason why the longevity of enchantment and magic

assemblage within rational modernity has, until recently, been downplayed or characterized as Other).⁶ Rational enchantment subjugates that threatening exoticism to the dominant epistemic and social paradigms. In Robert-Houdin’s account of the marabouts, for instance, his conquest is realized not just through enchanting French colonial power but discursively through exposing the Algerian shamans as frauds and who perform “pretended miracles” like “a company of mountebanks” (Robert-Houdin 422).⁷

The identity of the magician was essential for legitimizing his conjuring by purging it of threatening exoticism. Performers could don exotic garb and tell stories of learning strange arts in dark lands, but the enchanter must be firmly positioned within the dominant social order, so as to remain unthreatening. Unsurprisingly, magicians have mostly been white men bearing the trappings of wealth or high culture—female magicians historically have been mistaken for witches,⁸ and audiences likewise reluctant to submit to deception from minorities or socially marginalized groups (Nardi 761, 767). An African American man could never have been Houdini, for instance, because the spectacle of a black man breaking out of prisons and defying constraints would be too

⁶ See Fleming.

⁷ Robert-Houdin devotes a chapter of his *Confidences*, entitled “A Course of Miracles,” to discrediting the feats of the ‘Isawiyya.

⁸ Marcel Mauss provides a pithy encapsulation in his *General Theory of Magic*: “on the whole, it is the men who perform the magic while the women are accused of it” (qtd. in Nardi 769).

subversive.⁹ This point is dramatized in Louise Erdrich's *Love Medicine* (1993), which imagines in the character of Gerry Nanapush what a Native American Houdini might look like. His escapistry makes him, in the eyes of the authorities, an outlaw and "dangerous armed criminal" (Erdrich 341). His prodigious feats of escapistry must be staged in state penitentiaries and federal prisons, and are implicitly linked to the spirit-world magic of his grandmother Fleur. The world of stage magic, even more than the Western literary canon, is unmistakably the domain of privileged white males.

This dynamic clearly shapes the world of *Mr. Vertigo*. Before the public career of Walt the Wonder Boy begins, enchantment is established as a white man's territory, only permissible when stripped of its exoticism. Walt himself initially views Master Yehudi's schemes as violating 'natural' laws of gravity and racial taxonomies alike. He views the black Aesop's intellectual achievements and cultured manner with particular horror: "It went against the laws of nature, it transgressed everything that was holy and proper, and I wouldn't allow myself to accept it" (20). He reasons that Aesop must perforce be his predecessor, originally white but crippled in attempting to levitate and "turned into a ghastly nigger" by Yehudi's "invoking the power of a hundred Jewish demons" (24). "I had no doubt that the same fate was in store for me. Not only would I wind up with black skin and a crippled body, but I would be forced to spend the rest of my days studying books" (25). Thus Walt equates violations of the natural order with violations of the

⁹ As we will see in Chapter 3, Houdini labored to divest himself of his Eastern European and Jewish origins, crafting his public persona according to the American self-made man. Admittedly, Chinese magicians were an exception to this rule; Ching Ling Foo enjoyed tremendous acclaim and even inspired a white imitator, Chung Ling Soo (née William Ellsworth Robinson).

social order (and vice versa), viewing Yehudi's projects of elevation and enchantment as the necromancy of a "king of the gypsies" and "that witch, Mother Sue" (22, 23).¹⁰ Although Walt's belligerence is comically ignorant and quickly cured, the underlying mindset extends to assumptions about the activity of levitation itself, and who can practice it. Assessing his talents, Walt writes, "Scores of people possessed the ability to lift themselves off the ground, and even after you subtracted the Indian fakirs and Tibetan monks and Congolese witch doctors, there were numerous examples from the so-called civilized nations, the white countries of Europe and North America" (72). Mother Sioux also tells Walt that as a child, she had seen her "own father and [her] own brother... moving through the air like spirits" (48). But these examples are indeed "subtracted" in order for Walt's commercial levitation to be treated as unique. Master Yehudi tells Walt that if he perfects his craft he will be "an apparition of light and beauty shining joy into the heart of every man, woman, and child who lifts his face up to you" (73-74).

Mr. Vertigo does not uncritically reproduce these racialized assumptions, however. Instead, even as it internalizes them within the narrative, it calls attention to the violence by which they are maintained. In *Playing in the Dark*, Toni Morrison memorably describes the Africanist presence in American literature as a fishbowl, "the structure that transparently (and invisibly) permits the ordered life it contains to exist in the larger world" (17). The world of magic and imagination in *Mr. Vertigo* is shaped in just such a way by a largely invisible racialized structure. Enchantment in the novel carries with it a set of assumptions about and relations to otherness, which become

¹⁰ Walt's spelling of her name shifts from "Sue" to "Sioux" as he befriends her (34).

momentarily momentarily visible in eruptions of violence. These moments are all the more disruptive because, superficially, *Mr. Vertigo* approaches American history through what Jameson laments as “our own pop images and simulacra of that history” (*Postmodernism* 25). Walt’s autobiography moves through a series of well-worn sets and events that work as shorthand, gesturing towards a set of expected horizons against which the plot moves: *Wizard of Oz* Kansas, the 1929 market crash, 1930s gangland Chicago, and so forth. The generic confines of these settings appear increasingly flimsy and arbitrary as Walt’s rags-to-riches tale veers off course. Most strikingly, Walt’s training culminates in tragedy—shortly before Aesop is to leave for college and Walt for the stage, the Ku Klux Klan lynches Aesop and Mother Sioux and burns Master Yehudi’s house to the ground. Young Walt had not been not alone in viewing Yehudi’s magic of intellectual and physical uplift as intolerable.

The Klan’s violent enforcement of the racial norms of magic dictates the terms under which it can be presented. Walt receives notice of this at his first performance at a county fair, which ends almost ends in drowning when a bottle hurled from the crowd knocks him unconscious into a muddy pond. His levitation there occasions a riot: “Some people took the religious view, boldly asserting that we were in league with the devil. Others called us fakes and charlatans, and still others . . . yelled for the pure pleasure of yelling, just glad to be part of the mayhem as they let forth with angry, wordless howls” (*Mr. Vertigo* 119). Master Yehudi tries to brush off this reception as the fickle nature of show business, but Walt sees otherwise. “These rubes don’t like no fancy stuff,” he declares, locating their hostility as a reaction against his “nancy-boy angel” costume and

Master Yehudi's foreign accent and pseudo-mystical pomp (119). Because of these markers of vaguely transgressive foreignness and spirituality, the audience finds pleasure not in watching Walt's magical levitation but in exorcising him from the community. Walt's success, as this humiliation reinforces, depends upon his ability to present enchantment in an all-American, unthreatening light. The secret, he argues to Yehudi, is to "just keep it simple and folksy... They'll think you're a friendly, good-hearted Joe out to make an honest buck...[and] I stroll out before them like a little know-nothing, a wide-eyed farm boy dressed in denim overalls and a plaid shirt" (120). Guised as an honest entrepreneurial act, his magic is immediately embraced: "Master Yehudi did his cornpone spiel to the hilt, my Huck Finn costume was the last word in understatement, and all in all we knocked them dead" (126). This costuming is necessary to frame his powers of levitation as rational entertainments rather than threats to the established order.

The same dynamic operates within the narrative. In Walt's plainspoken narrative voice and biographical details (Missourian, motherless, scantily educated, kidnapped for money by an abusive father figure, overcoming prejudice to form close bond with a black man, etc.), *Mr. Vertigo* unmistakably dons a "Huck Finn costume" of its own for its flights of imagination. Moreover, Walt's levitation is scrubbed of mystical or supernatural overtones and placed firmly within a rational worldview through the narrative's emphasis on craft. Craft, that is, in the demystified sense of practice and artistry rather than that of necromancy. This helps to explain why Walt's magic does nothing to upend the world's ordering. It is conceived and developed solely for performance; its concerns are ultimately aesthetic and commercial. (In a similar fashion,

magic in *Lake of the Woods* resides in mental or discursive effects, which the novel addresses in terms narrative construction.)

But inasmuch as maintaining a Huck Finn costume is a vital to Walt's success, it also depends on incorporating, even appropriating, the otherness which has been forcibly excluded from the narrative. The lynched Aesop thus becomes a sentimental figure of inspiration—"If I found the courage to begin," Walt writes of his first performance, "it was only because of Aesop. I knew he was looking down on me from wherever he was, and I wasn't going to let myself fail him" (116). While young Walt enjoys success through and on behalf of Aesop, elderly Walt assumes Aesop's literary ambitions. Long before Walt attains an education, Aesop is already writing his own autobiographical tale of ascent, and gives Walt a glimpse into the production and enjoyment of literature:

It was my first experience with the making of books, and even when Aesop called me into his room to read selected passages of his work aloud, I found it hard to tally all that silence and concentration with the stories that came tumbling from his lips... We were all in the book—Master Yehudi, Mother Sioux, myself—and to my clumsy, untutored ear, the thing had every intention of becoming a masterpiece. I laughed at some parts, I cried at others, and what more can a person want from a book than to feel the prick of such delights and sorrows? Now that I'm writing a book of my own, not a day goes by when I don't think about Aesop up there in his room. (90)

Walt subsequently reenacts this scene of writing—hunched over an upstairs desk, writing by hand on foolscap the stories of Master Yehudi, Mother Sioux, and himself—in

composing his own manuscript, itself presumably comprised of much of the same material as was burned by the Klan (290). In other words, both Walt's physical and narrative levitations are implicitly dependent on the otherness that must be shrouded or excised for their consumption.

At the close of his narrative, Walt entertains the fantasy that he could realize a form of enchantment that transcends this racialized logic. Walt imagines playing the role of Master Yehudi to a boy who is a hybrid of Walt and Aesop, the son of his Caribbean cleaning woman—like Walt a “monumental pain in the ass, a junior hooligan and wise-talking brat” with a face that “resembles Aesop's to an almost appalling degree” (291). Walt sees in young Yusef the same gift he had: “In three years, I'd turn him into the next Wonder Boy. He'd start where I left off, and before long he'd go farther than anyone has ever gone... It would make the whole fucking world sing again” (292). This boy gives body to the overlap between Walt and Aesop that remains unmaterialized in the narrative. He affords Walt an opportunity to imagine that the Huck Finn costume can be discarded, that he could thereby control and redeem his history. However, he immediately discards the idea, again because it is beyond the pale of social acceptability. “They don't make men like Master Yehudi anymore, and they don't make boys like me either: stupid, susceptible, stubborn. We lived in a different world back then, and the things the master and I did together wouldn't be possible today. People wouldn't stand for it” (292). What *Mr. Vertigo* illustrates are the limits that social or racial norms place upon imaginative productions. Auster thus dramatizes how enchantment has been filtered for consumption

through the appropriation or elimination of any threats to the dominant racial and rational paradigm.

If *Mr. Vertigo* demonstrates social impediments to the cultivation of empathy through the illusions of fiction, *In the Lake of the Woods* manifests these limits within the individual's imagination. Symptomatic of the novel's misgivings concerning the effects of magic is the way in which magic becomes burdened with an increasingly lethal set of associations. Just as storytelling is one form of mental magic in the novel, so also are disavowal, historical erasure, political manipulation, and military savagery. Running contrary to the narrator's imaginative reconstruction are other forms of magic that serve to obscure the past, erase the truth, and preclude access to mysterious otherness. John Wade is repeatedly described as carrying "mirrors in his head," behind which he disappears from the burden of engaging reality, memory, or others. With these mirrors he hides from his father's verbal abuse and suicide—an "act of levitation," an escape with no diagrams left behind to explain it (*Lake* 241)—and later vanishes the traumatic memories of his complicity in the My Lai massacre. His political career, painted as one in which idealistic principles are swapped for compromises and half-truths, is likewise a continuation of his illusionist hobby. The mirrors prevent him from being known to others, and preempt for him any honest communication by which he could be saved. The sinister potential of magic is embodied in Wade's "Sorcerer" alter ego, with which he stalks his college girlfriend and kills in Vietnam:

Other things he would remember only dimly. How he was carried forward by the glide. How his lungs seemed full of ashes, and how at one point his rifle muzzle

came up against the little man's cheekbone... There was no sound at all, none that Sorcerer would remember. The little man's cheekbone was gone. Later, the men in Charlie Company couldn't stop talking about Sorcerer's new trick. (40)

Wade then exhibits his "new trick" to "an audience of villagers summoned at gunpoint," who are forced to watch as "Sorcerer and his assistants performed an act of levitation, hoisting the body high into the trees, into the dark, where it floated under a lovely red moon" (41). While Wade develops this persona as an attempt to assert control over the terrifying uncertainty of his life in Vietnam, his cultivated ability to "remember only dimly" becomes an essential part of his magic. Such amnesia defines his relation to the events that transpired at My Lai and his own complicity in them, and subsequently precludes the possibility of ever knowing what did or did not happen to Kathy. The equation of magic with violence and willed forgetting pervades the novel, which takes the disavowal of violence as one of its primary themes.

Something of Wade's myopic or mendacious illusionism also extends to the narrator, whose imaginative reconstruction is marred by obsessiveness and an inability to effect satisfactory closure, however illusory. His own interview quotations increasingly indict him in his fixation on John for a lack of imagination or empathy: "I mean, wake up. I get tired of saying it—*Kathy* had troubles, too, her own history, her own damn life!" Kathy Wade's sister tells him (263). Another interviewee begs him to stop besieging her with the same old questions: "I've said everything I can think of. Can't we just stop now? I'm an old lady. Why keep *asking* me these things?" (266). One must also suspect him of mimicking Wade's own mental sleights and disavowal, in that his narrative is littered

with clues suggesting that Wade did in fact murder his wife, yet he rejects the possibility as “both graceless and disgusting,” insisting on the truth’s unknowability and the plausibility of alternate hypotheses (300).¹¹

However, the primary failing of magic in *Lake of the Woods* is not the violence or duplicity which attends illusions, but rather the narrative’s inability to adequately imagine or extend empathic recognition to anyone besides John Wade. The narrative structure underscores this limitation, as chapters imagining what became of Kathy are always labeled ‘Hypothesis,’ whereas those imagining the inner life of John Wade form the narrative’s realistic backbone. “Evidence” sections likewise deal exclusively with masculine experience (and authorship), culled from presidents, magicians, and canonical authors (including Woodrow Wilson, Richard Nixon, Harry Houdini, Fyodor Dostoevsky, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Sigmund Freud, and the Peers Commission). Women are only cited on matters relating to PTSD and caring for veterans. These citations play the equivalent part of *Mr. Vertigo*’s “Huck Finn costume,” serving less to substantiate the plot than to frame the novel’s concerns as familiar and enduring. Because Wade is the narrator’s point of imaginative access, the traumas of Kathy’s disappearance and the atrocities at Thuan Yen are restaged as dramas of John Wade’s psyche. As a consequence, Wade himself becomes the “Other,” to whom we must extend empathic identification—“Aren’t we all [Other]?” the narrator asks. “John Wade—he’s beyond

¹¹ Herzog notes that “O’Brien ... made a significant last-minute change in the book’s final chapter (after a bound galley version had been distributed to some reviewers prior to the late October publication date). An added passage lessens the likelihood that readers will give greater credence to one possible ending (John Wade murdered his wife) than to the others (S. Kaplan 1995, 218)” (*Tim O’Brien* 146).

knowing. He's an other" (101)—while the Vietnamese remain largely unimaginable. "It was the spirit world. Vietnam. Ghosts and graveyards," the narrator reflects. "But it went beyond that. Something more mysterious. The smell of incense, maybe. The unknown, the unknowable. The blank faces. The overwhelming otherness" (199). John Wade thus becomes both the magician and the mystery, while Kathy, the nameless Vietnamese, and the jungles in which they live seem mere props in his tricks. Even as it excavates the repressed history of the atrocities committed by American troops at Thuan Yen, giving a painstaking reconstruction of the massacre and subsequent testimony, the novel focuses on how they are staged or vanished in Wade's mind. In this sense, the novel formally produces the "trope of friendly fire" prominent in American literature about Vietnam, in which violence becomes a tragic matter played out between and within Americans (Kinney 3).¹²

Recalling O'Brien's declared intention for *In the Lake of the Woods* of combatting American solipsism with a visceral confrontation with Vietnamese suffering and American evildoing, the narrator's inability to bring these "blank faces" into focus is puzzling. Why does an ostensibly empathic ethical project become an increasingly solipsistic affair? O'Brien has been faulted for chauvinism, for inaccuracies in his depiction of other cultures (especially in *Going After Cacciato*), and for hostility to women unable to understand a veteran's suffering (*The Things They Carried*), but the conspicuous shortcomings of *In the Lake of the Woods* suggest a more intentional and

¹² Friendly fire comprises the central plot and trauma of *Going After Cacciato*, and the primary marker of Wade's complicity and sense of guilt at Thuan Yen is his memory of shooting fellow soldier PFC Weatherby.

pointed narrowing of aims.¹³ This contradiction becomes even more pronounced in an essay O'Brien published in the *New York Times* shortly before *In the Lake of the Woods*' release. Entitled "The Vietnam in Me" (2 October 1994), the essay serves as a companion piece to the novel, sharing its concerns—the psychic trauma of the Vietnam War and the way its atrocities have been studiously forgotten—and even entire passages verbatim. It centers on a return to My Lai with his then-girlfriend Kate, in order to confront the American atrocities perpetrated and subsequently disavowed. In it, O'Brien is at pains to confront and mitigate his ignorance and status as tourist. He juxtaposes a visit to a paradisaal beach with one to the hut of a limbless casualty of war, meets with survivors of the massacre and Viet Cong veterans, studies Vietnamese history, and chokes down strange foods with villagers. He writes of feeling "betrayed" and outraged at how the My Lai Massacre has been "pushed off to the margins of memory" in the United States, and condemns the "cartoonish narcissism" of Americans' responses to Vietnam ("Vietnam" 52, 55). In these respects, the essay clearly strives to fulfill O'Brien's dictum that writing should leave its reader "jolted out of ... complacency" (S. Kaplan 61).

In "The Vietnam in Me," O'Brien frames his return to Vietnam within an account of the subsequent demise of his relationship with the woman who accompanies him. This personal dimension indicated in the title soon overtakes his project of empathizing and witnessing.¹⁴ "The Vietnam in Me" ultimately attends less to the "Vietnam" than it does

¹³ See L. Smith and Smiley.

¹⁴ The header in the *New York Times* Sunday Review reads: "As a soldier, he saw the wreckage of one My Lai after another. Now, on his return, he confronts the wreckage in his own life" ("Vietnam" 48).

to “Me”—the troubled psyche of its American writer, battling insomnia and depression, contemplating suicide and obsessing over his ex-lover—or rather reduces the country to a reflection of that psyche. Personal griefs mingle with and absorb historical or political ones. When O’Brien writes of “try[ing] to wrap words around a few horrid truths,” for instance, it initially seems that he is referring to the just-recounted murders at My Lai; it soon becomes clear, however, that he is speaking of the knowledge that Kate is “seven blocks away” in another man’s bed (“Vietnam” 50). When an elderly survivor tells O’Brien how at Thuan Yen she was buried under a pile of machine-gunned bodies, including those of her four children, Kate weeps. “This will be with us forever,” O’Brien thinks, “This we’ll have” (53). Traumatic history thus becomes romantic keepsake, a transmutation literalized in the Vietnam photo album Kate makes for O’Brien that constitutes her “parting gift” (53). Wartime butchery and broken romances are “different scales of atrocity,” of course, but the essay equates them throughout. Standing over a ditch where “maybe 100 innocent human beings perished,” O’Brien feels first “guilt chills,” but then uses the ditch as a metaphor for his romantic unhappiness—“That’s the final emotion. The terror at this ditch, the certain doom, the need for God’s intervention” (53).

In many respects, then, “The Vietnam in Me” would seem to embody the “cartoonish narcissism” against which it rages. It more explicitly displays the tendency of *In the Lake of the Woods* to render Vietnam finally as an abstracted “state of mind” in which the psychic war of the American veteran persists (“Vietnam” 56). Reaching after empathy, both essay and novel grasp primarily the “other” close-to-hand: John Wade

(whose case is in turn an occasion for the narrator's own introspection and self-understanding), or Tim O'Brien battling depression at home in Cambridge, MA. This failure is instructive: inasmuch as both texts fall into the traps they set out to expose, they demonstrate the limits of imaginative empathy. In this sense, they elaborate an enduring theme in O'Brien's fiction, which doesn't simply valorize the generative powers of the imagination but also presents its shortcomings. The fundamental narrative problem and operating principle of *Going After Cacciato* is that the world that protagonist Paul Berlin imagines is limited to that which he knows and believes.¹⁵ In one of the final scenes of the novel, Berlin sits across a negotiating table from his imaginary Vietnamese love interest, Sarkin Aung Wan, who places ethical demands on the "waking dream" Berlin has cultivated: "Even the refugee must do more than flee. He must arrive. He must return at last to a world as it is, however much in conflict with his hopes, and he must then do what he can to edge reality toward what he has dreamed, to change what he can change, to go beyond the wish or the fantasy" (*Cacciato* 318). In response, Berlin pleads that "[even] in imagination we must obey the logic of what we started. Even in imagination we must be true to our obligations, for, even in imagination, obligation cannot be outrun. Imagination, like reality, has its limits" (320-321). Unable to imagine a way out, Berlin's dream must end with a return to the original trauma of his psychic breakdown in pursuit of Cacciato.

¹⁵ Hence, O'Brien maintains that criticism leveled against *Cacciato* for its shallow or stereotypical depictions of Vietnamese villagers, India, Iran, etc. is misplaced: the novel aims not for mimesis but for a realistic depiction of what a 22-year-old college educated American might imagine of those places (Schroeder 38). See also McNerney 93-94.

In both O'Brien's and Auster's work, an affirmation of the power of fiction is thus limned with pessimism regarding what it can accomplish. Like *Mr. Vertigo*, *In the Lake of the Woods* is subject to a narrowing of horizons: magic bespeaks a potent imagination capable of transcending the self in order to form connections with others, yet along the way it is vitiated by social, cultural, or individual constraints. It is as if illusionism, self-reflexive by nature, can point only back towards itself. By this light, the initial characterization of magic as the essence of storytelling appears as wishful sleight of hand, simultaneously evading yet also registering the complicity of literary fictions with cultural hegemony.

Every Man a Magician

I have sought to establish first how the language and imagery of magic is used to valorize the imagination, and particularly the power of literature to foster empathy, and then how these aims are compromised by the hegemonic or self-referential properties of illusionism. In this final section, I consider how this critique can be squared with the initial promise attached to magic. I argue that both novels attempt to salvage the transformative power of fiction by reconceptualizing it in several key respects. The solipsistic tendencies of both narratives are reframed and redeemed as therapeutic acts of self-disclosure, and it is this self-disclosure that becomes the basis for universalization in the endings: both novels, having telescoped their aims, seek to reassert the universal quality of particular experience. What follows is a shift in what magic describes, from authorial creation to the imaginative effort of the reader. Thus magic is democratized, no

longer the domain of the white male magician-cum-author. However, inasmuch as this resolution answers Said's critique of the literary imagination, it does so at the expense of the political potential of fiction. Both texts forsake the pursuit of distinctly social goods and for primarily private ones.

The waning of empathy in these novels alerts us to the defensive or self-interested aspects of the magic performed, and marks a shift from imagining others to consolidating selves. Thus in both *Mr. Vertigo* and *In the Lake of the Woods*, magic is entangled with anxieties of authorship and masculinity. In this respect both novels resemble "The Vietnam in Me" in that they feature a beleaguered male writer seeking to consolidate his identity or psychic integrity. In both, fathers are absent or abusive, and substitute father figures are sought out; women are unfaithful or threatening, and males chafe at their own powerlessness or sense of being misunderstood. Walt and Wade pursue through their magic control over their life and identity. Walt's levitation both dramatizes and fulfills the dream of socio-economic ascent, elevating him from abjection to wealth and fame. Wade, meanwhile, repeatedly uses mental magic to reimagine his life (that his father is just "lost" rather than dead; that his memories of My Lai are dreams) or to bolster his political persona. He erases his name from Charlie Company's records and transposes it into the records of another unit, thereby concealing his presence at Thuan Yen. In his final vanishing act, he delivers a rambling monologue over shortwave radio as he

disappears into The Lake of the Woods, as if making a last-ditch claim to the telling of his life.¹⁶

This defensive magic is not irredeemable, however. A notion of storytelling as therapeutic self-revelation becomes the ground on which each text finally stakes its moral legitimacy. In contradistinction to Wade’s magic of concealment, the illusionism of *In the Lake of the Woods*’ narrator seeks to illuminate. Ultimately, it is his own self-knowledge that is at stake. He confesses that “the ordeal of John Wade ... has a vivid, living clarity that seems far more authentic than my own faraway experience. Maybe that’s what this book is for. To remind me. To give me back my vanished life” (*Lake* 298). In this sense, the narrator himself becomes the hidden subject of the book, and its writing an act of self-interrogation. While Walt is (needless to say) the subject of his autobiography, he is similarly “rescued by the idea of writing” *Mr. Vertigo* after the death of his wife, just as he was initially saved from wretchedness by the idea of levitation (*Mr. Vertigo* 290). For both men, the rewards of this self-disclosure are realized in the absence of any specific reader. Both address a hypothetical reader, but Wade’s narrator seeks only his own “vanished life” while Walt plans to store his narrative in a vault until after his death.

O’Brien’s comments concerning “The Vietnam in Me” underscore this notion that the texts realize their aims not through the ethical imagining of others but through

¹⁶ Given the context—almost beyond the grave, quasi-confessional, obsessive—it is fitting that Wade lapses into what appears to be a pastiche of *Lolita*, the exemplar of aesthetic enchantments grading into solipsism and exploitation: “My love, my life. The purpose of all deceit. She is what I had. Have I yet discussed her way of chasing me with a squirt gun? She did indeed ... Did I tumble in love? I did. Did I remain in love? Oh, yes. Remember: a squirt gun. The girl of my dreams. Her skin, her soul,” and so forth (*Lake* 295).

therapeutic self-disclosure. He has called the essay “one of the best things he has ever written. ‘I reread it maybe once every two months,’ he says, ‘just to remind myself what writing’s for... It was a hard thing to do. It saved my life, but it was a fuck of a thing to print’” (Lee 115-116). Implicitly, the essay’s political attack on American amnesiac narcissism is secondary to its confessional qualities.¹⁷ His comments imply that its failure to adequately represent the Vietnamese is acceptable since it articulates some authentic self-disclosure. Inasmuch as empathy is implicit in this model of writing, it is directed from reader back to writer rather than towards any third party. O’Brien clarifies in the same interview that “what writing’s for” is not “catharsis” but “communication”—a distinction that emphasizes the importance of the telling over the substance of what is told—but his own description of that communication makes it seem indistinguishable from catharsis.

Indeed, despite his talk of fiction as a magic show that closes unbridgeable gaps between self and others, O’Brien is highly skeptical of its ability to successfully do so. In response to accusations that his fiction ignores the experience and concerns of the Vietnamese, O’Brien argues that attempting to represent the Vietnamese would be “a horrible mistake” (Bourne and Shostak 83). When the “basic problem of otherness” is compounded by ignorance of the culture, language, and history that informs that thinking—the “overwhelming otherness” the narrator of *In the Lake of the Woods*

¹⁷ It would be foolish to take “The Vietnam in Me” as simply confessional, of course, when the hallmark of O’Brien’s writing is to peel away a layer of artifice, only to reveal that pose as another fiction. His account of returning to Vietnam in the essay, for example, not only mirrors aspects of *In the Lake of the Woods*, but also closely resembles the “Field Trip” chapter of *The Things They Carried* (which predates his visit by 4 years).

ascribes to the Vietnamese (*Lake* 199)—it precludes the possibility of adequate representation in fiction (Bourne and Shostak 84). Neither does O'Brien feel it his place to try: "I'm not going to deign to speak for people who can speak very well for themselves... To don the mantle of an alien culture and to pretend to speak for that culture as if you knew it seems to me hubris. I don't want to write for the Vietnamese. They are capable of writing for themselves, and have done it very well" (McNerney 94). His words suggest that it would be presumptuous, even condescending, to write "for the Vietnamese"—that, contra Said, representation becomes imperialist precisely when it attempts to give the "full view" of what is beyond the writer's purview. The most a writer can achieve is true expression within the limits circumscribed by one's experience. It follows that inasmuch as we have an ethical responsibility to understand the thoughts or experience of others, the responsibility to do so lies with the reader rather than the writer: readers can enlarge themselves through texts, whereas a writer is bound only to Write What He Knows.¹⁸ By this light, the failures of empathy manifested by *In the Lake of the Woods* and "The Vietnam in Me" are not shortcomings but markers of their authenticity.

Thus the goods of illusionist narrative devolve from empathic altruism to therapeutic self-disclosure. "Communication" here does not resemble interpersonal exchange and mutual understanding so much as, to recall the Lacanian model, a one-way flow in which the reader/analyst sits in as a "dummy" for the patient's discourse. In opposition to the involution of their resolutions, both novels seek to universalize imaginative fiction by making illusionism itself the ground for identification between

¹⁸ See McGurl's *The Program Era*, in which he identifies "Write What You Know" as one of the primary dogmas of postwar American fiction.

reader and narrator. They aim to recover in the transmission of the text the empathic dimension that fails in its depicted content: in other words, it is ultimately the reader who must accomplish the magic of imaginative empathy. For this reason, both novels conclude by presenting magic as something available to all. At the end of *Mr. Vertigo*, Walt's miraculous levitation becomes generalized as something like immersion in fiction and the suspension of disbelief:

Deep down, I don't believe it takes any special talent for a person to lift himself off the ground and hover in the air. We all have it in us—every man, woman, and child—and with enough hard work and concentration, every human being is capable of duplicating the feats I accomplished as Walt the Wonder Boy. You must learn to stop being yourself. That's where it begins, and everything else follows from that. You must let yourself evaporate. Let your muscles go limp, breath until you feel your soul pouring out of you, and then shut your eyes. That's how it's done. The emptiness inside your body grows lighter than the air around you. Little by little, you begin to weigh less than nothing. You shut your eyes; you spread your arms; you let yourself evaporate. And then, little by little, you lift yourself off the ground.

Like so. (293)

In these closing lines, it is the reader's imagination that performs the levitation Walt describes and wishes to teach. Thus what was initially framed as miraculous, transcendent artistry is finally realized as readerly practice, which perfects the self-forgetting that has been associated with imaginative action throughout. Walt forsakes

thoughts of becoming Master to another Wonder Boy not just because of changing social mores, but because “every human being” possesses those same skills.

This conclusion signals a democratization of magic and concurrent diminution of authorial control. For although *Mr. Vertigo* maintains a pedagogic stance in this passage, one effect of the ending is to demystify the particular authority of the magician. In this it gestures beyond the power dynamic embodied in the racial and social constraints that hem in imaginative activity throughout the novel. One could put off all Huck Finn costumes, it suggests, if the universality of such enchantments were realized. This democratic presentation of magic affords the text separation from the coercive or colonial aspects of magic presented elsewhere. Yet at the same time, the conclusion points towards magic as an ineluctably private rather than social enterprise (much as, Melamed argues, neoliberalism has recast literature as an avenue of individualist self-actualization rather than one of social consciousness or protest). It suggests that the promise of storytelling’s magic lies in transcending the self instead of embracing the other, an activity less of building empathic connections than of self-abandonment.

The conclusion of *In the Lake of the Woods* follows similar contours of imaginative goods realized individually. As in *Mr. Vertigo*, control of the narrative illusions devolves onto the reader. What one critic calls the novel’s “democratic meta-narrator” is unable or unwilling finally to resolve the puzzle he has brought to life (Worthington). Rather than producing the illusion’s prestige, he hands over the illusion to the reader to finish as she or he sees fit. “Finally it’s a matter of taste, or aesthetics,” he writes, defending his resistance to the notion that Wade murdered his wife while

admitting the reader might prefer “a wee-hour boiling... A teakettle and scalded flesh” (*Lake* 300). Lacking any sure conviction beyond the sense that the mystery is insoluble, the narrator declares that “We find truth inside, or not at all” (295). The narrator’s conjuring of John Wade ultimately becomes a readerly act of imaginative interpretation.

It also becomes an act of identification: for if Auster universalizes the magical power of the imagination, O’Brien universalizes its failures. *In the Lake of the Woods* closes with the suggestion that the pathological magic of John Wade is in fact common to all. In a concluding footnote, the narrator writes, “Mystery finally claims us... One way or another, it seems, we all perform vanishing tricks, effacing history, locking up our lives and slipping day by day into the graying shadows. Our whereabouts are uncertain. All secrets lead to the dark, and beyond the dark there is only maybe” (301). The universality of self-deception demands that we extend imaginative empathy to Wade, to recognize ourselves in him and his humanity as our own. “Can we believe that he was not a monster but a man?” the novel concludes, “That he was innocent of everything except his life? Could the truth be so simple? So terrible?” (303) But this extension of empathy to Wade is not one of ethical obligation: we, like the narrator, are opaque to ourselves, and the “great curving mirror” of the lake by which the novel began is ultimately a mirror in which to see our vanishing selves. The act of understanding and identifying with otherness promises not ethical commitment but self-illumination. In the final piece in *The Things They Carried*, O’Brien’s narrator reflects that, while stories cannot change reality, “this also is true: stories can save us” (*Things* 225). Hence O’Brien can view an essay like “The Vietnam in Me” as a triumph that embodies “what writing’s for,” not in spite of

the way that self subsumes other, but precisely because of it. Its failures of vision and of empathy are, O'Brien would argue, universal.

Thus, in figuring the ethical qualities of imaginative literature, illusionism emerges in these novels as both transcending and reinforcing the limits of the imagination. The magician imaginatively disrupts the sensible, engendering flights of fancy that have a therapeutic or clarifying potential. Magic entails inhabiting something outside of oneself—seeing beyond ossified prejudices (in *Mr. Vertigo*), or penetrating self-deceptions and mysteries (in *Lake of the Woods*). In this sense it is celebratory, “magic” in the figurative sense with which we praise inventions, spectacles, or solutions. But, as I have worked to show in this chapter, the figure of the imperial illusionist looms large: the historical contours of rational enchantment constrain the possibilities of imaginative artistry throughout, short-circuiting attempts to empathically represent and inhabit otherness. While these limits are elided by shifting the production of illusions from magician to audience, the consequence is that imaginative fiction, having been evacuated of its social potential, finally promises only individual therapy. The universality of storytelling is salvaged through a predominantly atomistic understanding of the work of the imagination that forsakes social commitment for private insight. This route avoids the hegemony or complacency imputed to literary fiction in Melamed's critique, yet cannot uncover a properly ethical function.

In a 2011 interview, O'Brien, taking stock of his body of work, gave a more grim assessment of the power of fiction to shape the world:

I know that nothing I say or do or write will change anything. I feel the same powerlessness, I might add, in regard to mankind's appetite for war. I look back on my years as a writer—all those books, all those scenes and sentences and paragraphs, all that struggling over bits of language—but what real fruit did it bear? The world is as full of self-righteous bellicosity as when I began... It's not that I'm cynical. It's that the efficacy of humanism, including the efficacy of literature, seems far more limited than I envisioned as a naïve young writer. (P. Smith 186)

In this final accounting, we might read the rhetoric of illusionism in these novels as suggesting not the potential but rather the implausibility of the ethical project each text initially undertakes. In attempting to banish the limits of reality, the appeal to magic attests to them at every step. It is this thread of equivocation that I will pick up again in Chapter Three, wherein dramatizations of Harry Houdini afford occasion to interrogate more fully notions of fiction as offering primarily individualistic imaginative escape.

CHAPTER THREE: Nostalgic Escapistry: Harry Houdini in Contemporary Fiction

“He had conceived an enormous interest in the works and career of Harry Houdini, the escape artist.” E. L. Doctorow, *Ragtime* (7)

“I swear on my mother’s, on my mother’s life ... loyalty to Houdini!” – Glen David Gold, *Carter Beats the Devil* (181)

“In later years, holding forth to an interviewer or to an audience of aging fans at a comic book convention, Sam Clay liked to declare, apropos of his and Joe Kavalier’s greatest creation, that back when he was a boy, sealed and hog-tied inside the airtight vessel known as Brooklyn, New York, he had been haunted by dreams of Harry Houdini.” – Michael Chabon, *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay* (3)

Introduction

The subtext of secular magic is that what it purports to do is unreal. The skeptic denouncing sleight of hand and the magician showing his audience an apparently ordinary box each testifies to an unbridged gap between artifice and reality. In this respect, the legendary magician and escape artist Harry Houdini is exceptional. His career and legacy were staked on the assertion that his escapes were no illusion. The question of what literature and the arts can do, really, is a prevailing one today—not just in the humanities but in discussions about ethics, neuroscience, education, etc.—and in this light it is no coincidence that, much like the young Sam Clay, contemporary American popular culture is “haunted by dreams of Harry Houdini.” Distilled into a few broad strokes—preternatural escapist, world’s greatest magician, heroic combatant of spirit-world fraud—his life has recently been the subject of novels, films, miniseries, biographies, and musicals. Houdini is the fantasy that artful illusions are real and thus

have undeniable power in reality.¹ Inasmuch as this view of Houdini implies sincerity and demands belief, the contemporary phenomenon of Houdini sits between competing modes of evaluating fiction: the stance of critique, which seeks to unmask ideology and recover political content in art, and a contrasting assertion of the pleasurable, imaginative, or therapeutic content of fiction. Houdini is an avatar of the liberatory power of popular entertainment.

This tension becomes clear in contrasting several novels in which Houdini features prominently, E. L. Doctorow's *Ragtime* (1975), Glen David Gold's *Carter Beats the Devil* (2000), and Michael Chabon's *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay* (2000). These works of historical fiction are set within key moments in the development of modern mass culture: the birth of film in *Ragtime*, television in *Carter Beats the Devil*, and comics in *Kavalier & Clay*, and they explore the relation between those popular forms and their own literary activity. Fundamentally concerned with questions of what popular art forms should be and do, they invoke the figure of Houdini to examine the pleasures and the politics of escapist entertainment. Doctorow faults Houdini for an abdication of social consciousness and lack of critical insight (lamenting the loss of revolutionary potential in popular culture), while Gold embraces Houdini's escapistry wholesale, suggesting that the therapeutic and innocent pleasures of such entertainment

¹ Relatedly, one might note the proliferation of stories in which magicians are truly capable of doing that which they pretend to do on stage. *Mr. Vertigo* partly falls under this category, although Walt's levitations are always performative—he never, for instance, levitates to elude capture or rescue a damsel from a burning tower. Stronger examples would include films such as *The Illusionist* and *Now You See Me* and Erin Morgenstern's *The Night Circus* (2013). See also Steven Millhauser's dark subversions of this theme in "Eisenheim, the Illusionist" and "The Knife Thrower."

should be enjoyed for their own sake and on their own terms. In *Kavalier & Clay*, meanwhile, Chabon mediates between these positions, attempting to square his love of popular entertainment with the demands of critique. The novel wavers between celebrating escapism in and through fiction, and recognizing the fragility, incompleteness, or insufficiency of that escape. Even as Chabon defends entertainment against ironic disdain, he explores escapism's political, ethical, and aesthetic dimensions and limits. *Kavalier & Clay*'s narrative illusionism presents an understanding of imaginative enchantments that is equivocal but ultimately affirming: while doubting art's efficacy as a vehicle of ideological content or political change, it asserts that the flight from reality can itself be transformative, that fantasy contains a residue of hope and utopian potential. Whereas Houdini's escapism bespeaks the demise of politically motivated mass culture in *Ragtime* and apolitical entertainment in *Carter Beats the Devil*, in *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay* it exemplifies Chabon's vision of art that enchants with unrealized possibility.

Houdini in Contemporary Literature

In spite of being a long-dead practitioner of a mostly-dead art form, Harry Houdini is a surprisingly prevalent figure in contemporary fiction and popular culture. He often boasted of being "the most famous man in the world," and while he may never have returned from the afterlife, as he promised to try, he has enjoyed a remarkable career as a spirit in contemporary fiction. In recent years, evidence of his longevity crosses cultural registers: he has been the subject of a PBS *American Experience* documentary (2000), a

contemporary art exhibition at the Jewish Museum in New York (*Houdini: Art and Magic*, 2010), an episode of *The Simpsons* (“The Great Simpsonsina,” Season 22, Ep. 18), an upcoming History Channel miniseries, and a Broadway musical,² in addition to multiple biographies, critical studies, films, and young-adult fiction.³ Illusionist Penn Jillette has suggested that when “[w]e look back on the 20th Century in 100 years, and look at entertainment, the only two people in the running for being remembered ... are Elvis Presley and Houdini. And as time goes on, Houdini’s winning” (“Interview”).

In his day, Houdini’s allure lay in his masterful handling of apparent contradictions: he styled himself as superhuman and everyman, illusionist and truth-seeker, a figure of enchantment and belief and also of reason and empiricism. He exemplified what Michael Saler calls the “ironic imagination” prominent in turn of the century popular culture, from Sherlock Holmes fandom to science fiction. This disposition of “delight without delusion” allowed audiences to immerse themselves fully in imaginative fictions without abandoning the tenets of rational modernity (Saler, *As If*

² *Houdini* on Broadway, music by Stephen Schwartz, is slated to run in the 2015-16 season, but both librettist Aaron Sorkin and headliner Hugh Jackman have backed out. (Healy, Patrick. “All Tied Up: The Musical ‘Houdini’ Travels a Bumpy Path.” *New York Times* 7 January 2015.)

³ For biographies, see Brandon, Silverman, and Kalush and Sloman, *The Secret Life of Houdini* (2006). The latter was purchased in 2009 by Summit Entertainment, which is rumored to be developing Houdini as a franchise-able action hero (Kit), possibly starring Johnny Depp (Lynch). Recent Hollywood Houdini ventures include *Death Defying Acts* (2007), a romance concerning an episode in Houdini’s anti-Spiritualist campaign, and a 20th Century Fox adaptation of Brian Selznick’s young adult novel *The Houdini Box* (in development). Houdini is likewise the inspiration for Woody Allen’s *Magic in the Moonlight* (2014), about an illusionist who unmasks a woman posing as a clairvoyant and mystic.

61). Houdini's escapistry, for instance, presented seemingly supernatural feats while remaining rooted in everyday settings. As E. L. Doctorow catalogues in *Ragtime*,

He was roped to a chair. He escaped. He was chained to a ladder. He escaped. He was handcuffed, his legs were put in irons, he was tied up in a strait jacket and put in a locked cabinet. He escaped. He escaped from bank vaults, nailed-up barrels, sewn mailbags; he escape from a zinc-lined Knabe piano case, a giant football, a galvanized iron boiler, a rolltop desk, a sausage skin... He escaped from a sealed milk can filled with water. He escaped from a Siberian exile van. From a Chinese torture crucifix. From a Hamburg penitentiary. From an English prison ship. From a Boston jail. He was chained to automobile tires, water wheels, cannon, and he escaped. He dove manacled from a bridge into the Mississippi, the Seine, the Mersey, and came up waving. He hung upside down and strait-jacketed from cranes, biplanes and the tops of buildings. He was dropped into the ocean padlocked in a diving suit fully weighted and not connected to an air supply, and he escaped. (7)

In this assortment of mundane, grotesque, and punitive constraints, Houdini's escapistry dramatized strongly individualist yet anti-modern urges, the lone figure symbolically breaking the shackles of industry, urban life, institutional and bureaucratic coercion.⁴ His minimally-clad body was the locus of attention and source of his powers; he cultivated rumors that he could dislocate all his joints, loose restraints by flexing his muscular toes,

⁴ John Kasson has persuasively suggested that Houdini's art staged the triumph of (white) masculinity beleaguered by the modernization of labor and the "feminization" of culture at the turn of the century.

or produce lock-picking implements from cavities hollowed in his gums. By directing attention to his physicality, he crafted a persona of the struggling everyman hero, in stark contrast to the aristocratic grace of more technically adept magicians. Inasmuch as his magic called for identification with his struggles and triumphs, Houdini depended on the narrative participation and belief of his audience. (Indeed, many of his contemporaries, most famously Arthur Conan-Doyle, were convinced that Houdini was in fact a powerful medium posing as a stage magician.) In contradistinction to P.T. Barnum, who reveled in epistemic uncertainty and exploited the viewer's thirst for novelty and detection, the vital component of Houdini's performance was his indubitable physical triumph over constraint. Less an instance of Barnum's capitalist irony than antidote to it, Houdini's act invited its viewer to put aside cynical consumption for belief in his heroic individual agency.

Contemporary interest in Houdini has likewise focused on the "real" and "rational" aspects of his persona, particularly the "honesty" of his illusionism and his anti-spiritualist endeavors.⁵ As Doctorow points out, Houdini's spiritualist refutations, by attacking "a dishonest form of show business... attested to the honesty of his own

⁵ "Casting escapes in a surprising new light, Houdini moved them from the world of Spiritualism to the contemporaneous religion of Strenuousness" (Silverman 42). His commitment to battling spiritualist frauds is the focus of the upcoming *Houdini* musical and the films *FairyTale: A True Story* (1997) and *Death Defying Acts*. Illusionists Penn and Teller position themselves as the inheritors of this crusade in their popular show *Bullshit!*, devoted to scientific rationalism, atheism, and libertarian principles of self-determination. In a different vein, Kalush and Sloman's *The Secret Life of Houdini* speculates that Houdini was an international spy, reading into his public career traces of political machinations and the covert operations of powerful men and agencies. Their rather contorted argument evinces the compulsion to view Houdini as transcending stage performance.

declared illusions and so positioned himself in the real world outside show business” (Rapaport 121-122). On the modern-day page and screen, however, Houdini connotes less masculine or working-class angst than fantasies of artistic production and consumption. Rather than the heroic everyman, he embodies the empowered artist, who inspires belief and enjoys success without the taint of commodification. Hence, in the novels I discuss, the “realness” of Houdini’s escapistry comes to represent an ideal of artistic efficacy, sincerity, and vitality—illusion backed by substance, enchantment anchored in reason, commerce rooted in sincerity. This fantasy has two sides: on one, Houdini’s artistry connotes the triumph of creativity or illusion over material constraints. On the other, the reception of this artistry is one of participatory immersion; that is, an audience that wholly suspends its disbelief. In this relation between artist and audience, Houdini’s escapistry represents an alternative to cynical or demystified consumption. It imagines artistry as realizing what Chabon calls the “two-way exchange of attention, experience, and the universal hunger for connection” (*Maps* 17). Houdini today is thus a paragon of mass cultural vitality, an ennobling notion of entertainment.

Such fantasies imply corresponding anxieties: that art is divorced from reality, that illusions are without substance, that commercial entertainment is cynical manipulation, and thus that sincere immersion in entertainments is unpardonably naïve. In this light, we can place Houdini’s resurgent popularity within broader critical stakes. The figure of Houdini—comprising notions of artistry that value “realness,” belief, and artist-audience connections—emerges in contemporary fiction alongside the “turn to sincerity” and turn from critique, both of which treat literature in terms other than hermeneutic unveiling or

ideological resistance. As the influence of literature and the humanities has waned, both culturally and within the academy, considerations of the place and role of the arts have taken on new urgency. As Marjorie Garber suggests, the two fundamental modes of valuation for literature are that it “feels good” (entertains, stirs the imagination, produces pleasure) or that it is “good for us” (instructs, challenges assumptions, inspires ethical behavior). Respectively, these poles privilege the imaginative power of art (associated with creation, enjoyment, interpersonal connection) and its critical capabilities (as a tool of political resistance, ideological unmasking, witnessing). If the latter has been the dominant paradigm of literary studies, the former has been regaining traction as a number of prominent scholars have offered accounts of literature’s function and relevance beyond critique.⁶ These approaches thus aim to “engage seriously with ordinary motives for reading,” (Felski 14) not the least of which is escape from the limits of quotidian life and the self. As Charles Altieri argues, “many readers see their interest in reading precisely as an opportunity to escape the empirical self, to undergo through imagination protean changes of identity and sympathy. Thus, the pleasure in the text is a pleasure in forms of consciousness or in eloquent responses to experience we can hope to encounter only in imaginary worlds not congruent with our sectarian commitments” (29).

At stake in this debate is the social function of literature today. What ends, political or personal, can or should literary entertainment serve? How might it be upheld as worthwhile against the incursions of commodification or charges of enervation? Partly because the lens of ideology critique has fallen victim to its own success (unmasking has

⁶ See for instance J. Hillis Miller, Sedgwick, Felski, Latour, Castiglia, Punday, and Fleissner.

become passé, a marketable ploy), the recent turn to sincerity has sought to recover modes that abjure ironic distance, whether the ‘high’ form of historicism and critique or the ‘low’ version of reflexively ironic consumerism. “Irony tyrannizes us,” David Foster Wallace lamented in a 1993 essay on U.S. television and fiction; “the forms of our best rebellious art have become mere gestures, shticks, not only sterile but perversely enslaving. How can even the idea of rebellion against corporate culture stay meaningful when Chrysler Inc. advertises trucks by invoking ‘The Dodge Rebellion’? How is one to be a bona fide iconoclast when Burger King sells onion rings with ‘Sometimes You Gotta Break the Rules’?” (183-4). Wallace characterized this irony as particularly pernicious because, in rejecting empathy for critical distance, it denies the potential of imagination or shared experience. In contrast, to wager on sincerity implies hope for human connection, and with it the possibility of “real-world” transformations. In this sense, the “turn to sincerity” associated with Wallace and other millennial writers of fiction anticipates the critical turn from critique of recent years and, as detailed in Chapter Two, the rehabilitation of imagination as a critically vital category. As Suzanne Keen notes (with skepticism) in *Empathy and the Novel*, many recent arguments on behalf of literature and the humanities depend on the presupposition that venturing imaginatively into the lives of others is essential for sympathy, understanding, and engagement.⁷ The social effects of such activity then manifest in a “sense of solidarity ... with other actual and potential readers who respond in a similar fashion” (Aubry 36). As the title of Timothy Aubry’s *Reading as Therapy* implies, these accounts of literary enterprise that

⁷ See also Palumbo-Liu, *The Deliverance of Others* and Black, *Fiction Across Borders*.

emphasize sincerity and imagination relocate its therapeutic effects—from the textual/critical act of witnessing or discovery (predicated on hermeneutics of depth) to authorial communication and readerly experience.

As an escape artist who sought to embody sincerity and demanded participatory belief, Harry Houdini represents this idealized version of author-audience relations. He has come to stand for authorial agency and unmediated experience, and thus for an understanding of fiction as offering imaginative escape rather than imparting critical knowledge or making political claims. However, as E.L. Doctorow's portrayal of Houdini in *Ragtime* indicates, such an understanding of art is neither necessarily accurate nor desirable.

Unwitting Escapistry: *Ragtime's* critique of Houdini

Early in *Ragtime*, Harry Houdini appears outside the family's house in a broken-down car. Invited into the sitting room, his "modest, almost colorless demeanor" and ill-fitting suit betray his unease. Houdini is a unifying element in *Ragtime's* patchwork narrative—linking its first and last scenes, crossing paths with or biographically resembling many of its characters. Hillary Chute suggests that "we are given perhaps the most emotional access to Houdini, and he comes closest to resembling the book's conscience" (281). The novel also attests to his immense popularity, particularly with the working-class. However, he is perpetually out of step with his surroundings, unable to grasp his situation. Events discomfit him, the wealthy and powerful marginalize him, modernity bewilders him. These contradictory features of Houdini attest to the larger

uncertainty of *Ragtime*—whether it views popular culture as neutralizing political activism, or as instantiating democratic and hopeful elements.⁸ Far from embodying individual or creative agency, Houdini in *Ragtime* is presented as uncritical and out of step with his times, unable to develop the political potential of his art.

It is not surprising that the legendary Houdini might lose luster in the acid wash of *Ragtime*'s subversive narrative tone. As Arthur Saltzman notes, *Ragtime*'s “terse, flat prose” seemingly invokes “turn of the century nostalgia” for “the good old days” only to employ it “to handle the abundant evidence against these myths” (90, 91). Houdini's biography provides ample material for revisionism. Houdini frequently exhibited artless pomposity, petty jealousies, and a lack of self-reflection (such as his hypocritical savaging of his former idol in *The Unmasking of Robert-Houdin*). He has been called “a terrible magician,” who was a wooden performer of magic and depended upon thieving the tricks of others (Steinmeyer 5). His campaign against spirit mediums was also old hat—spiritualism had been debunked on a regular basis since its mid-19th century invention (very often by magicians exploiting their sensational illusionist counterparts).⁹

⁸ While Jameson suggests that “the proposition that the depolitization of the workers' movement is attributable to the media or culture generally... is ... the elegiac backdrop, if not the meaning, of *Ragtime*, and perhaps of Doctorow's work in general” (*Postmodernism* 23), Chute argues that “In *Ragtime* Houdini represents the democratization of art; the novel valorizes the pioneering of productive, popular social and cultural spaces that escapism/magic (as well as movie making, ragtime, and even the professional performance of sideshow freakery) accomplish” (281). My reading of Houdini in *Ragtime* questions the extent to which the novel “valorizes” such art, suggesting instead that it is marked by a failure to realize any revolutionary potential it might have.

⁹ Houdini even dabbled as a spiritualist medium early in his Vaudeville career (Silverman 18).

Moreover, his rhetoric of honesty belied the extent to which his celebrity was fueled by hype. He thrived because he took advantage of the machinery of modern media with his publicity stunts; he arranged news coverage and documentation of his bridge jumps and jail escapes, faked rivalries (such as with his brother Dash), and apparently rigged his “handcuff challenges” with his adversaries and publicists. By this light, Houdini’s performances traded in pseudo controversy and public deception as much as any Barnum exhibit, but suppressed Barnum’s self-reflexive uncertainty to preserve the heroic pose of the escapist.

Crucially, however, Doctorow dwells not on Houdini’s personality flaws but on his artistic and critical failings. Throughout the novel, Houdini is shown struggling to connect with his audiences. The wealthy, Doctorow writes, “looked on him as a child or a fool” or mistake him altogether—Franz Ferdinand hails him as “the inventor of the airplane” (31, 105). A Westchester audience flees his show when they mistake a nearby bombing for some uncontrolled effect of his performance. The convict Harry K. Thaw strips naked and obscenely pantomimes Houdini from his cell during a jail escape. In his final appearance in the novel, Houdini labors to escape from a straightjacket above a Manhattan street: “A man was grinning at him, upside down, from a twelfth-floor window. Hey, Houdini, the man said, fuck you” (315). In an uncomfortable scene, Houdini visits the hospital bed of a subway worker mortally injured in an industrial accident. The man has been blasted out of the East River while digging a tunnel, and Houdini wants to know the secret of his escape: “I’m Harry Houdini, he said to the family, I escape for a living, that’s my profession, I’m an escapologist. But let me tell you

I've never done an escape that can touch this one" (97). Heedless of the family's grief and the victim's groans, he tries to buy the secret of this "escapist's" tricks, to find out "how it felt... [and] what he did to get to the surface" (98). The injured worker's sons drag Houdini out of the room.

The desperation implied by Houdini's missteps in this scene stems from his sense that his stagecraft, for all its commitment to reality, is eclipsed in the modern world. With chagrin he reads newspaper accounts of Peary reaching the North Pole: "There was a kind of act that used the real world for its stage. He couldn't touch it. For all his achievements he was a trickster, an illusionist, a mere magician. What was the sense of his life if people walked out of the theatre and forgot him? ... The real-world act was what got into the history books" (99). The "real-world act" is what Houdini continually pursued on stage: he would sweat, bleed, strain, and emerge short of breath, bruised and disheveled yet victorious. His props were likewise drawn from modern industry and incarceration—crates and milk cans, handcuffs and straightjackets. Matthew Solomon points out that Houdini's major contribution to twentieth-century magic was to free it from the confines of the theatre and bring it into the real world, using skyscrapers, bridges, and prisons as his props, policemen and passersby as his audience.¹⁰ Houdini's misgivings in *Ragtime* suggest, however, that his act remains unreal inasmuch as it fails to connect with his audience. The scenes in which onlookers view him with cynicism or

¹⁰ Even in the theater, magician Raymond Teller points out, "Houdini put emphasis on real-world objects that are very... identifiable and definable, and very different from the more popular kind of stage magic at the time, which emphasized exotic props" (Rapaport 127). On film, though, Houdini's act came to seem an artifact of the nineteenth century stage: his techniques were indistinguishable from cheap tricks of the camera (Walters 214).

detachment (Thaw, the man in the twelfth-floor window, etc.) threaten to render Houdini ridiculous.

Ragtime implies that Houdini's artistic limitations, his inability to get his act "into the history books," stems from a failure to understand his art in political or historical terms. Doctorow's Houdini is marked by a fundamental inability to interpret himself critically, to read past the surface of entertainment to its latent ideological import. This shortcoming lies at the root of his fears of artistic impotence and obsolescence—even though "[t]oday, nearly fifty years since his death, the audience for escapes is even larger" (8). For in fact, Doctorow suggests, Houdini's art was (and is) full of revolutionary significance, as "[h]e went all over the world accepting all kinds of bondage and escaping" (7). He was adored by the poor and demeaned by the wealthy, but "[d]espite such experiences Houdini never developed what we think of as a political consciousness. He could not reason from his own hurt feelings. To the end he would be almost totally unaware of the design of his career, the great map of revolution laid out by his life" (35). This "great map of revolution" lay not just in Houdini's remarkable capacity for self-invention and self-assertion, but in the symbolic or illuminating potential of his escapistry. His escapes betrayed both the arbitrariness of boundaries and their permeability. His populist magic had the potential to "bring[] technologies of constraint and restraint into the public gaze surreptitiously and alter[] his audience's way of looking at institutional scenes" (Laurier 379). Doctorow sees in Houdini's art what Jameson terms the "Utopian or transcendent potential" of works of mass culture— "that dimension of even the most degraded type of mass culture which remains implicitly, and no matter

how faintly, negative and critical of the social order from which, as a product and a commodity, it springs” (*Signatures* 39). In this respect, *Ragtime* anticipates Chabon’s stance in *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay*. However, for Doctorow this potential remains dormant in the absence of critical consciousness; it thus resides not in the art itself nor in the experience of it, but rather in its interpretation (a fact signaled, perhaps, in the affectless and direct prose in which this judgment is rendered).

Doctorow returns to the notion that the revolutionary content of art is available only through critical interpretation in *Loon Lake* (1980), a novel which like *Ragtime* meditates on the demise of political and artistic resistance in the United States.¹¹ In it, the poet Warren Penfield (a failure and a sot who plots revenge on the industrialist Bennett only to become his house laureate instead) attends a performance of Bunraku puppet theater. Watching the puppets being manipulated by hooded figures and voiced by a reader, Penfield thinks,

yes it’s exactly true, when I speak I hear someone else saying the words when I decide to do something someone else is propelling me when I look up at the sky or down at the ground I feel the talons on my neck how true what genius to make a public theater out of this why don’t we all stand up and tear the place apart what

¹¹ Cf. Jameson, *Postmodernism* (21-26). *Loon Lake* also serves chronologically as a sequel to *Ragtime*, charting the Depression-era United States whereas *Ragtime* ends in 1919. Michelle Tokarczyk argues that, although it adopts many of the forms of the 1930s proletarian novel, it culminates not in hope or revolutionary change but instead displays “the lure of wealth, the difficulty of building true solidarity among many workers, and the wide and corrosive reach of money and power” (qtd. in Bevilacqua 51). In *Loon Lake*, the debasement of popular culture reaches its nadir in the traveling carnival that the protagonist works for: its “freak show” and side business of prostitution culminate in the gang-rape of the dying Fanny, the Fat Lady—a “special event” organized by the magician and carnival owner Sim Hearn.

brazen art to tell us this about ourselves knowing we'll sit here and not do a thing.

(*Loon Lake*, 212)

The performance inverts Houdini's escapistry: whereas the puppet theater reveals the truth of our coercion, Houdini allegorizes the possibility of escape from that coercion. Hence Doctorow calls attention to the class-based nature of its reception, implying that the revolutionary implications of his art are clear. Houdini, on the other hand, can neither recognize nor draw out those implications, distracting himself with ghosts and airplanes instead

It is a different Eastern European Jewish immigrant with a fabricated name and history who finds success as a showman in *Ragtime*.¹² An impoverished Marxist artist called Tateh becomes a designer of visual illusions for the Franklin Novelty Company—first “movie books,” a magic lantern apparatus, then films—and reinvents himself as a film mogul, the “Baron Ashkenazy.” Chute maintains that Tateh's trajectory shows how *Ragtime* “is passionately invested in articulating the [political] possibilities of a post-utopian democratic art” (273). However, this success comes only after poverty and brutal strike-breakers impel him to despair of his revolutionary hopes and pursue material prosperity. As he considers his daughter's future, he resolves “to drive from her memory every tenement stench and filthy immigrant street” (*Ragtime* 259). In place of resisting

¹² Houdini was born Ehrich Weiss, to a rabbi who moved from Budapest to Wisconsin when Ehrich was an infant. From early in his career, Houdini worked to Americanize himself. He shaped his biographical details to downplay exoticism and instead worked the prototypical American entrepreneurial story, the self-made immigrant who had risen by dint of hard work and brilliance to become the world's biggest celebrity (Steinmeyer 150). As depicted in *Carter Beats the Devil*, his escapist performances would end with the orchestra playing “My Country 'Tis of Thee.”

industrial capitalism, “He would buy her light and sun and clean wind of the ocean for the rest of her life” (259). He makes his fortune producing “preparedness serials” during World War I (319). Thus, despite the fact that his success provides a sense of happy resolution to the novel, uniting its three families,¹³ *Ragtime*’s conclusion anticipates that of *Loon Lake*, in which the once-defiant protagonist succeeds only through total capitulation to the power against which he rebels. If this constitutes a celebration of popular culture, as Chute suggests, it is one limned with defeat: Houdini’s failures indicate the foreclosure of popular entertainment’s “revolutionary potential,” not its vitality.

Willful Innocence: Houdinism in *Carter Beats the Devil*

Published twenty-five years after *Ragtime*, Glen David Gold’s *Carter Beats the Devil* (2000) resembles Doctorow’s novel in some respects—both are set in early twentieth century America, populated by historical figures, and concerned with popular culture and innovation. *Carter*’s treatment of Houdini, however, bespeaks a shift away from conceptions of art as necessarily politically involved and towards the espousal of imaginative entertainment for its own sake. In Gold’s post-postmodern novel, Houdini’s art embodies the imaginative belief that Gold insists is essential to literary pleasure. Against the cynicisms of commerce and critical distance, the novel embraces “wonder” and “faith” as guiding principles for literary entertainment. (As one reviewer noted, Gold “uses [Houdini] the entertainer for his entertainment value” [Greenman].) *Carter Beats*

¹³ Tateh/Ashkenazy marries Mother, and thereby adopts the Boy and the orphaned child of Coalhouse Walker, the murdered African American revolutionary.

the Devil implicitly admits, however, that entertainment for its own sake necessitates a certain degree of disavowal. In spite of being (like *Ragtime*) replete with historical minutiae, it possesses a strangely ahistorical quality. It demonstrates that, in idealizing Houdini and the entertainment function of art, it must necessarily screen out that which Doctorow attends to: social unrest, economic realities, the channels of history itself.

Whereas Doctorow's aim in *Ragtime* was to create "narrative distance" (Barrett 821), Gold has presented *Carter Beats the Devil* as a return to narrative intimacy (in contrast to what he terms the metaphorical or postmodern treatments of magic in John Fowles and Steven Millhauser). He wanted "a good book that treated a magician protagonist like an actual person... There was no quotidian treatment of what it was like to roll out of bed in the morning with a new way to vanish a horse" (Bierlein). This description is misleading, inasmuch as it suggests a focus on the everyday, behind-the-scenes life of a magician. Instead, what Gold loves (and describes at length) are not the tricks of the trade but tricks onstage—the magic show as it appears to the audience. This emphasis is unsurprising, given the stress the novel places on the virtue of wonder. In its plot and prose, *Carter* aims for readerly immersion rather than critical perspective, demanding the sort of "innocent," un-cynical engagement that it also argues for. Written with a light touch and little irony, *Carter's* narrative commits to romance rather than realism: its cast of characters includes South Seas pirates, Secret Service agents, and golden-hearted prostitutes as it follows the (historical) magician Charles Carter from childhood to professional and romantic success. To license its well-worn tropes, *Carter Beats the Devil* presents itself, in both style and content, as popular entertainment harking

back to the innocent pleasures of a bygone era. Art Deco magic posters headline each section, and the novel shares its title and structure (an overture and three acts, culminating in a finale called “Carter Beats the Devil”) with the magic of its protagonist.¹⁴ *Carter* presents a noble protagonist, sincere in speech and brave in deed, and a world in which such a disposition is recompensed.

Poised like *Mr. Vertigo* in the waning days of vaudeville, *Carter Beats the Devil* depends on magic and Harry Houdini to advance and resolve the narrative, as well as to articulate its proper reception. Houdini acts as *deus ex machina* in elevating Carter from struggling novice to headlining magician. The narrative also appropriates Houdini’s improbable escapes, his sentimental sincerity, and the commitments to individual agency and imaginative belief that can make stage magic “real.” Just as Houdini presented his stage tricks as rooted in real physical power, so also does Carter’s magic carry over into reality. This is most evident when Carter has to escape death at the hands of rogue Secret Service agents who, unwittingly replicating one of Houdini’s stunts, chain Carter and stuff him in a mail sack in a wooden crate, which they nail shut and throw into the harbor. Likewise, in the novel’s denouement, stage props (bullets, wires, a lion, a guillotine) are put to lethal use in a showdown with his nemesis Mysterioso. Although Carter admits that he merely performs illusions invented by others (279), the distinction between magician-qua-illusionist and magician-qua-superhero is often porous.

¹⁴ Reviewers are quick to adopt the analogous relation between narrative and illusionism, praising Gold as an “escape artist” in his narrative, “who has all the tricks in his bag,” and makes “hours vanish” with his “most entertaining appearing act” (dust jacket, Greenman). Michael Chabon blurbs it “a top-hat-and-tails performance.”

Houdini's artistry and the antithetical responses it provokes are thematically central to *Carter's* account of what entertainment should be and how it should be consumed. Attending a Houdini performance as a young man, Charles Carter recounts his initial skepticism of Houdini's dirty tuxedo, his "botching ten minutes of card tricks," and his repeated proclamations that he is "the most famous man in the world" (Gold 129). However, Carter is soon mesmerized by "the most amazing stunt" he has ever seen, as Houdini climbs inside a water-filled boiler which is then riveted shut (129). Entirely out of sight, Houdini nevertheless made such submersion escapes into grand theatre by soliciting the participation of his audience: he often invited spectators to hold their breath, and stationed assistants nearby with axes for emergency rescues (Silverman 113). As Carter watches, minutes drag by and the tension mounts, until Houdini emerges soaked, exhausted, and bloodied. Carter is caught up in the mass ecstasy that ensues,¹⁵ and Houdini is rushed to the hospital "due to the exertions of the escape" (Gold 132). The serialized and commercial aspects of his escape—the final announcement is to remind viewers that the hospital-bound Houdini will be "escaping from a giant lightbulb, provided by the Edison Power Company" the next day—do nothing to diminish Carter's euphoria. Leaving the theater, Carter and others in the crowd marvel at "the spectacle, the suffering, the triumph ... [the] great personal sacrifice" (132). The thrill of Houdini's escape depends on the audience's faith (that the boiler isn't rigged) and imaginative participation. It requires the artist to inspire his audience to become "immersed"

¹⁵ *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay* also contains a firsthand account of a Houdini performance, and like *Carter Beats the Devil* it emphasizes the dramatic suspense and mass euphoria that accompanies his escape.

narratively and sympathetically, and the audience to respond with belief rather than skepticism. Doubting the struggle threatens to reveal the scene as cheaply melodramatic, even absurd. (Hence Houdini's compulsive insistence on his own genuineness, and the intensity with which he sought to punish his imitators and detractors and to disavow fakery.)

Carter's belief contrasts with the cynicism of the evil magician Mysterioso, who mocks the awe-struck Carter for a rube: "The man risked nothing... He got out of that nice bathtub in five seconds, and sat backstage reading a newspaper while children like you sweated and prayed and felt tremendous sympathy for the third-most-famous man in the world as he painted up his hands with fake blood and counted up the house receipts" (133). Carter admits that Mysterioso's skepticism is rational—"If I think about it, I suppose..."—yet he refuses to consider it rationally—"But I don't want to think about it" (134).¹⁶ The real magic of Houdini's performance, Carter suggests, isn't the escape itself but the pleasure it inspires, even the willingness to believe what one knows to be untrue. *Carter Beats the Devil* asks of its readers a similar form of provisional belief, in which the calculus of plausibility is set aside for investment in its fictions. Shortly thereafter, Carter's faith is rewarded and Mysterioso's cynicism punished when Houdini humiliates Mysterioso in the middle of a magic show, thereby wrecking his career and elevating Carter from apprentice to headliner. Houdini's art and the affective experience it

¹⁶ This formulation, of course, closely resembles Žižek's definition of commodity fetishism: "I know very well that [x] is not in fact the case, but, all the same, I will go on behaving as if it is" (*Sublime Object* 32).

produces in sympathetic audiences thus sets a template for what popular art (and *Carter* itself) can do and how it should be consumed.

Because of this emphasis on belief, a morally-freighted distinction between innocence and cynicism runs throughout the novel. Early on, Carter's childlike interest in magic is terrorized by a cynical refusal of wonder by Mr. Jenks, the Carter family's "deformed and hostile" gardener. Carter and his brother awaken Jenks from his dreams of "splitting timbers and collapsing mine shafts" to enlist him as audience for their tricks. When they make his only quarter dollar disappear, he beats them and threatens them with torture (79). The scene has unmistakable socioeconomic undertones—wealthy boys having some fun with the downtrodden servant—and the boys are later chided by their father for "teasing" the wretched Jenks. However, the narrative bypasses matters of class inasmuch as it faults Jenks' meanness while excusing the boys' imaginative innocence. The gardener is portrayed as brutish and dirty, incapable of appreciating magic because he cares only for money and drink; his sensitivity to his own material situation seemingly bespeaks his narrow-mindedness. (Indeed, throughout the novel Carter's hereditary wealth is brought up only by skeptics and villains.) The discomfort engendered by the scene, however, arises not just from the specter of the antique instruments of torture the boys' father happens to collect, but from the manner in which socioeconomic concerns intrude even as they are dismissed. The scene with Jenks exemplifies a recurrent feature of *Carter Beats the Devil*, in which political, economic, or social issues are raised and then stifled in order to preserve a feeling of wonder.

Both Mysterioso's cynicism and Jenks' resentment are inadequate responses to magic, in part because magic in *Carter Beats the Devil*, properly understood, aims only to delight. The novel underscores this point through repeated invocations of the "magician's code," which cleanses artful deception of unsavory connotations: true magicians never betray their fellows, disrespect their audience, present an ungainly or obnoxious appearance, or harm animals (Gold 70). The vaudeville troop in which Carter (like Houdini) gets his start is populated by simple, hardworking folk, and Houdini preaches the virtues of sober living and honest work. The novel opens with an epigraph from Albert Einstein: "The most beautiful experience we can have is the mysterious. It is the fundamental emotion which stands at the cradle of true art and true science. Whoever does not know it and can no longer wonder, no longer marvel, is as good as dead, and his eyes are dimmed" (2). This is the role magic plays, conjuring the mysterious and gratifying a fundamental human longing to be "taken over by genuine wonder" (48). It is in this respect (and not, given his family's wealth, in any material sense) that "from the moment Charles Carter the Fourth first learned it, magic was not an amusement, but a means of survival" (35). The disavowal the novel dramatizes is, it suggests, a necessary component of this experience of wonder. Carter's magic exemplifies the humanitarian ends of magic: the two "devil-beating" illusions that he stages covertly aim at saving individual lives. In the first magic show he conspires to free President Harding from the bonds of political intrigue and responsibility by faking his death. His final performance introduces television to the masses and, by publicizing its technology, saves the life of its

inventor, Philo Farnsworth, from “all the industrialists and all the armed forces” who seek to capitalize on his new invention (376).

The tension between cynicism and wonder plays out in the climax of *Carter Beats the Devil* as a struggle between competing visions of entertainment. Radio corporations, venture capitalists, and the state ally to pursue the new medium of television as an opportunity for immense profit at home and military surveillance abroad. In contrast, the baby-faced and idealistic Farnsworth declares that his invention is “a medium of education” that he intends to give away for free, “like schooling” (453). He is also a firm believer in the ethical power of the imagination, suggesting that the cross-cultural exposure and communication that television facilitates “will end war” (452).¹⁷ When the powers-that-be hire a Russian anarchist to assassinate him, the man is instead moved by Farnsworth’s utopian vision. Carter similarly envisions television as a radically democratic form of entertainment, one that affords an equal view to “the dirty-collared, cloth-hatted man forever squinting” from the upper galleries of the theatre (347). His assistant gushes that its immediacy would make the audience “*feel* like spectators, just like being there, without the artificial nature that film has, no editing, no schmaltz, just real life” (343). In short, television is validated insofar as it aligns with the artistry of magic: “[Carter’s] instincts told him that as he’d suspected all along, television was magic” (344). In the final scene, Carter performs card and coin tricks at a television expo, cheerfully anticipating his imminent obsolescence.

¹⁷ Farnsworth first unveils television to his new bride on their honeymoon: “Pem stood amazed. It looked like having your own piece of the world under glass. For a long moment, Philo and Pem Farnsworth held each other. Their bodies were bathed in the blue light of the screen. ‘Pem, I’d like you to meet television’” (Gold 342).

There is, of course, no small irony or inadvertent *entendre* lurking in these naive hopes, divergent as they are from our general understanding of television as making a spectacle of war, a travesty of real life, and as indeed being “like schooling” for passive consumers. Nevertheless, Farnsworth’s innocence is held up as a model for consumption and interpretation in *Carter Beats the Devil*. Gold suggests that “faith” redeems the corruptions of the market. At one point, Carter laments that “when faith is gone, what always takes its place is profit” (378). Shortly thereafter, finding delight in a quixotic daytime fireworks display with his blind paramour, he reflects that “Faith was a choice. So, it followed, was wonder” (411). The problem the novel presents is that this choice to experience the world as enchanted requires that we refuse to consider things too closely. This is the heuristic Houdini’s performance inspires in Carter (“If I think about it... But I don’t want to think about it”), and one the narrative repeatedly stages. When Houdini humiliates Mysterioso, for instance, Carter recognizes but chooses to ignore both the artificiality of Houdini’s stage rivalries and the probability that Mysterioso’s downfall was dictated by corporate interests. Carter likewise maintains ignorance of the finances of his magic, leaving questions of money to his investor brother. At one point Carter derides “shilling for Henry Ford [as] tantamount to suicide,” yet shortly thereafter he agrees to design an illusion and appear in print ads for a BMW motorbike (which he drives for the remainder of the novel) (325, 367).

In a sense, *Carter Beats the Devil* radicalizes the resolution of the novels discussed in the previous chapter. It presents the personal and therapeutic goods of entertainment as its primary ends, ends that can be realized only at the expense of its

political or social content. Houdini's obliviousness to the "great map of revolution laid out by his life" is, in *Carter Beats the Devil*, implicitly essential to the escapism he offers. The consolations of entertainment carry with them disavowal. Thus political, social, and historical concerns, while visible, are transmuted into individual dramas.¹⁸ Narrative resolution exclusively concerns individuals, who are liberated by magic from the incursions of the state (Harding) or the power of money (Farnsworth). The novel's elision of World War I is symptomatic. As Agent Griffin scours news clippings for details of Carter's past, he finds a 1917 reference to Carter coming out of a retirement "enforced by an incident," for a magic show to benefit families of U-boat victims. In a sly acknowledgment of its own (limited) historicity, the narrative states that "Griffin flipped through the remainder of the book, and found nothing to explain what had happened between 1914 and 1917" (241). *Carter* translates the global catastrophe of WWI into a personal one—Griffin learns that Carter retired after his wife died in an on-stage accident—which is redeemed when Carter finds true love anew with a woman who had herself apparently died. When Carter's brother James laments the "jaded feeling in the world," Carter corrects him, saying, "People are also wonderfully naïve" (335).¹⁹

¹⁸ The political corruption of the Harding administration, for instance, is framed in terms of Harding's unhappiness and thus salvaged when Carter conjures his escape to a desert island. Capitalists are represented by the mining magnate Borax Smith, a friend and inspiration to Carter who runs a charity home for "fallen women"; his double-dealing and speculations thus are represented primarily as a violation of friendship rather than the economic order.

¹⁹ His assistant Ledocq suggests this disposition is particularly American: "But Americans, everyone here, they all say, 'I seen everything, you can't pull one on me, I'm a real wise guy,' and then two minutes later, we show them a chess-playing automaton, and they lose every ounce of savoir faire... and the truth is, they *really* don't want to

Carter Beats the Devil thus presents, through Houdini and magic, fiction as a means for experiencing wonder and pleasure, and this requires a disposition of innocence and participatory belief. This disposition is a choice and must be sustained against the incursions of reality and knowing-better. The magical powers of Carter and Houdini are indispensable to *Carter's* narrative inasmuch as they invite the reader to forego critical distance or cynicism and to enjoy the wondrous spectacle. In Carter's grand finale, TV-globes illuminating the stage announce that "Carter the Great ... is ... Everywhere!" (585)—as if the alternative to corporate coercion and cynical consumerism is immersion in entertainment. The novel toys with the possibility that this escapism has a revolutionary dimension: at its conclusion of Carter's final show, it seems to Farnsworth "as if the theatre wouldn't actually contain the flood of emotion, as if it would burst outward and down the street, to fill the city and sweep like tidal waves through its outlying reaches with joy and marvel" (585). But in its subordination of historical and ideological matters to individual dramas and resolutions, the novel valorizes less the utopian potential of mass culture than its capacity to repress "fundamental social anxieties and concerns ... by the narrative construction of imaginary resolutions and by the projection of an optical illusion of social harmony" (Jameson, *Signatures* 34). Imagining escapist entertainment untrammelled by limits or ideology, *Carter Beats the Devil* risks resembling neoliberal rhetoric of individual freedom and unsanctioned exchange, which "require[s] both politically and economically the construction of a neoliberal market-based populist culture of differentiated consumerism and individual

know how it works. ... The naive and the knowing, that's our audience, boys, that's how we make a living" (335).

libertarianism” (Harvey 42). *Carter Beats the Devil* thus seems to illustrate Doctorow’s misgivings about the limits of Houdini’s escapistry, in that it presents escapist entertainment as incompatible with substantial historical engagement or direct confrontation of the commodified status of entertainment under late capitalism. It opens and closes on the figure of Warren G. Harding, whose choice—to escape political responsibilities and misdeeds alike by fleeing into a fantasy—is a radicalized version of the stance the novel dictates

Kavalier & Clay’s Ambivalent Defense of Escapistry

I have positioned Houdini as a lightning rod concerning the role of entertainment, what it can do, and how one ought to approach it. But while they differ markedly on the proper function of populist entertainment, Doctorow and Gold arrive at a similar conclusion regarding the political limits of Houdini’s mass cultural art. In his critique of Houdini, Doctorow laments his inability to translate his art into anything revolutionary; Gold, in using Houdini to idealize “innocent” entertainment, suggests that escapistry comes at the expense of engagement with the world as it is. The challenge Michael Chabon tackles in *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay* is how to navigate between the conflicting positions of critical distance and immersion in fiction in order to recover the liberating, empowering dimensions of escapistry. In attempting to reconcile escapist pleasures with ironic or critical knowledge, Chabon offers a nuanced form of literary Houdinism that is poised between celebrating the escapist pleasures of fiction and acknowledging the fragility or inadequacy of that escape.

Chabon displays an allegiance to both escapist entertainment and critique in the dialectical attraction to pulp and theory that informs his writing. As one critic notes, “while Chabon seems drawn to the highest and most abstract planes of literary theory, he has been pulled downward with an even more vigorous energy, into the lowest strata of the generic universe” (Bigelow 306). Chabon’s comic-book fandom is particularly well-known, and a number of critics treat *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay* as embracing popular art forms: comic books (Chute), fantasy (Behlman), superheroes (Moscowitz), and Golem-making (Berger).²⁰ He has also edited *McSweeney’s Mammoth Treasury of Thrilling Tales* (2003), declaring in its introduction his intent to “revive the lost genres of short fiction” (Chabon, “Introduction” 2). But Chabon also couches his love of generic fare defensively in terms of why he needn’t apologize for it. In explaining why theory isn’t ultimately important to the experience of art, he invokes it at length, as in the following statement of writerly purpose:

I write to entertain. Period. Oh, I could decoct a brew of other, more impressive motivations and explanations. I could uncork some stuff about reader response theory, or the Lacanian *parole*. I could go on about the storytelling impulse and the need to make sense of experience through story. A spritz of Jung might scent

²⁰ Behlman describes *Kavalier & Clay* as “an extended meditation, with comic books as its central subject, on the value of fantasy as a deflective resource rather than a reflective one” (62). While Behlman faults the novel for privileging escapism over realism, Chute suggests that it in fact “elaborate[s] the new possibilities of popular forms to confront and to articulate history” (291). She sees the novel as embracing graphic narrative as a democratic form that can mediate between ‘high’ and ‘low.’ Chute also touches on Houdini’s role as “an important force, predecessor and guide to the world of comics” (281).

the air... But in the end—and here’s my point—it would still all boil down to *entertainment*, and its suave henchman, pleasure. (Chabon, *Maps* 14)

While Chabon’s main assertion is that apparently facile categories of “entertainment” and “pleasure” are fundamental to writing and reading, he seems equally intent on demonstrating knowledge of all the “more impressive motivations and explanations.” He repeats this move in a *New Yorker* essay on superhero costumes, trotting out a gamut of historicist and theoretical interpretive approaches in order to reject them as insufficient. He writes of how critical accounts of Superman’s origin “index the advent of Superman, in mid-1938, to various intellectual, social, and economic trends of the Depression years, to the influence or aura of contemporary celebrities and authors, to the structure and demands of magazine publishing and distribution, et cetera” (“Secret Skin”). He boasts that, to “suit [his] purpose,” he might “construct a similar etiology of the superhero costume” by referencing a range of early twentieth century costuming, design, fashion, aesthetic movements, and cultural fantasies, “When in fact the point of origin is not a date or a theory or a conjunction of cultural trends but a story, the intersection of a wish and the tip of a pencil” (“Secret Skin”). Again Chabon uses critical knowledge to bolster his primary claim—the primacy of fantasy and artistry over any way of accounting for it. Immersion in fiction need not feel shame before critical or scholarly knowledge, he suggests, even as the latter legitimates it by defusing accusations of naiveté. As I will argue, Chabon embeds this pose in the narrative of *Kavalier & Clay*.

This defensive stance is necessary because, Chabon argues, entertainment must be rescued from its “bad name” that causes it to be abjured or handled “with gloves of irony

and postmodern tongs” (*Maps and Legends* 13). Admitting its associations with commerce, empty pleasure, and passivity (not to mention “the ills of mass manufacture—spurious innovation, inferior materials, alienated labor, and an excess of market research” [16]), Chabon argues that responding cynically to entertainment perniciously stunts our expectations for and experience of literature. Instead, we should “[expand] our definition of entertainment to encompass everything pleasurable that arises from the encounter of an attentive mind with a page of literature” (14). He writes:

entertainment—as I define it, pleasure and all—remains the only sure means we have of bridging, or at least of feeling as if we have bridged, the gulf of consciousness that separates each of us from everybody else. The best response to those who would cheapen and exploit it is not to disparage or repudiate but to reclaim entertainment as a job fit for artists and for audiences, a two-way exchange of attention, experience, and the universal hunger for connection.

(*Maps*, 17)

Chabon seeks in “reclaim[ing] entertainment as a job fit for artists and audiences” to preempt critical maneuvers that would dismiss entertainment as irresponsible or insubstantial. Instead, he develops a notion of “entertainment” not as solipsistic consumption but as a deeply interpersonal and social activity. In emphasizing pleasure, feeling, and empathy, Chabon places the affective function of literature over its epistemic capabilities. In this respect his thinking aligns with that of writers such as David Foster Wallace or Dave Eggers, who locate in sincerity the chance for interpersonal understanding. What is particular about Chabon, and distinguishes his claims from those

of O'Brien and Auster (detailed in the last chapter) that art can bridge the gap between self and other via "communication," is his emphasis on literature as entertainment—a word that connotes not just pleasures consumed but, in verb form, hosting guests or weighing unfamiliar ideas. While Chabon places creativity and enjoyment in opposition to reductive historical or theoretical accounts of art, he insists that generic, popular entertainment has a serious function.²¹ Thus *Kavalier & Clay*'s central dilemma, both thematically and formally, is how to realize escapism without losing critical perspective. This takes the form of a sustained defense of mass cultural art as aesthetically valuable and socially transformative.

The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay first presents escapism as desirable, enumerating a litany of twentieth-century forms of dehumanization from which one might long for escape: totalitarianism and its sclerotic bureaucracy; corporate exploitation of labor and commodification of creativity; ideologically and racially motivated violence; police surveillance and brutality; the oppression of minorities and exploitation of the vulnerable; the Holocaust; Cold War McCarthyism; the soul-sapping drudgery of suburban living and mass production. In the lives of the titular characters, an interest in escapism seems a natural impulse, born of youthful hopes and dreams of freedom.²² For Sammy Klayman, comic-book fantasies sustain dreams of artistic and commercial glory

²¹ See Richardson and Bigelow, among others, for examinations of serious intents in Chabon's genre fiction. Richardson addresses Chabon's use of genre in representing the Holocaust in fiction, while Bigelow argues that Chabon "ask[s] us to take pulp seriously, as [he] has clearly done in his subsequent work" (Bigelow 317).

²² As Chute observes, the cousins biographically blend high and mass culture: European Joe is "an artist," Brooklyn Sammy a "commercial artist"; Sammy works at Empire Novelty Company, Inc, while Joe studied at the Prague Academy of Art.

amidst a drab domestic and working life. Escape is a matter of survival for his cousin Josef Kavalier, a Jew in Nazi-occupied Prague. Their respective desires converge in *The Escapist*, their comic-book creation involving an escape artist superhero disguised as a stage magician. Described as “Houdini, but mixed with Robin Hood and a little bit of Albert Schweitzer” (153)—no doubt how Houdini would have wished to be described himself—the Escapist is part of a league of superheroes who “roamed the world acting... to procure the freedom of others, whether physical or metaphysical, emotional or economic” (133). These are also the freedoms that Sammy and Joe hope to gain from their creation. Its windfall temporarily gratifies Sammy’s material and artistic ambitions, while the series’ subject matter—an increasingly overt assault on Nazi Germany—partly placates Joe’s desire to avenge himself on Hitler.

The Escapist is commercial entertainment, but also, the narrator insists, excellent art—praised for its vivid artistry, gripping storytelling, and modernist narrative experimentation. It is aligned with another triumphant blend of “pop culture” and modernism, *Citizen Kane*. After Joe strikes up a friendship with Orson Welles, the boys attend the premier of the film and are inspired to revolutionize their approach to narrative. In general, *Kavalier & Clay* contrasts the vitality of popular forms with the ossification of “high art.” As Chute notes, this contrast plays out in a scene at a Greenwich Village party, in which Salvador Dalí is immobile and inaudible in a scuba apparatus and has to be rescued from asphyxiation by Joe. A recurring gag in the novel is the pretentiously literary (and ironically generic) titles of the perennially incomplete autobiographical novels in which Sammy and his comic-book employers house their

“serious” artistic ambition: Sammy calls his opus *American Disillusionment* or *Through Abe Glass, Darkly* (7); his boss Anapol oscillates between *The Science of Opportunity* and *Sorrow in My Sample Case* (81); his editor George Deasey, meanwhile, works on his personal tragedy of love and betrayal, *Death Wears a Black Sarong* (276). Deasey, dressed in “the stiff-collared shirts and high-button waistcoats of his generation of literary men,” epitomizes high modern aspirations transferred into a commercial register, as his symbolist poetry and war coverage gives way to anonymous mass-production of pulp novels. *Kavalier & Clay* illustrates in these men what Chabon elsewhere terms “the quickening force, neglected, derided, and denied, of money and the getting of it on a ready imagination” (*Maps and Legends* 37). Deasey “professed to despise the pulps and never lost an opportunity to ridicule himself for earning his living by them, but all the same he took the work seriously, and his novels, each of them composed in two or three weeks, were written with verve and an erudite touch” (*Kavalier & Clay* 156). Likewise Sammy, despite his highbrow aspirations, ventures into whatever genres seem commercially viable, putting aside *American Disillusionment* to work on comics about crime-fighting boxers, hard-boiled detectives, and cowgirls (296). The novel gently mocks the pretensions of high art, instead praising the pleasurable quality of the commercial work these writers do.

It is by treating popular forms “seriously” that they can be pleasurable and meaningful. *The Escapist* is eventually vitiated not by commodification—although it is franchised as a host of cheap commodities, from “Keys of Freedom” to advertising for “Frosted Chaff-Os” breakfast cereal (291)—but by postmodern pastiche:

Tastes changed, and writers grew bored, and all the straight plots had been pretty well exhausted. Later writers and artists... turned the strip into a peculiar kind of inverted parody of the whole genre of the costumed hero. The Escapist's chin grew larger and more emphatically dimpled, and his muscles hypertrophied until he bulged... [He] was quite vain; readers sometimes caught him stopping, on his way to fight evil, to check his reflection and comb his hair in a window or the mirror of a drugstore scale... [he] never seemed to take his adventures very seriously... Sometimes, if he was in no particular hurry to get anywhere, he let Big Al take over the controls of the Keyjet and picked up a movie magazine that had his picture on the cover... He was a superpowerful, muscle-bound clown... (359-60)

This exhausted, foppish, unserious Escapist is a far cry from the heroic figure that Joe and Sammy bring to life. Treated ironically, he becomes the negative image of good popular art. In expressing artistic ennui rather than readerly desires, the work is rendered solipsistic and insignificant.²³

In this context, Harry Houdini serves as an avatar of vital, inspiring, and sincere popular art. The narrator presents him as legitimating mass cultural artistry and fantasy. The “still-fresh memory of Harry Houdini in the American mind thirteen years after his death—of his myth, his mysterious abilities, his physique, his feats, his dedicated hunting down and exposure of frauds and cheats—is a neglected source of the superhero idea in

²³ Not coincidentally, *Kavalier & Clay* has few self-reflexively ironic moments. An exception is a footnote on a comic strip reprint by “Nostalgia Press, 1970; second edition, Pure Imagination, 1996” (319).

general,” even “an argument in its favor” (120). Houdini is Chabon’s primary point of reference for what culturally vibrant and imaginative art might look like in a commodified and ironic world. Hence his centrality in *The Escapist’s* origins—Sammy first imagines the Escapist as a hybrid of Houdini and his vaudeville strongman father, a super-magician who could rescue the European Jews from Hitler’s regime.²⁴ The dreams of Sammy Clay’s youth are “Houdiniesque,” while Josef Kavalier harbors a childhood passion for lock-picking and escapistry, which he learns from a disciple of Houdini named Bernard Kornblum. Joe’s younger brother, Thomas, writes and illustrates the libretto for an imagined opera about Houdini. In New York Joe befriends Walter B. Gibson (real-life biographer of Houdini, whose *Houdini on Magic* later appears in the hands of Joe’s son Tommy), part of a literary coterie of amateur magicians who “baffle one another with drink, tall stories, and novel deceptions” (354). Joe’s lover, Rosa, paints Joe in a pose “borrowed from a photograph in a book about Harry Houdini” (388), and includes “an image of Harry Houdini, that immigrant boy from Central Europe” in a

²⁴ Vaudeville complements the novel’s defense of mass culture. Sammy’s father, a strongman called the Mighty Molecule, is like Houdini an antecedent to the Escapist. The Mighty Molecule’s training started when he was imprisoned by the Czar “in the same cell as a politically minded circus strong man from Odessa,” hinting at a revolutionary impulse in his vocation (99). The comic-book pitch Sammy delivers of the Escapist’s history is lifted from his father’s old publicity clippings, with its emphasis on “superb physical and mental training” and accrued “ancient wisdom” (121, 99). The first installation of the Escapist’s story is a magic show at the Empire Palace Theater, “the summit and capital of American vaudeville” (356)—where Joe and Sammy see the premiere of Orson Welles’ *Citizen Kane*. In another instance of earlier forms of popular culture inspiring artistry in the novel, Sammy’s lone success as a “serious writer” is a barely fictionalized account of a day with his father, a “miraculous short story [sold] to *Collier’s* ... about a crippled young boy’s visit to a Coney Island steambath with his strong-man father, before the war” (480).

mural for Thomas Kavalier (395). In short, Houdini inspires artistic activity throughout the novel.

Houdini is not a living character in *Kavalier & Clay*, however, only a memory (albeit a “still-fresh” one). His physical absence from the world of the narrative bespeaks the tension *Kavalier & Clay* maintains between valuing fiction’s capacity to enchant and recognizing its limited claims on reality. This tension, which radiates through the narrative, manifests itself in two competing modes of narration, one romantic and one scholarly. The narrative thus encourages immersion and critical distance, illusion and reason. It mimics formally the self-reflexivity of a magic show, as if scientifically presenting its fantasy content. This lens of rational enchantment allows Chabon to embrace the features of escapist entertainment without relinquishing a critical stance.

On one hand is the novel’s intemperate embrace of romance and melodrama. Chabon adopts an omniscient voice, and tends towards stylistic fireworks and grand plotting. For instance, Joe meets Rosa on the anniversary of his arrival in New York, while Sammy finds love atop the Empire State Building after midnight in a lightning storm. Narrative details emphasize symmetry or symbolism. Joe’s unacknowledged son Tommy manifests a variety of his father’s incidental behaviors—a love of magic and comics, an impulse to draw, “a capacity for standing in front of the mirror with a quarter or a book of matches, repeating the same tiny flexings of his fingers over and over again, that surprised even him” (500). Similarly, the inexplicable arrival (and portentous heaviness) of the Golem’s remains in the novel’s closing scenes signals the novel’s fidelity to narrative closure regardless of dramatic contrivance. So also does a pivotal

sequence in which the plot-lines of its two protagonists mirror and refract within a single night. On the eve of personal or romantic happiness, both Joe and Sammy suffer disasters and lose loved ones, and they functionally swap places: Joe abandons the pregnant Rosa and runs away to join the Navy; Sammy abandons his plans to move to Hollywood and instead marries Rosa to support her. These events occur on the night of December 6 and morning of December 7, 1941, thus indexing the crises in Joe and Sammy's lives to a third, monumental event, the bombing of Pearl Harbor and the United States' entry into World War II.

Running contrary to the grand melodrama, another voice sounds throughout *Kavalier & Clay* that is limited in knowledge, archival in method, and scholarly in tone. It proceeds with footnotes, citations, and commentary, adopting a pose of critical detachment. This scholarly voice is pronounced with respect to the art and history of comic books. It gives a brief essayistic interlude on the covers and plots of American comic books circa 1938-39 (Chabon 74-78), while footnotes detail auctions of rare editions (169), note what books Joe Kavalier was illustrating in 1941 (312), amend gaps in Sammy Clay's bibliography (485), and provide a detailed history of superheroes' secret lairs (625). In addition to analyzing early comic strips and Joe's *Citizen Kane*-inspired artistic renaissance (368-370), the narrator also critically evaluates Rosa's comic book scripts, citing Robert C. Harvey's (real) "excellent *The Art of the Comic Book: An Aesthetic History*" (545). He also quotes critics on Kavalier & Clay strips (275), disputes interpretations, and charts aesthetic influences (319). The same limited, critical gaze is turned on the novel's historical content. The narrator cites "fragmentary accounts" of

events and attributes reports to journals, police statements, and financial records. Footnotes gloss characters and events, with biographical notes, historical corrections, editorial comments, and bibliographic details (195, 198, 202, 212). He notes the smudges and redactions on a lost letter to Joe from his mother (325), inserts “[sic]” into memoranda (203) and sources a “secret monograph” on Hardeen Houdini to the private collection of Kenneth Silverman (537). Describing a Greenwich Village party, the narrator quotes from a W.H. Auden letter to Isherwood (228), references *The Sun Also Rises* (229), and documents news coverage of the party, splicing in a block quote from E.J. Kahn’s “Talk of the Town” column in *The New Yorker* (226).

This odd admixture of scholarship and romance closely resembles that which Chabon praises in the ghost fiction of M.R. James—an “at once careful and cavalier” approach to point of view, and the “fitting out his stories with the full apparatus of scholarly research” (*Maps* 129). Even if this “sounds dubiously postmodern,” Chabon insists that it has an intellectual and effectual purpose, both exploring “the wobble, the shimmer of uncertainty that results when quotation marks are placed around the word ‘true,’” and engendering more gripping stories (128). If James bends veracity to the service of thrills, Chabon applies the “shimmer of uncertainty” to critical distance itself, both limiting and enhancing the narrative’s illusions. It is not coincidental that critical interjections mainly address mass cultural and historical material; the elevation of entertainment and the recovery of history are the novel’s primary effects.

A similar logic explains why moments of escapistry within the narrative itself are framed as Houdiniesque magic. Throughout the novel, Joe’s various escapes are presided

over by Bernard Kornblum, a proxy for Houdini.²⁵ When Joe's escape from Prague is stymied by Nazi bureaucracy, he turns to Kornblum "in the desperate expectation that his expertise with jail cells, straitjackets, and iron chests might somehow be extended to unlocking the borders of sovereign nations" (20). That is to say, he hopes that staged escapistry might translate—literally—to political escape. Nor does he hope in vain: Kornblum smuggles Joe out of Prague in costume props from the estate of Houdini (40) and the clothes of a circus giant. Previously, Joe and Thomas nearly drown attempting an ill-considered escapist stunt in the Moldau river, but are saved when Kornblum improbably arrives in time to rescue them. This scene recurs years later when Joe miraculously escapes carbon monoxide poisoning at the Antarctic naval base, and hallucinates the figure of Kornblum carrying him to safety (431). Kornblum's magic finally helps Joe evade a more existential peril; after drifting through a decade of survivor's guilt and addiction, Joe sees his son in a crowd and recalls Kornblum's account of Houdini's *Mirror* handcuff challenge,²⁶ that "only love... could pick a nested pair of steel Bramah locks" (532). Kornblum's story of Houdini gives Joe the means to understand his own emotional condition: "Like Harry Houdini, Joe had failed to get out

²⁵ Like Houdini, Kornblum is Eastern European, Jewish, a magician, and an escape artist. During lessons he recounts to Joe "in apostolic and tedious detail, one of the three golden occasions on which he had been fortunate enough to catch the act of his prophet, Houdini" (532).

²⁶ Cf. Silverman 58-63. The original Bramah lock went unpicked for 60 years, and required 44 hours of continuous effort to eventually solve. The "nested" lock Houdini escaped in an hour was essentially a Bramah lock squared. Hence, many magicians "think Houdini and Hart schemed the event from the beginning, perhaps in cahoots with the *Mirror*, and that Houdini's drawing out of the test to more than an hour was only showmanship" (Silverman 62).

of his self-created trap; but now the love of a boy had sprung him, and drawn him at last, blinking, before the footlights” (536). Soon thereafter, Joe pays a visit to the grave of Houdini, seeking spiritual counsel. In his meditations the figure of Kornblum appears again: “*Lieber Meister...* What should I do?” Joe asks. “For God’s sake,” Kornblum replies, “Go home” (608). By framing its primary instances of escape in terms of stage magic, the narrative both acknowledges and conceals its own contrivances, and also dramatizes its own pursuit of enchantments that truly liberate.

Chabon develops this self-reflexive, critical stance in *Kavalier & Clay* because he seeks not just to expand our conception of entertainment but also to consider the limits of escapistry. Joe Kavalier, as a Holocaust survivor, is the novel’s conscience and litmus test concerning the social, political, or personal efficacy of escapist art. Initially, he hopes that *The Escapist’s* anti-Hitler propaganda will spur America into war, generate money to purchase his brother’s safe passage to the USA, or at least provide emotional release. However, as these avenues prove unsatisfactory, he is plagued with guilt that while his family suffers under Nazism he is “making up a lot of nonsense about someone who could liberate no one and nothing but smudgy-black marks on a piece of cheap paper” (135).

Joe’s initial justification for drawing *The Escapist* is explicitly political. His first comic book cover features the Escapist breaking Adolph Hitler’s jaw, and Joe fantasizes that his art will ripple into reality, that “somehow a copy of this comic book might eventually make its way to Berlin and cross the desk of Hitler himself, that he would look at the painting into which Joe had channeled all his pent-up rage and rub his jaw, and

check with his tongue for a missing tooth” (159).²⁷ In addition to this consoling fantasy, Joe derives pleasure “from administering this brutal beating” that is “intense and durable and strangely redemptive” (159). Although Joe’s employers demand that he conduct his war under a veneer of fictionalized names and places, the boys hope that their “unabashed propaganda” will help spur intervention in Europe. Joe feels that “[if] they could not move Americans to anger against Hitler, then Joe’s existence, the mysterious freedom that had been granted to him and denied to so many others, had no meaning” (172-73). Instead, the cartoon violence of his “funny-book war” escalates into grotesque spectacle, obeying market requirements for innovation and intensification; he soon finds himself obliged to produce each month “more than two hundred pages of art and wholesale imaginary slaughter” and “Breughelian” gore, to glut the appetites of “the remarkably bloodthirsty children of America” (171). Not only does *The Escapist* fail to shift public opinion, appreciation of the strip operates independently of ideological content. Joe learns the limits of artistic propaganda when he raids the office of a Nazi agitator, only to discover that the man has become a devoted fan of *The Escapist*—immersed in the fiction and fundamentally unaffected by its message. It becomes apparent that the “only people winning the war that Joe had been fighting ... were [his employers] Sheldon Anapol and Jack Ashkenazy” (175). The catharsis he enjoys quickly evaporates, and Joe’s appetite for revenge spills out into street fights with random Germans.

²⁷ Taking a page from his character, Chabon also imaginatively responds to harsh historical realities via the arts of deception. He has written a drama series in development for HBO entitled *Hobgoblin*, in which “a motley group of conmen and magicians... use their skills at deception to battle Hitler and his forces during World War II” (Littleton).

While the series' ideological content leads nowhere, Sammy and Joe also consider escapistry's financial promise. Commercial success, after all, promises tangible effects. More pragmatic than his idealistic cousin, Sammy Clay recognizes this immediately, assuring Joe,

“We are going to kill with this. I mean, that's a good thing, kill... we are going to sell a million copies of this thing and make a pile of money, and you are going to be able to take that pile of money and pay what you need to pay to get your mother and father and brother and grandfather out of there and over here, where they will be safe... And in that sense, see, he really *will* be real. The Escapist. He will be doing what we're saying he can do.” (136, italics original)

Art for Sammy can “kill,” rescue, and realize fantasies through the mediating power of money. Later Sammy tries again to persuade his cousin of its tangible power: “Think of what you could do with all the money they're talking about. Think of how many kids you could afford to bring over here. That's something *real*, Joe” (286, italics original). But when Joe heeds Sammy's advice and funds a scheme to ship Jewish children to the States, he merely hastens his brother's death—the ship is torpedoed and all his sponsored children drown. Joe abandons his professional artistry for purely private endeavors, while Sammy settles unhappily into generating grist for the generic mills. The would-be modernist George Deasey leaves Empire Comics and his literary aspirations, finding success instead as a CIA operative. Art money amounts only to money, not any lasting transformations.

Chabon furthermore implies that *The Escapist* is successful in spite of, not because of, its real-world ambitions: the boys enjoy an aesthetic renaissance when they are forced to abandon political messaging. Influenced by *Citizen Kane*, they reinvent *The Escapist* through modernist aesthetics and experimental narrative devices. The narrator summarily dismisses the potential costs of making artistry paramount:

Whether the delightful fruit of this collaboration came at a price; whether the thirty-two extra issues, the two thousand extra pages of Nazi-smashing obviated by Anapol's ban, might somehow, incrementally, have slid America into the war sooner; whether the advantage gained in time would have precipitated an earlier victory; whether that victory coming a day or a week or a month earlier would have sufficed to preserve a dozen or a hundred or a thousand more lives; such questions now can have only an academic poignancy, as both the ghosts and those haunted by them are dead. (370)

These “academic” considerations—each hypothetical diminishing the probability of the one before it—pale next to the “delightful fruit” of the aesthetic pleasures produced. Such questions appear not only unknowable but also ultimately misplaced, in that they demand of literary activity something it isn't suited to deliver. (This is also a primary reason why the novel ridicules Dr. Frederick Wertham's congressional inquest into comic books as depraving young minds with latent homosexuality.) Through Joe and Sammy's unrealized aspirations, *Kavalier & Clay* insists that we revise expectations of literature

that are predicated on its ideological content or cultural prestige and recognize instead the potentially transformative value of immersive experience.²⁸

Rita Felski suggests that the “case against enchantment has been fueled by two main charges: that it deludes and that it disables” (74). What *Kavalier & Clay* implies is that escapism's departure from reality is in fact its strength: to flee reality is “a worthy challenge” which can be temporarily realized by “genuine magic.” Escapist entertainment by definition does not directly attempt to transform reality, but, Chabon insists, such flight can itself be transformative. He develops this point most forcefully near the end of *Kavalier & Clay*, when Joe returns home after years of exile and unearths boxes of old comics he'd saved. The narrator describes the pleasures and the relief they gave Joe in the years after the Holocaust:

Most of all, he loved them for the pictures and stories they contained, the inspirations and lucubrations of five hundred aging boys dreaming as hard as they could for fifteen years, transfiguring their insecurities and delusions, their wishes and their doubts, their public educations and their sexual perversions, into something that only the most purblind of societies would have denied the status of art... Having lost his mother, father, brother, and grandfather, the friends and foes of his youth, his beloved teacher Bernard Kornblum, his city, his history—his

²⁸ Daniel Punday compares the rhetoric of *Kavalier & Clay* to that of contemporary business autobiographies. He argues that, in contrast to other contemporary novels that thematize the production of comics, Chabon downplays twentieth-century anxieties of corporate control and impersonal modes of reproduction, instead favoring a more nineteenth-century bildungsroman mode of personal and economic development. Instead of emphasizing the economic and technological determinants that subjugate the individual to capitalism's dictates, these works suggest an economic ecosystem that holds the promise of change for the visionary individual.

home—the usual charge leveled against comic books, that they offered *merely an easy escape from reality*, seemed to Joe actually to be a powerful argument on their behalf... The escape from reality was, he felt—especially right after the war—a worthy challenge. (575, italics original)

The novel does not present this viewpoint merely as Joe's opinion: his life bears witness to the tangible goods of comic book escapistry. In the years following World War II, comic books had “sustained his sanity” in an Army psychiatric ward and “enabled Joe to fight off ... the craving for morphine” (575). He would remember “for the rest of his life a peaceful half hour spent reading a copy of *Betty and Veronica* that he had found in a service-station rest room,” and how that “primary-colored world of bad gags, heavy ink lines, Shakespearean farce” had caused the pain of his loss to, temporarily, “melt away without him even noticing” (575-6).

That was magic—not the apparent magic of the silk-hatted card-palmer, or the bold, brute trickery of the escape artist, but the genuine magic of art. It was a mark of how fucked-up and broken was the world—the reality—that had swallowed his home and his family that such a feat of escape, by no means easy to pull off, should remain so universally despised. (576, italics original)

This is Chabon's defense of escapistry at its punchiest: not only does it produce “genuine magic,” but suspicion or disdain for such pleasures is a sign of the dysfunctional, genocidal condition of the world.

Properly understood, the magic of art—a term Chabon explicitly extends to commercial, escapist entertainment—takes place in the immersive, pleasurable, and

therapeutic experience of the individual. Even Golem-making, an art literally intended to combat oppression, is for Chabon personal and creative prior to its social or political dimensions. Like illusionism, it is “the expression of a yearning that a few magic words and an artful hand might produce something . . . exempt from the crushing strictures, from the ills, cruelties, and inevitable failures of the greater Creation” (582). The individually therapeutic emphasis also shapes Joe Kavalier’s *The Golem*, his most immediate and artistically sophisticated confrontation of the horrors of the Holocaust. Chute argues that it is Joe’s most important work, realizing the promise of yoking mass-market forms to aesthetic innovation and historical confrontation. What this ignores, however, is that it can be all these things only for Joe: with over 2200 pages of textless images and an accompanying script in German, it is practically unpublishable. Moreover, the more fully it works therapeutically for Joe, the less willing he feels ever “to expose what had become the secret record of his mourning, of his guilt and retribution” (579). Its private function eclipses all other possible uses.

Recuperative Magic, Nostalgia, and the Time of Escapistry

It seems paradoxical, given Chabon’s definition of entertainment as “fruitful exchange, reciprocal substance . . . a slender span of bilateral attention” (*Maps* 17), that Joe Kavalier’s masterpiece appears destined to remain private. But escapistry is limned throughout the novel with melancholy concerning the impossibility of its realization. Golem-making, for instance, was “the voicing of a vain wish, when you got down to it, to escape. To slip, like the Escapist, free of the entangling chain of reality and the

straitjacket of physical laws” (*Kavalier & Clay* 582). Houdini likewise was animated “only by this same desire, never fulfilled: truly to escape, if only for one instant; to poke his head through the borders of this world, with its harsh physics, into the mysterious spirit world that lay beyond” (582). (Chabon thus reads Houdini’s airplane flying and obsession with the spirit world not, as in *Ragtime*, as distractions from his implicitly revolutionary art but as congruent signs of the existential longing it expresses.) In this light, Houdini’s escapes pantomime not material liberation but rather its existential impossibility, and incite desires less revolutionary than unrealizable. Even as characters enjoy the benefits of escapistry, *Kavalier & Clay* demonstrates escapistry’s inability to generate lasting transformations or true escape. Instead, magic in *Kavalier & Clay* is above all temporary, a momentary transformation.

These limits are felt in the way that, in the novel, magic promises two different (if not necessarily contradictory) things. One is escape from the bounds of the ordinary or probable; another is recovery of that which has been lost. When a mishap causes Joe to lose unopened and unread the last letter he would ever receive from his mother, we are told that he would wonder about its contents many years later:

It was at these times that he began to understand, after all those years of study and performance ... the nature of magic. The magician seemed to promise that something torn to bits might be mended without a seam, that what had vanished might reappear, that a scattered handful of doves or dust might be reunited by a word, that a paper rose consumed by fire could be made to bloom from a pile of ash. But everyone knew that it was only an illusion. The true magic of this broken

world lay in the ability of the things it contained to vanish, to become so thoroughly lost, that they might never have existed in the first place. (339)

Just as escapistry is “a vain wish, never fulfilled” to break the chains of reality, so also does *Kavalier & Clay* set its narrative magic against the “true” (and permanent) “magic of this broken world.” As much as it thematizes escapistry, the novel ultimately seeks the magical recovery of vanished things—lives, texts, and artifacts. While all historical fiction could be said to perform recuperative magic by animating that which is past, *Kavalier & Clay* grounds hope and narrative resolution on such recovery.

Susan Stewart argues that “we need and desire souvenirs of . . . events whose materiality has escaped us, events that thereby exist only through the invention of narrative” (135). But while the souvenir is a “magical object” in that it conjures up the past in the present, it represents “a kind of failed magic” because “the place of origin must remain unavailable in order for desire to be generated” (Stewart 151). In other words, the longing that magic addresses is predicated on the impossibility of its realization. It is according to what Stewart calls “the necessarily insatiable demands of nostalgia” that we can understand *Kavalier & Clay*’s preoccupation with relics—the forgotten comics, misplaced letters, records and minutiae of a “golden age” in New York City. Mrs. Kavalier’s lost letter to Joe is a case in point. The narrative presents a transcribed and annotated copy—with censored words blacked out, editorial footnotes, and an emendation “[? smudged]” calling attention to its materiality—of the vanished object whose irretrievability forces Joe to reflect darkly on the true nature of magic. The narrator similarly traces the subsequent history and present-day whereabouts of many

other printed and penned artifacts from the narrative. For instance, Joe first spies Rosa when she is sleeping naked and, for three dollars, produces a drawing of the scene for his friend Julie Glovsky.²⁹ The narrator notes that, at Glovsky's death "fifty-three years later ... the drawing of Rosa Saks naked and asleep was found among his effects, in a Barracini's candy box ... and was erroneously exhibited, in a retrospective at the Cartoon Art Museum in San Francisco, as the work of the young Julius Glovsky" (117). This scene, with its historical perspective, attention to affective objects, and interpretive work, forms a template for subsequent moments of textual recovery.³⁰ Broadly concerned with the production and consumption of literature, *Kavalier & Clay* is particularly invested in the ways in which textual objects can preserve human feeling and memory.

The novel's central preoccupations of escapistry, recovered texts, and nostalgia converge in the drawing of Houdini that Thomas Kavalier gives Joe when he left Prague. A page from his Houdini libretto, it features the magician "in a dinner jacket, hurtling from a crooked airplane in company with a parachute, two chairs, a table, and a tea set... The magician had a smile on his face as he poured tea for the parachute. He seemed to think he had all the time in the world" (30). Joe opens the drawing upon his improbable

²⁹ Joe's drawing of Rosa is another instance in the novel where "selling out"—Joe selling his art and passions to satisfy audience lasciviousness—does not diminish the aesthetic worth or longevity of the artwork.

³⁰ A program from Joe's Amazing Cavalieri magic show, journal entries, military and court transcripts all appear in the text. Comics from 1939 are opened in the present, as "today there wafts an inevitable flea-market smell of rot and nostalgia" from inside their covers (75). George Deasey's hardbound collection of all his pulp writing "was lost, and widely considered apocryphal, until 1995, when one of its volumes, *Racy Attorney #23*, turned up at an IKEA store in Elizabeth, New Jersey... It is signed by the author and bears the probably spurious but fascinating inscription *To my pal Dick Nixon*" (225).

arrival in America, and it crystallizes the motif of escapist magic wishfully resolving impossible difficulties. The sketch subsequently becomes a lost object magically recovered, in a brief coda to Joe's exile in Antarctica during WWII. The narrative leaps from 1944 to August 1977, when a huge chunk of an ice shelf splits off into the sea, carrying with it the German exploration hut where Joe had sheltered. This puts an end to a tourist trek, in which guided tours would "respectfully examine" the relics of an earlier era:

They might reflect on the endurance of this monument to a failure, or on the dignity and poignance that time can bring to human detritus, or they might merely wonder if the peas and gooseberries in the neat rows of cans on the shelves were still edible, and how they might taste. A few would linger a moment longer, puzzling over an enigmatic drawing that lay on the workbench, done in colored pencil, frozen solid and somewhat the worse from long-ago folding and refolding. Clearly the work of a child, it appeared to show a man in a dinner jacket falling from the belly of an airplane... as if oblivious of his predicament, or as if he thought he had all the time in the world before he would hit the ground. (468)

This passage performs a complex counterpoint of distancing and recovery, setting the reader's position of insight against the tourists' limited perspective and curiosity. Doubly removed from the world of the narrative and of the reader, the passage heightens the emotional weight of the sketch's appearance as insuperable distances (child from drawing, drawing from present) are temporarily overcome. Thomas's drawing, transmuting desperation into artistry through childlike fantasy, underscores the essential

function of magic within *Kavalier & Clay*—staging a longing for escape that finally provides the solace of return.

It is similarly indicative of the novel's nostalgic imagination that perhaps the purest example of individual liberation from social confines—Sammy's first sexual encounter with another man (an act punished as brutally by authorities in 1941 Long Island as in Nazi Germany)—occurs at the defunct grounds of the 1939 World's Fair. Sammy has a button souvenir from the General Motors pavilion that declares, "I HAVE SEEN THE FUTURE" (375), but that future feels irrevocably lost:

It made [Sammy's] heart ache to look around the vast expanse of the fairground that, not very long ago, had swarmed with flags and women's hats and people being whizzed around in jitneys, and see only a vista of mud and tarpaulins and blowing newspaper... It made him sad, not because he saw some instructive allegory or harsh sermon on the vanity of all human hopes and utopian imaginings in this translation of a bright summer dream into an immense mud puddle freezing over at the end of a September afternoon... but because he had so loved the Fair, and seeing it this way, he felt in his heart what he had known all along, that, like childhood, the fair was over, and he would never be able to visit again. (376-77)

Sammy's experience of this moment is one of profound nostalgia, but this nostalgia is presented as a better, more human alternative to critical exegesis or ironic commentary on "the vanity of all human hopes and utopian imaginings." Rather, Sammy immerses himself in this nostalgic venture and thereby realizes the freedom to love—in the "General Motors' Futurama," no less, "quite literally the *dernier cri* of the art and ancient

principles of clockwork machinery in the final ticking moments of the computerless world” (378). Like Houdini and vaudeville, this utopian (and commercial) place of escape is already consigned to the past, its recovery an imaginative and private illusion.

Sammy’s romance in the General Motors’ Futurama articulates how *Kavalier & Clay*’s relationship to its history differs from that of both *Ragtime* and *Carter Beats the Devil*. Although it shares aspects of Doctorow’s elegiac stance and Gold’s evasions regarding the failures of Houdini’s escapistry, *Kavalier & Clay* insists upon the hopeful and momentarily transformative potential of nostalgia. The magic of escapistry in *Kavalier & Clay* grades into a magic of nostalgic recovery.³¹ This tendency could be seen as a shortcoming of the novel’s Houdinism, imaginative liberation reduced to longing for a past that never was. As Kornblum admonishes young Josef Kavalier, “Never worry about what you are escaping *from* ... Reserve your anxieties for what you are escaping *to*” (37). In a sense, this dictum encapsulates Doctorow’s critique of Houdini (and critiques Gold’s use of the magician in *Carter Beats the Devil*): in embracing flight, one must not be heedless of direction and arrival. What Chabon insists upon in *Kavalier & Clay*, however, is the potential of nostalgia itself. Nostalgic longing need not be delusional or pathological, but can be seen instead as imaginatively generative or utopian: recall once more Jameson’s account of how “even the most ideologically compromised forms of longing express in attenuated fashion a genuine human need” and are thus

³¹ “I suffer intensely from bouts, at times almost disabling, of a limitless, all-encompassing nostalgia, extending well back into the years before I was born,” Chabon confesses (*Maps* 135). He suggests that, manipulations of the nostalgia industry notwithstanding, there’s nothing particularly unhealthy or abnormal about this disposition.

implicitly “negative and critical of the [existing] social order” (qtd. in Su, *Ethics* 3).

Nostalgia thus “encourages an imaginative exploration of how present systems of social relations fail to address human needs,” John J. Su argues, while “the specific objects of nostalgia ... represent efforts to articulate alternatives” (5). The broader implication of Kornblum’s advice to Joe, and thus of *Kavalier & Clay*’s escapistry, is that we ought to suspend the diagnosis of nostalgia as mere flight from reality in order to see it as an expression (and thus nascent realization) of hope for some thing that does not yet exist.³²

This utopian nostalgia marks the convergence in *Kavalier & Clay* of magic and the rehabilitation of entertainment, and it elucidates Chabon’s use of Houdini. What *Kavalier & Clay* develops is less a longing to return to earlier forms—be they vaudeville, stage magic, Houdini’s escapistry, comics, radio—than an attempt, through a historical exploration of those forms, to imagine what popular, aesthetically innovative, therapeutic art might look like. The novel avoids irresponsible or debilitating forms of nostalgia through a close engagement with history and material objects. In keeping with the critical component of its illusionism, the narrative itself calls attention to nostalgia’s affinities for disavowal: “Every golden age is as much a matter of disregard as of felicity,” the narrator

³² I will return in my conclusion to the thought of Ernst Bloch, whose conception of history as “a repository of possibilities that are living options for future action” underwrites this understanding of nostalgia. Bloch calls for a “three-dimensional temporality [that] must be grasped and activated by an anticipatory consciousness that at once perceives the unrealized emancipatory potential in the past, the latencies and tendencies of the present, and the realizable hopes of the future” (Kellner 2). Hence Helmut Illbruck turns to Bloch in his apologia for nostalgia, arguing that we must “do hermeneutic justice to even those ‘real-ciphers in the world’ which signify not a ‘where from’ (woher) but a ‘where to’ (wohin), a directionality and end as an ‘origin’ ... an origin still essentially unrealized in itself, [which] first enters reality with this ultimum” (Illbruck 234). Not where you are escaping from, but what you are escaping to.

declares (in a section entitled “The Golden Age”). This is to explain why Joe never opened the last letter his mother sent him (327), but the narrator suggests that it is the general condition of 1941 New York. While “the rest of the world was busy feeding itself, country by country, to the furnace... the general mentality of the New Yorker was not one of siege, panic, or grim resignation to fate but rather the toe-wiggling, tea-sipping contentment of a woman curled on a sofa, reading in front of a fire with cold rain rattling against the windows” (340). The passage establishes a direct relation between the “furnace” engulfing the world and the cozy enjoyment of the reader “in front of a fire.” Such reading is marked not as immersion that transcends reality (as when Joe temporarily escapes his grief in *Betty and Veronica*) but by an indulgent detachment from reality. *Kavalier & Clay* staves off such disengagement by illuminating both the enchantments and the limits of escapistry, and by continually calling the reader’s attention to the prevailing storm and the fire’s fuel.

Fittingly, the narrative both originates from and resolves with an act of recovery. The restoration of Joe to his proper place as Rosa’s spouse and Tommy’s father takes place in the family garage, as Tommy rummages through old boxes: “With the precision of an archaeologist, mindful that he would have to put everything back just as he had found it, [Tommy] prized apart the layers, one by one, inventorying the chance survivals of his prehistory” (626). What he discovers are synecdoches for *Kavalier & Clay*’s narrative: old comics, news clippings and photos of the Mighty Molecule, Joe’s initial Golem-Superman drawing, a ticket stub from *Citizen Kane*, *Kavalier & Clay* stationary, a photo from Tracy Bacon to Sammy, and photo booth shots of young Joe and Rosa.

Through these souvenirs Tommy understands, in a flash, his own history and future—that Joe is his father and his parents are in love. These remainders are the lifeblood of the narrative, and their recuperation its primary magic. Thus *Kavalier & Clay* advances and resolves in a continually backward-reaching operation of recovery and excavation; the novel's final gesture towards a future (a Kavalier & Clay address card that Sammy leaves for Joe) looks to a past that has not yet been fully realized.

The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay thus turns to Houdini's escapistry, vaudeville art, magic, and comic books—and adopts the narrative forms of escapistry and rational enchantment—not as a flight from present realities but in the spirit of Ernst Bloch's notion of the “Not-Yet-Conscious” contained in ideology, pointing towards “real possibilities for social development and real potentials for human liberation” (Kellner 5). If this connotes an understanding of literature's function and value that moves away from critical suspicion and towards fantasy and nostalgic longing, the novel insists that such a venture need not forsake critique. Instead, as Paul Ricoeur argued, “there is a third term, and a third course which eschews both credulity and mere doubt: that is hope” (Illbruck 22). *Kavalier & Clay*'s nostalgic escapistry pursues this hope, grounded in a positive account of what popular art might be. But the hope of illusionism is a paradoxical sort, founded on momentary transformation, illusory restoration, action that is inevitably incomplete. The residue of such magic can last only in the imagination of the individual consumer, never materially. The Houdiniesque dream of the artist carrying his transformational or liberatory capacities into reality is itself a nourishing fantasy rather than a promise to be attained.

CONCLUSION: Magic, Hope, and the Event of Art

In *The Future of Nostalgia*, Svetlana Boym distinguishes between “restorative” and “reflective” nostalgia. The former, she argues, guards the absolute truth of a specific past (such as a national myth or religious tradition), whereas the latter doubts the desirability of any specific return, dealing instead in melancholic, individual longing (Boym 49-51). Reflective nostalgia grows out of dissatisfaction with the present, but rather than idealizing a mythic past it is “ironic, inconclusive, and fragmentary” (50).¹ While a case could be made that reflective nostalgia is latent in the literary recovery of historical illusionism, I contend that the resolution of *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay* points towards a form of nostalgia that is anticipatory rather than reactionary. It is grounded, that is, not in melancholy but in hope.

Just as a magic trick oscillates between the exposure of deception and the assertion of its reality, each chapter in this study has wavered between critique and fantasy. These terms are generally taken to describe antithetical relations to reality: critique seeks to uncover and act upon reality, whereas fantasy constitutes a flight from it. However, this opposition—the notion that illusions must either enlighten or dupe, empower or manipulate—proves to be inadequate for describing the work literary illusionism performs. Hope emerges as a third term, one that necessarily remains grounded in the world as it is yet imagines what it could be or become. This is the “anticipatory” dimension that Ernst Bloch argues is present in ideology and cultural

¹Boym remains critical of reflective nostalgia too, which she believes can become pathological when people attempt to realize it; shared longings suddenly take on divisively different objects (53).

artifacts, and which critique properly practiced must discover: the “Not-Yet-Conscious” of “unrealized dreams, lost possibilities, abortive hopes—that can be resurrected and enliven and realized in our current situation [or] ... future development” (qtd. in Kellner 4). This anticipatory dimension requires the imagination and provisional belief that magic, in conjuring enchantment, performs. Moreover, I have argued, illusionism in its historical and discursive dimensions constitutes a rich source of this unrealized possibility.

As the turn from critique is itself faulted for being unable to articulate a clear direction or positive end, efforts to describe the function of literature in the present increasingly have recourse to the anticipatory dimension of literature. Surveying recent criticism, Mathias Nilges argues that it shares a concept of “literariness ... [as] deeply connected to literature’s ability to generate a new vocabulary, new forms of thought, and new modes of knowledge via which we cannot only come to terms with the present ... but with which we can also think and move beyond it” (192).² Bruno Latour argues that we must therefore take up “composition,” the work of looking towards a future which “has never been contemplated face to face, since it has always been the future of someone fleeing their past looking *backward*, not *forward*” (“Attempt,” 486). The reflexive modernity of literature, Mark McGurl argues, while “[o]riented ... primarily toward the past, ... allows us to reconfigure both our conception of the future and our relationship to that future, to move away from a position of automatic critique to a position as interested in the conservation and value of institutions as in their limitations” (“Ordinary Doom”

² Nilges is completing a monograph entitled *Nostalgia for the Future: The Time of the Contemporary American Novel*.

343-344). In praising literature's ability to impart "cartographies of the unreal world," Christopher Castiglia argues for hope as the term that must supplement critique: it signals that idealism must be risked "as a necessary companion" to critique, venturing to dream of something new.³ In these accounts, hope conveys the notion that what literature offers isn't necessarily an immediate material intervention into present reality but rather a momentary transformation of it, a glimpse of what it could become.

While *Kavalier & Clay* most clearly exemplifies this anticipatory dimension of historical illusionism, hope is present in all the literary enchantments I have considered: in *The Prestige* and *Blood Meridian*, in the way aesthetic illusions transcend the conditions of their production; in *Mr. Vertigo* and *In the Lake of the Woods*, in the way imagination can disrupt and expand individual and social boundaries; in *Carter Beats the Devil* and *Kavalier & Clay*, in the psychic consolations magic and escapistry offer. These works are bound together not just by their use of historical forms of illusionism but by their efforts to recover its fictional possibilities.⁴

Hence magic (staged and literary) is not a flight from the real but a momentary transformation that illuminates it. This understanding of enchantment is the focus of

³ Castiglia's *The Practices of Hope* is forthcoming from NYU Press; the quotes here are transcribed from a talk he gave at the Dartmouth Futures of American Studies Institute, 17 June 2013.

⁴ A question that remains unanswered in my project is, as Peter Thompson writes in *The Privatization of Hope and the Crisis of Negation*, "whether hope can still exist in anything other than an atomized, desocialized, and privatized form" (5). As I have shown, the hopeful aspects of magic in these works tend to coalesce in terms of individual expression, therapy, or liberation. Moreover, illusionism's apparent affinities with a defense of white masculine authority remains unresolved.

Steven Millhauser's "The Barnum Museum," which imagines Barnum's American Museum as extant and thriving. The narrator describes how the Museum's halls of wonder are interspersed with unfinished or mundanely cluttered rooms. At first they appear to be "errors or oversights ... awaiting renovation," but, he suggests, rightly understood they are neither mistakes nor simply a break from "the oppression of astonishment" (Millhauser 229). Instead, "[t]hese everyday images, when we come upon them suddenly among the marvels of the Barnum Museum, startle us with their strangeness before settling to rest. In this sense the plain rooms do not interrupt the halls of wonder; they themselves are those halls" (229). Because it imparts this momentary immediacy of vision, he argues, the Museum is not simply "a form of escape [from] ... the realm of sunlight and death" (233). Even if it does offer freedom and "relief from suffering and sorrow,"

[i]n the branching halls of the Barnum Museum we are never forgetful of the ordinary world, for it is precisely our awareness of that world which permits us to enjoy the wonders of the halls. Indeed I would argue that we are most sharply aware of our town when we leave it to enter the Barnum Museum; without our museum, we would pass through life as in a daze or dream. (233-234)

"The Barnum Museum" describes a relationship between reality and enchantment that is complementary rather than antagonistic.

In this light, the fleetingness of magic can be understood not as a shortcoming but as a necessity. A recurring theme throughout this study is that the duration of enchantment is momentary, its disruptions and transformations only temporary. Were it

otherwise, however, enchantment would not illuminate or revitalize reality but rather replace it. It is the momentary character of illusionism that distinguishes it from fantasy and stands it in an anticipatory relation to reality rather than an immediate one. The provisional transformation of reality, Derek Attridge argues, is the work of literature: “the complex of habits, associations, proclivities, norms, and so on that gives us, day by day, the world we live in encounters something, however slight, that can’t be apprehended without some adjustment, some re-evaluation, some clarification” (332). The affective power of fiction resides in the power of language to perform things or states, not to actually do them. As in a magic show, the fabric of reality is left unchanged, but it has been experienced as transformed. Hence, Attridge suggests, we should speak not of the “work of art” but rather the “event” of art.

 Magic tricks by nature are momentary events. They bespeak their own impossibility even as they apparently accomplish wonders, testifying to the vitality of the creative imagination. Literary illusionism similarly admits the limited claims fiction can make on reality, yet dramatizes the vitality of those claims. Tropes of illusionism demonstrate the inextricability of art and artifice, construction and deception. They point to the ways in which illusion surrounds us, to its operations and effects. As Michael Taussig cautions, we must not “labor under the illusion of eliminating trickery on the assumption that there is some world out there beyond and bereft of trickery” (Taussig 278).

The ephemeral instant of illusionism remains that of art. I turn in closing to Frederic Jameson, who provides a magisterial description of the sufficiency of this artistic moment:

The aestheticians return again and again to the problem of the extra-artistic and referential dimensions of art, in its shabby ideological messages and its altogether insufficient and rather pitiful calls to this or that action, this or that indignation or 'call to arms' ... this or that coming to consciousness. But the moment of the aesthetic is not that call but rather its reminder that all those impulses exist: the revolutionary Utopian one full as much as the immense disgust with human evil, Brecht's 'temptation of the good,' the will to escape and to be free, the delight in craftsmanship and production, the implacably satiric, unremittingly skeptical gaze. Art has no function but to reawaken all those differences at once in an ephemeral instant; and the historical novel no function save to resurrect for one more brief moment their multitudinous coexistence in History itself. After that, the reader sinks back into the current situation, which may or may not have some similarity to what has just been glimpsed. (*Antinomies* 312)

Illusionist fiction dramatizes this ephemeral instant, historically and in the present. In so doing, it also conjures a future.

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EDUCATION

Boston University, PhD in English (September 2015)
 Dissertation: *Novel Deceptions: Historical Illusionism in Contemporary American Fiction*
 Adviser: John T. Matthews

Boston University, MA in English, *summa cum laude* (2007)

Gonzaga University, BA in English and Philosophy, *summa cum laude* (2005)

PUBLICATIONS

“Some degenerate entrepreneur fleeing from a medicine show’: Judge Holden in the Age of P.T. Barnum.” *The Cormac McCarthy Journal* 10.1 (2012): 27-45. Reprinted in *They Rode On: Blood Meridian and the Tragedy of the American West*. Ed. Rick Wallach. *The Cormac McCarthy Society* 2013.

Lydia Cooper, *No More Heroes: Narrative Perspective and Morality in Cormac McCarthy* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, 2011), reviewed in *The Cormac McCarthy Journal* 111 (2013): 105-108.

HONORS, GRANTS, AND FELLOWSHIPS

Graduate Writing Fellowship, Boston University (2011-2014)
Travel Grant for Dartmouth Futures of American Studies Institute (2013)
Edward Wagenknecht Dissertation Fellowship, Boston University (2013)
Alice M. Brennan Humanities Award, Boston University Center for the Humanities (2012)
Angela J. and James J. Rallis Memorial Award, BU Center for the Humanities (2012)
Graduate School of Arts and Sciences Teaching Fellowship, Boston University (2007-2011)
English Graduate Fellowship, Boston University (2006-2007)
Honors Fellow, Intercollegiate Studies Institute (2005)

CONFERENCE PRESENTATIONS

Cormac McCarthy's P.T. Barnum Style

- *Harvard University Americanist Colloquium, Cambridge, MA, February 2014*

Stage Magic in Contemporary American Fiction

- *Dartmouth Futures of American Studies Institute, Hanover, NH, June 2013.*

"Like some degenerate entrepreneur fleeing from a medicine show": *Blood Meridian's* Judge Holden in the Age of P.T. Barnum

- *American Literature Association 22nd Annual Conference, Boston, MA, May 2011.*

"I notice the slip of my pen": *Lolita* and Narrative Authenticity

- *Tufts University English Graduate Conference, Somerville, MA, October 2010.*

Blake and Martin Delany's Transnational Archaeology

- *Northeast Modern Language Association Convention, Montreal, QUE, April 2010*

Practical Sincerity in Conrad's Political Novels

- *Modernist Studies Association Convention, Montreal, QUE, November 2009*

The Films of the Coens and the Faulknerian Unmasking of Genre

- *Northeast Modern Language Association Convention, Boston, MA, February 2009.*

TEACHING EXPERIENCE

Boston University, courses designed and taught:

Department of English

Literary Creations and Confessions, Spring 2011

What Now? Readings in Modern Literature, Fall 2010

Survey in Fiction: Travel and Home, Spring 2010

Survey in Fiction: Cultural Landscapes, Fall 2009

Writing Program

Identity and Agency in Contemporary Fiction, Spring 2014

Race and Identity in Contemporary Genre Fiction, Fall 2013

Understanding Genres, Fall 2012

The Historical Novel and Postmodernism, Spring 2012

The Fiction of Tim O'Brien, Fall 2011

Novel Visions of America, Spring 2009

Forging an American Identity, Fall 2008

Boston University, courses assisted:

History of Global Cinema II; Professor Roy Grundmann, Spring 2015
 Literature and the Art of Film; Professor Lee Monk, Fall 2007, Spring 2008

Harvard University, courses assisted:

Shakespeare: The Early Plays and Shakespeare: The Later Plays; Professor Marjorie Garber, Summer 2013
Porgy and Bess: Performance and Contexts; Professor Marjorie Garber, Spring 2011, Fall 2012
 Shakespeare and Modern Culture; Professor Marjorie Garber, Spring 2012

Suffolk University, courses taught:

American Literature since 1865, Fall 2014
 Developmental English, Fall 2014, Spring 2015

EMPLOYMENT

Instructor for Elements of College Writing, Summer Program for High School Students at Northeastern University, Boston, MA, 2015-present
Instructor of English, Suffolk University, Boston, MA, 2014-present
Professional Writing Tutor, Suffolk University Center for Learning and Academic Success, Boston, MA, 2010-present
Teaching Fellow, Harvard University Extension School, Cambridge, MA, 2011-2012
Writing Program Tutor, Boston University, Boston, MA, 2008-2010
Arts Elective Leader, Great Books Summer Program, Amherst, MA, 2009-2010
Instructor of English, Club Negubide y Olalde, Miralvent Summer Program, Spain, 2007

RESEARCH ASSISTANTSHIPS AND PROFESSIONAL SERVICE

Manuscript Reviewer, *Cormac McCarthy Journal*, Penn State UP, 2014-present
Research Assistant for Prof. Gene Andrew Jarrett, Boston University, 2012-2013
Graduate Representative, Boston University Department of English, 2010-2011

TEACHING AREAS

Nineteenth and Twentieth Century American Literature; academic writing; the history of the novel; contemporary fiction; genre fiction; American literature and culture since 1900; transnational literature and theory; film; digital humanities; literature and technology.

LANGUAGES

French (intermediate proficiency)

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