

1-1-2017

# (an) Unsettled Commons: Narrative And Trauma After 9/11

Chinmayi Kattemalavadi  
*Wayne State University,*

Follow this and additional works at: [https://digitalcommons.wayne.edu/oa\\_dissertations](https://digitalcommons.wayne.edu/oa_dissertations)

 Part of the [American Literature Commons](#), and the [Comparative Literature Commons](#)

---

## Recommended Citation

Kattemalavadi, Chinmayi, "(an) Unsettled Commons: Narrative And Trauma After 9/11" (2017). *Wayne State University Dissertations*. 1821.

[https://digitalcommons.wayne.edu/oa\\_dissertations/1821](https://digitalcommons.wayne.edu/oa_dissertations/1821)

This Open Access Dissertation is brought to you for free and open access by DigitalCommons@WayneState. It has been accepted for inclusion in Wayne State University Dissertations by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@WayneState.

**(AN) UNSETTLED COMMONS:  
NARRATIVE AND TRAUMA AFTER 9/11**

by

**CHINMAYI KATTEMALAVADI**

**DISSERTATION**

Submitted to the Graduate School

of Wayne State University,

Detroit, Michigan

in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

**DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY**

2017

MAJOR: ENGLISH

Approved By:

\_\_\_\_\_  
Advisor

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

My sincerest thanks to all the wonderful teachers I have had the privilege of knowing and learning from. For lack of space, I will specifically mention four of those teachers here: Jonathan, thank you so much for helping me to think things through in this dissertation and so many other subjects we ended up discussing through the process. I cannot say enough about your patience with me. renée, Sarika, and Prof. Pease – your advise and support have been indispensable through this project.

Mom, dad, you set me on this path by sharing the joys of reading. My sisters, Chetana and Chitkala, thank you for all the nights sharing stories and giggling. Look where you guys got me.

So many friends have supported me through this journey. Any list that I begin will inevitably leave out too many.

Achintya and Amartya, your sense of humor and enthusiasm kept me going when I thought I would not be able to continue. I love you guys so much.

Prashant, what can I say? You are everything to me. Love you!

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acknowledgements .....	ii
Introduction Trauma, Narration, and (an) Unsettled Commons .....	1
Chapter 1 Cricket, Family, and 9/11: Joseph O'Neill's <i>Netherland</i> .....	16
New York and Memory .....	16
New York, 9/11, and Culture .....	19
Hans, Cricket, and Becoming American .....	27
Chuck, Cricket and America .....	42
Rachel and Post-9/11 Angst .....	58
Chapter 2 Empathic Unsettlement Through Relationality: Díaz's <i>Oscar Wao</i> .....	66
Díaz and Historiography .....	71
Empathic Unsettlement .....	75
Relationality .....	78
A Telling Silence: Fukú and Zafa .....	83
Fukú in Relation .....	87
Knowing/Not Knowing .....	91
Comprehension/Incomprehensibility .....	100
Chapter 3 Unsettled Commons and Narration: <i>Open City</i> and <i>Goon Squad</i> .....	114
Unsettlement and (re)collecting .....	121
The wound and the story .....	133
Belated address and the unclaimed experience .....	145
Conclusion Potential for (an) Unsettled Commons .....	160
References .....	165
Abstract.....	169
Autobiographical Statement.....	170

## INTRODUCTION TRAUMA, NARRATION, AND (AN) UNSETTLED COMMONS

This dissertation examines fictional responses to the events of September 11, 2001. It argues for the importance of one kind of fictional response, one which focuses on representing the feeling of "unsettledness" that can be one effect of trauma, with the aim of making that unsettledness itself a locus of a shared common experience. I posit that in articulating the events of 9/11 in the context of, in relation to, and as one in a series of traumas, violences, and histories, these narratives make the unsettlements shareable. Focusing on four works of fiction that were published after 9/11 – Joseph O'Neill's *Netherland*, Junot Díaz's *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* (*Oscar Wao*), Teju Cole's *Open City*, and Jennifer Egan's *A Visit From the Goon Squad* (*Goon Squad*) – I explore representations of the effects of and the attempts to cope with traumatic experiences including 9/11 itself.

I understand trauma here as those extreme and disorienting experiences which elude comprehension or conscious processing; traumas, as Cathy Caruth puts it, entail a "breach in the mind's experience of time, self, and the world" (Caruth 4). They are elusive and unsettling because they are unrepresentable; they do not fit in with existing narratives and therefore, as Dominick La Capra observes, a traumatic experience "disarticulates the self and creates holes in existence" (La Capra 41). Narratives of trauma are often attempts at articulating unsettling experiences both in terms of giving voice to the experience itself, that

---

<sup>1</sup> Caruth, Cathy. *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*. Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins UP, 1996.

<sup>2</sup> La Capra, Dominick. *Writing History, Writing Trauma*. Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins UP, 2001.

is finding ways to verbalize and cover over the “holes in existence,” and in terms of relating it to other experiences of unsettledness. Articulation here is used first in the sense of verbalizing, of breaking silences that envelop experiences of trauma. As Stuart Hall has stated, “to articulate” is primarily understood as, “to utter, to speak forth, to be articulate. It carries that sense of languageing, of expressing, etc.”<sup>3</sup> Articulation is also considered in its other sense of joining, “the form of the connection that can make a unity of two different elements, under certain conditions, that is, a linkage which is not necessary, determined, absolute and essential for all time” (Hall 141). Articulating unsettlements does not dispel them but affords ways to consciously process them. By connecting a trauma to the histories that produce it, and other, similar or analogous traumas, such articulations make the trauma something shared, and shareable and as such engender a commons.

The novels explored in my dissertation give voice to the traumatic unsettlements produced by the events of 9/11<sup>4</sup>. Historical moments such as 9/11 or the war that followed are experienced in public because they are played out in a visible manner or are shared by multiple people simultaneously. For instance, *Netherland* offers a first person narrative of being in New York City on 9/11 and

---

<sup>3</sup> Hall Stuart. “On Postmodernism and Articulation.” *Stuart Hall: Critical Dialogs in Cultural Studies*. Routledge, 1996.

<sup>4</sup> In her 2014 book *The 9/11 Novel: Trauma, Politics and Identity*, Arin Keeble examines the conflictedness of novelistic response to 9/11. She sees conflictedness as mapped through “continuity” and “discontinuity.” Her book examines the tensions and conflictedness in their style, politics, and agendas. In one of her chapters she examines *Netherland*, a work examined in this project as well, as an intersection of public and private traumas. Marriage and domesticity are a starting point of the novel to present two sides of a political polemic and goes on to explore how it represents otherness, how it distinguishes between personal and collective trauma, and how to think about 9/11, is it an epochal moment or does it have a past, present, and future.

the displacements that the characters experience in common. Instances of domestic abuse and racism tend to be experienced more personally and privately. *Goon Squad* examines how the effects of personal traumas and the symptoms associated with them resurface in the aftermath of 9/11. Traumas experienced as a group are frequently passed on through generations. The various kinds of trauma – personal, public, or inherited traumas – are not mutually exclusive. *Oscar Wao* and *Open City* explore how these various types of trauma overlap and how they are frequently experienced in tandem and the ways in which previous traumas are articulated in the context of 9/11.

The reading of the narratives becomes a shared or common experience. Because unsettlement is at the core of traumatic experiences, narratives of trauma generate what I want to call an unsettled commons. While these narratives sometimes find a way to respond to traumatic experiences by making sense of them, I do not think this is their primary aim or most interesting function. More compelling, and more central to the narrative and formal strategies at work in these novels, I argue, is the effort to find ways of transition into the condition of unsettlement by making it a shared experience. The function of the narrative – or indeed of the novel itself in my examples – is to provide the scene for this unsettledness to be shared.

The narratives examined here are involved in the articulations of diverse groups of people. As I read them, they seek to engender empathy in the unsettled commons by articulating stories across spatial and temporal boundaries. Empathy – in the sense of feeling with, sharing a feeling – does not erase the unsettlement but is a necessary condition in order to maintain an open circuit of possible articulations in the future that defy closure or harmony.

Empathy in the unsettled commons, I argue here, is key to work through and move forward from the experience of trauma that can then conceive of possibilities for the future. In making these unsettlements sharable, these narratives also imagine a possible set of futures, ones that enable the self and the commons to feel at home in the state of unsettledness. Through empathy and community, each of these novels conceive of a future whether it is through the camaraderie and conviviality of cricket (*Netherland*), or the shared experiences of fukú (*Oscar Wao*), or the sense of community that emerges in putting together of punk rock bands (*Goon Squad*), or through sharing stories of trauma in conversations (*Open City*).

\*\*\*

In his 2006 article “Art After 9/11” Roland Bleiker characterizes the attacks of 9/11 as “a key turning point in international politics.” In agreement with most scholarly commentators, he argues that the “attacks were directed not just at physical targets but at representations of power.” He elaborates:

No building symbolized the neoliberal economic world order better than the twin towers of the World Trade Center, and no building symbolizes the military might of the United States better than the Pentagon. The White House, the target for a failed third attack, would have been the perfect representation of political power.

The effect of the attacks on representational sites marked the moment when American self-mythologizing was redeployed<sup>5</sup>. Barely twelve hours after the

---

<sup>5</sup> 9/11 marked the first significant experience of victimhood in Americans notions of themselves. The response to 9/11, at least in public discourse, veered between victimhood and vengeance. American victimhood, particularly white



attacks, then-president George W. Bush addressed the nation by declaring that, “our way of life, our very freedom came under attack in a series of deliberate and deadly terrorist acts.” The worst damage in terms of lives lost and property destroyed was at the WTC towers, the other two attacks having been far less effective than intended. Needless to say, the attacks were horrifying and tragic but barely caused a dent in “our way of life” or “our very freedom.” The rhetoric of “us versus them” was already beginning to take shape. Bush reiterated this further casting America in familiar self-aggrandizing terms by declaring, “America was targeted for attack because we're the brightest beacon for freedom and opportunity in the world. And no one will keep that light from shining.” Bush went on to state that, “A great people has been moved to defend a great nation” and that the search was underway for the perpetrators with the warning, “We will make no distinction between the terrorists who committed these acts and those who harbor them.” He set the tone for the aggressive, take no

---

male victimhood is at the center of Kathy Knapp's 2014 book, *American Unexceptionalism: The Everyman and the Suburban Novel after 9/11*. Knapp explores suburban 9/11 novels and white male characters who are neither heroes nor villains in order to hold them accountable and deal with ideas of forgiveness and how to move on after a crisis. Knapp's argument is that these characters and the novels counteract the idea of American innocence.

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=58057>

<sup>7</sup> The notion of preemption gained ascendancy in the immediate aftermath of 9/11. Annie McClanahan focuses on this discourse of preemption that preoccupied public and political discourse post 9/11. In her 2009 article “Future's Shock: Plausibility, Preemption, and the Fiction of 9/11,” McClanahan brings together a diverse set of discourses about the future. She sees “preemption” as unique to the post-9/11 moment and examines narrative models of corporate “scenario” forecasting and the legal history of the doctrine of preemption as an instance of the emerging genre of “9/11 literature.” In the fiction that she examines she sees that in “bringing scenario thinking's narrative epistemology to law and policy, the doctrine of preemption transforms the ontology of the future, making it fully available to both the imagination and the intervention of the present.” Acts of preemption in seeking to transform the

prisoners approach to foreign policy and for starting wars. This approach also shaped individual understanding of and response to the traumatic experiences of 9/11<sup>8</sup>. Following Susan Neiman, Bleiker identifies the events of 9/11 as “moments in history when certain events defy ‘human capacities for understanding’ and trigger a ‘collapse of the most basic trust in the world.’”

Certainly the reaction of the US government to 9/11 has altered the national and international political landscape in fundamental ways. A decade and half since 9/11, we have seen that the international political landscape has indeed been impacted in ways that have brought new realities to contend with. The American War on Terror has morphed into an increasingly destabilized Middle East. Afghanistan, following the deaths of hundreds of thousands civilians and military personnel as a result of the war, is a barely functioning democracy that still relies on American troop presence to have a modicum of stability against continued terrorist attacks. Iraq has become a stronghold of ISIS, the terrorist group that has filled the vacuum left by a botched American war and an ineffectual government left in its wake. Regime changes following the Arab Spring have not been a stabilizing influence as had been expected, in many

---

future present the future as the here and now, thus blurring already confused lines of thought. Temporal disruptions added to the spatial disruptions that were experienced post-9/11.

<sup>8</sup> Challenges to this framing came later, most significantly in the 9/11 Commission Report. Craig A. Warren’s examination of the report, “It Reads like a Novel”: The “9/11 Commission Report” and the American Reading Public,” points out that “the report won the respect of the American public as much for its literary qualities as for the findings of the 9/11 commissioners.” Selling more than a million copies in a matter of months, the unprecedented popularity and success of the report, Warren argues, “depended on its ability to challenge literary classification, and to bring down the walls between personal and national experience.” Straddling the line between clarity and elusiveness, the report “wed the fortunes of a weakened American government to those of a wounded citizenry.”

cases (Egypt being a prime example) replacing one dictatorship with another. While the Taliban – the originally intended target – has lost its place as a prime player, the newly emerged, amorphous ISIS/ISIL has redefined rules of engagement. The war in Syria rages on making its mark on the world psyche with boat loads of refugees trying to resettle in Europe, a refugee crisis unprecedented in recent times. The refugee crisis has only aggravated the latent nativist tendencies within Europe seeing the election of white nationalists in France and Germany. The most dramatic instance came in the form of Brexit, Britain’s exit of the European Union and its attempt at closing borders to migrant workers.

While 9/11 has had far reaching effects on international politics directly or tangentially, domestically too its effect continues to be significant. As stated earlier, the attack on the World Trade Center towers has been seen as a symbolic attack on American neoliberal economic might. Seven years after the attacks, that symbolism turned into a real, material collapse. The recession of 2008, which stemmed primarily from toxic mortgages was a result of unbridled neoliberalism. The economy went into a tailspin that took years to steady. The election of Barack Obama as the first black president of the country was plagued by efforts to delegitimize him spearheaded primarily by the “birther” controversy claiming he was born in Kenya and therefore ineligible to be president. According to the Southern Poverty Law Center, there has been a 917% increase in anti-Muslim hate groups<sup>9</sup>. Random attacks against Muslims or ethnic

---

<sup>9</sup> As of February 2017, “The SPLC has documented an explosive rise in the number of hate groups since the turn of the century, driven in part by anger over Latino immigration and demographic projections showing that whites will no

others have increased. Perhaps a result of the rise in racism and a resurgent white nationalist movements, Donald Trump, the most vocal and visible advocate of the “birther” conspiracy is now president. All of these events can be seen as stemming from the events of 9/11, either directly or tangentially. While not by any means an exhaustive list, this is a summary intended to highlight the increase in nativist tendencies and resurgence of white supremacy since the events of 9/11. Increased nativist tendencies can be seen as a symptom of collective political trauma. The trauma of 9/11 was not really resolved satisfactorily, at least by the wars that were deemed an appropriate response and as a way for America to reassert its global power in that there is no foreseeable end to the wars. The economic collapse under the Bush regime deepened the despair. An ineffectual and hostile Congress throughout the Obama presidency did little to assuage the anxiety. For the purposes of this project, the question is: how has fiction responded to the events of 9/11 and subsequent developments such as the ones I have just mentioned?

Observing a literary phenomenon that emerged post-9/11, Lauren Berlant asks,

Why are so many novels so quickly written, these days, about the intimate experience of disasters such as 9/11, and how does the aesthetic rendition of emotionally complex sensual experience articulate with what is already

---

longer hold majority status in the country by around 2040. The rise accelerated in 2009, the year President Obama took office, but declined after that, in part because large numbers of extremists were moving to the web and away from on-the-ground activities. In the last two years, in part due to a presidential campaign that flirted heavily with extremist ideas, the hate group count has risen again.”  
<https://www.splcenter.org/hate-map>

codified as “knowledge” of a contemporary historical moment? (Berlant 846)<sup>10</sup>

Indeed, ever so many novels have been written, that they have an informal categorization all their own – “9/11 novels.” An obvious response as to why so many novels are “so quickly written” could be that it was an attempt to capitalize on a potentially lucrative market, comprised of an audience of readers ready and eager to seek ways of comprehending the traumatic events that were just witnessed or experienced. But more compelling is the question about the impact of “codifying” and claiming knowledge of the experiences of the contemporary moment. Many of these novels try to capture emotional states, snapshots of the emotional toll of experiencing a trauma such as 9/11; they also try to give voice to experiences of readers, creating and extending a sense of conviviality and empathy; additionally, they attempt to inform readers of experiences, building and extending memories. In presenting these works as historical novels, Berlant states that,

[T]he historical novel aesthetic forces readers to be like the protagonists who are also making sense of things without generic or structural guarantees: we are positioned to live the presented present by being in it, touching, tasting, over-hearing, and tracking how we are responding to it. (Berlant 849)

What Berlant observes is protagonists’ attempts to make sense of things they are experiencing much like the readers of the narratives who are also trying to figure things out. With no generic or structural guarantees, the readers, like the

---

<sup>10</sup> Berlant, Lauren. "Intuitionists: History and the Affective Event." *American Literary History* 20.4 (2008): 845-60. Web.

protagonists are forced to articulate their experiences in ways that may have previously been unthinkable. What is most significant is that these attempts at articulation are self-conscious in that they are aware of living in the “presented present” through tracking their responses to their experiences.

I explore the self-consciousness of experience that these novels offer. How are generic and structural guarantees dismantled? What function does culture perform in this scenario? What cultural forms become privileged in such a situation – sport, music, literature, or religion, for instance? Do they provide reference points or ways of being? What are the various coping mechanisms that are deployed? What affective responses indicate “a unity of experience,” as Berlant calls it (847)? How do these aesthetic practices get altered, redefined in the process? How do these novels conceive of themselves as cultural forms?

In his essay “Open Doors, Closed Minds: American Prose Writing at a Time of Crisis,” Richard Gray has argued that most novels post-9/11 lack imagination in that they are merely registering the occurrence of a traumatic event; they focus on the personal and domesticated experience of trauma<sup>11</sup>. Gray’s analysis calls this tendency “reducing a turning point in national and international history to little more than a stage in a sentimental education.” He calls for a “deterritorialization” of the novel that hybridizes American culture through immigrant novels and experiences. Michael Rothberg responds to this charge against post 9/11 fiction, a charge not just formal but political, by arguing that Gray’s call for deterritorialization while essential and necessary, is not quite

---

<sup>11</sup> Gray, Richard. “Open Doors, Closed Minds: American Prose Writing at a Time of Crisis.” *American Literary History* 21.1 2009 pp. 128-148. Web.

enough<sup>12</sup>. He defines Gray's call for hybridization centripetal, "an account of the world's movement toward America." Rothberg calls for "a complementary centrifugal mapping that charts the outward movement of American citizenship." Complementary to Gray's call for multiculturalism in the novel, Rothberg calls for a "a fiction of international relations and extraterritorial citizenship." He argues the difficult problem for most citizens of the US Empire "to grasp is not the internal difference of their motley multicultural, but the prosthetic reach of that empire into other worlds." While immigrants flock to America, perpetually redefining notions of Americanness, the global economy extends Americanness around the world, where it takes on new forms and participates in new structures of feeling. For instance, Chuck Ramkissoon of *Netherland* and his ideas of building a cricketing presence on a grand scale in New York is an example of this simultaneous movement inward and outward. He wants to lift cricket from its status as an exotic sporting curiosity in New York to one of NFL style prestige and cultural significance. Cricket, in his view, can use some American style staging of sports but more importantly America can use some of cricket's gentlemanly culture to temper its sense of self-importance. Similarly, the first footnote in *Oscar Wao* where Junot Díaz introduces his readers to the Trujillo regime in the Dominican Republic focuses on "the prosthetic reach" of American empire, of American presence in international politics through covert operations.

---

<sup>12</sup> Rothberg, Michael. "A Failure of the Imagination: Diagnosing the Post-9/11 Novel: A Response to Richard Gray." *American Literary History* 21.1 2009 pp. 152-158. Web.

What Gray and Rothberg are calling for is a political project in which multiculturalism and hybridity are at the core of our understanding of American citizenship while simultaneously emphasizing the Americanness that is global. The effect of this is a disruption of the sense of space where the demarcations between the here and the there are fluid. Hans van den Broek of *Netherland* experiences New York as simultaneously an American space in his profession as an oil analyst with the wealthy lifestyle that it entails and as a global space through the diverse immigrant cricketing community. Global Americanness helps him and his family to “drop in on New York for a year or three” (O’Neill 3). But this apparently seamless “dropping in” is also disruptive because space becomes confusing and conflicted. Hans offers to leave New York with his wife Rachel and their son whether it is to London or Tehran. Rachel responds with, “You can’t geographize this” (O’Neill 28). The disruption of spatial difference elides the difference between New York, London, and Tehran. While Beli leaves the Dominican Republic for New Jersey in *Oscar Wao*, the fukú never leaves her and her family. Space becomes fluid in the effect that fukú has on her and her family. The fukú follows her and her family to the US and back to the Dominican Republic. Gray’s and Rothberg’s ideas of deterritorialized, centripetal and centrifugal movements in space and of space become key to the understanding of the narratives in this study.

Overlapping inward and outward movements connect public and private traumas and current and historical traumas in the narratives examined here. For example, *Open City* explores various historical public traumas such as the internment of Japanese citizens during World War II, the experiences of Germans during World War II, and the decimation of Native American populations



among others. Fukú in *Oscar Wao* encompasses the curse that is inherited and even repeated through generations for many in the Dominican Republic, and more specifically the de Leon family. Bennie in *Goon Squad* is always examining what it means to be American and the ways in which his ethnicity challenges received notions of Americanness. For both Bennie and Sasha, 9/11 recalls personal traumas; for Bennie it is his traumas from the experience of racism; for Sasha, it is memories of her childhood experiences in an abusive home.

While the World Trade Center towers, the most dramatic and spectacular targets of the attacks of 9/11, signified American economic power, they also symbolized America's global reach, the nexus of American sovereignty and global capital; they represented the deterritorial and extraterritorial Americanness that Gray and Rothberg emphasize. Through the articulations of deterritorial and extraterritorial citizenships achieved in these texts, characters in the narratives and readers of the narratives achieve a commons through shared traumatic experiences. The stories that Julius of *Open City* collects offer ways to narrate previous traumas and to collectively work through them. They display an interiority of the experience while looking outward to commiserate with their experience, centripetal and centrifugal forces acting in common and in tension. Sasha in *Goon Squad* collects objects as a result of her tendency to kleptomania; they provide her ways to reenact the unsettlements of trauma. Displayed all together on a table, they bring together her affective response to each of the moments of acquisition of these objects. The unsaid stories of fukú burst through seeking an audience when the narrator triggers a search on a forum in *Oscar Wao*. The many stories are simultaneously similar and dissimilar and provide a common space to commiserate.

The works explored in this project examine the duality of public and private experience of trauma. They also examine memories of previous traumas and inherited historical traumas, both communal and private. Temporally, they focus on the present moment as much as the past and the future. Oscar Wao, the titular character, dies well before the events of 9/11. The entire novel is about memories and remembering trauma. Ways of being, concurrently at the moment as well as how to be in a post-9/11 world is crucial to the narratives cited here. While Hans in *Netherland* is struggling with his notions of himself in the present moment, cricket offers him a way to be as it triggers memories of a former self. For Chuck, the post-colonial subject, cricket is a way to be in the future. These novels map traumas and trajectories of the various kinds of trauma. However, what they represent is that these maps, trajectories, traumas, and temporalities are contradictory, often fail to fit together, work against each, create real difficulties and problems that need to be negotiated, represented, but are often not solved. This project traces the articulations that are engendered through the maps and trajectories in the selected novels.

For the purposes of this project, what stories are told (stories of personal trauma, public trauma, traumas of the present, traumas of the past), who tells them (whose voice gets heard, how do these voices break through), and how are they told (formal questions like the linkage between story and history, first or third person narration) are crucial. In forging unities and relations to other historical and personal events, these articulations contextualize the events of 9/11 and demand the kind of centripetal and centrifugal discourses that Gray and Rothberg seek. The stories that emerge try to capture the “unity of experience” as Berlant calls it while figuring out ways in which the experience

can be related. Shared unsettlements and the resultant empathy that is also shared are central to the narratives explored in this project. In this sense, they serve a kind of therapeutic function.

As stated earlier, ever so many novels were published after 9/11 that helped readers track their responses to the presented present as Berlant has called them. Don De Lillo's *Falling Man* and Jonathan Safran Foer's *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*, for example, narrate the trauma of 9/11, the personal losses suffered from it, and ways that individuals try to cope with its effects. Dave Eggers explores how the "us versus them" rhetoric of 9/11 was unleashed on American citizens in *Zeitoun*, which tracks the experiences of a Syrian-American following hurricane Katrina in New Orleans. While these novels explore trauma and its effects in the context of 9/11, my focus is on narratives that read 9/11 as one in a series of various historical traumas and the ways in which an empathetic commons develops in and through them. I begin with a reading of *Netherland* where O'Neill explores cricket as a way to engender such a commons through its compensatory and instructive functions. I follow it with a reading of *Oscar Wao* where analogous histories of trauma are shared. Díaz's evocative use of the word *fukú* is particularly effective in tracing the repetitive and shared nature of trauma in families and communities and through history. Finally, *Open City* and *Goon Squad* are read in parallel to study ways in which private, public, and inherited traumas engender an unsettled commons through their collections of diverse stories.

## CHAPTER 1 CRICKET, FAMILY, AND 9/11: JOSEPH O'NEILL'S *NETHERLAND*

Memory and memory management, I want to argue, are two crucial tools in attempts to comprehend a traumatizing experience such as 9/11. As we shall see in this examination of Joseph O'Neill's *Netherland*, managing memory calls for a postmortem of those memories – studying them, analyzing them, and sorting through the different emotional aspects of memories. The constant process of postmortem of memory frames characters' responses to their current circumstances and how they conceive their future. This chapter examines O'Neill's attempt to explore the function of cricket as an aid to memory management and as a way of moving forward in a moment of crisis. The compensatory function of cricket, in the sense that Herbert Marcuse proposes, and instructive function of cricket, in Clifford Geertz's sense of a sentimental education are privileged in a post-9/11 moment, when life appears at an impasse. Justice and fair play are possible on the cricket field even if it is frequently subverted in life. The code of cricket, which is "a lesson in civility," can teach ways of being in the world (O' Neill 15). That the cricket project is abandoned and the heteronormative coupling is restored at the end of the novel is significant. My argument is that the novel, much like the cricket that it promotes, envisions utopian existences only to succumb to realities of life and thus to compromise. But the possibilities of a future help the characters work through the traumatic experiences of 9/11.

### **New York and Memory**

*Netherland* opens with the autobiographical narrator Hans van den Broek recalling a conversation with a co-worker at his bank in London, as he prepares

to leave for a stint in New York. Hans observes that the senior vice-president at the bank (SVP), an Englishman he barely knew, had spoken with an “American openness” about his sense of loss at leaving New York. Reminiscing about his loft on Wooster Street and trips to the “original” Dean & DeLuca, he opines, “But New York’s a very hard place to leave. And once you leave ... I still miss it, and I left twelve years ago” (O’Neill 3). The SVP shows no reticence and this frank avowal of his emotions appears uncharacteristic to Hans. This “American openness” is embarrassing to his own “cut-and-dried Dutch manner” (O’Neill 25). The conversation ends with the SVP reiterating that New York will be missed, once you leave it. Hans is both embarrassed by and irritated with what he sees as his coworker’s pitiable and cheap longing for New York. However, at the present moment, when the novel begins—about eight years after the conversation and two years after his return to England, he finds that his coworker may have been right.

Hans admits that he now understands that what the SVP felt was significant, for there is no such thing as “cheap longing” and the sense of loss is very real. He too admits feeling a sense of loss and nostalgia for New York, having lived in and left the city. He states that:

Now that I, too, have left that city, I find it hard to rid myself of the feeling that life carries a taint of aftermath. This last-mentioned word, somebody once told me, refers literally to a second mowing of grass in the same season. You might say, if you’re the type prone to general observations, that New York City insists on memory’s repetitive mower—on the sort of purposeful postmortem that has the effect, so one is told and forlornly

hopes, of cutting the grass to manageable proportions. For it keeps growing back, of course. (O'Neill 4)

Though he is back in London, New York continues to haunt his memories, despite his best efforts to move on. "The taint of aftermath" alludes to the enduring aspect of memory, that experiences in life can never be entirely erased. Some aspect of the experience is always retained, remembered. It is a "taint," a trace of something bad, like an infection or contamination. If life carries a taint of aftermath, as Hans posits, then memory seems to function more like a repository of infections, contaminations, a space packed with baggage as it is referred to in everyday parlance. But the taint that colors memory is not static; it is a taint of "aftermath." As Hans defines it, "aftermath" is "a second mowing of grass in the same season." The taint comes back, grows back and, more importantly, it has to be cut back, trimmed, managed. Hans concurs with the SVP that the experience of living in New York City is a significant taint in one's memory and resurfaces forcefully, insisting on management. The image of "memory's repetitive mower" emphasizes the fact that management of memory is constant and repetitive, akin to perpetual motion. Feelings of loss and the sense of nostalgia that follows are integral to this process of memory management, what Hans – continuing the allusion to contagion, disease and contamination – calls "purposeful postmortem." While the act of mowing seems organic to memory something that one has no control over, the purposeful act of postmortem seems to restore agency to the one with the memory. The act of postmortem seems to delve into causality, why or how something happened. The hope of this purposeful postmortem is to cut "the grass to manageable proportions." As we shall see in this examination of the novel, the results that are generated from this constant

process of postmortem of memory engenders characters' responses to their current circumstances and also how they conceive their future. New York City and the particular circumstances of 9/11, I want to argue, are not only part of memory's postmortem, but are also part of the effective management of that memory.

Hans concludes what can be considered the introduction to the narrative by commiserating even further with the SVP. Dismissing his own earlier assessment of the SVP's reminiscences as "cheap longing," Hans ponders, "Who knows what happened to that fellow over there? Who knows what lay behind his story about shopping for balsamic vinegar? He made it sound like an elixir, the poor bastard" (O'Neill 4). But this is not simply commiseration between two characters. O'Neill is getting his readers to commiserate with Hans, the SVP, and the story to come. Sharing stories about shopping for balsamic vinegar may not always simply be about the shopping for balsamic vinegar. Memory is deploying the mower in order to manage the grass that keeps growing; the teller of the story is conducting a purposeful postmortem. One question that this chapter will explore is whether the novel is memory's mower, a purposeful postmortem. Furthermore, whose memory is implicated here – the reader? The narrator? The writer? In any case, the ethos of New York is placed front and center of the novel.

### **New York, 9/11, and Culture**

Again, the novel's narration or performance of the management of memory is further complicated because Hans's stint in New York coincides with the events and the aftermath of 9/11. Hans, a large cap oil and gas analyst/"guru" (O'Neill 26) and his lawyer wife Rachel are variously plagued by among other things, feelings of loss, fear, anxiety, displacement, and depression in their

experience of and response to 9/11. They are confused and disoriented, trying to understand if they are in a “preapocalyptic situation, like the European Jews in the thirties or the last citizens of Pompeii,” or if they were in a situation “merely near-apocalyptic, like that of the Cold War inhabitants of New York, London, Washington, and, for that matter, Moscow” (O’Neill 24). Unable to reconcile their different responses to 9/11, Hans being more passive, probably more depressed than his wife Rachel, they separate, with his wife taking their toddler son back to London. Eventually, Hans and Rachel reconcile and resume their life back together as a family in London. Concurrent with the period of separation from his wife, “when [he] had been unhappy for the first time in [his] life,” Hans, by chance, becomes part of the cricketing world of New York. The novel, as some critics have observed, is Hans’s discovery of himself, through cricket and its related subcultures in New York.<sup>1</sup> It is through cricket that he meets and becomes friends with Khamraj Ramkisson (Chuck), an “oddball,” “crazy son of a bitch”, ambitious Trinidadian immigrant who calls himself the President of the yet to be formed New York Cricket Club (O’Neill 19, 58, 4). Cricket not only introduces and sustains the friendship between Chuck and Hans, the role of cricket in their lives, discussions about cricket and its role in society, and the future of cricket in America occupy a significant portion of the novel. This chapter will examine how cricket is deployed in the context of the novel. The important question to be

---

<sup>1</sup> Reading the novel as a bildungsroman, Adam Kushner titles his review “A Lost Boy Grows Up”, and notes that O’Neill “uses everything from cricket to the post-9/11 world to explore what it means to be a man.” *Newsweek* Book Review, June 30, 2008.



asked is, what is O'Neill's agenda for cricket?<sup>2</sup> How does he see cricket in the context of post-9/11 America? It is these three characters – Rachel, Hans, and Chuck - that are significantly developed in the novel. Chuck and Rachel never meet, with Chuck almost replacing Rachel for a significant chunk of the novel. This chapter will explore how these three characters respond to 9/11.

The novel is autobiographical and Hans is a fairly reliable narrator, who is trying to work through issues and challenges that the present moment has brought to the fore. The way the story unfolds, two distinct responses to 9/11 can be identified through the formation of two dyads, with Hans as the common entity to both – Hans/Chuck and Hans/Rachel. Hans/Chuck dyad is male, homosocial, and is centered in and around cricket. The Hans/Rachel dyad focuses on domesticity and the American political response to 9/11. With Hans being common to both, a lot of the issues overlap. The allusion to cricket as O'Neill's mother tongue (see endnote 2) and the way that Hans the character turns to cricket as a sort of originary experience – an invisible thread he cannot break; his mother watching him from the sidelines – I want to argue, cast the novel as O'Neill's attempt to explore the function of cricket as an aid to memory management and as a way of moving forward in a moment of crisis. The compensatory and instructive functions of cricket are privileged in a post-9/11 moment, when life appears at an impasse. Justice and fair play are possible on the cricket field even if it is frequently subverted in life. The code of cricket,

---

<sup>2</sup> O'Neill is a member of the Staten Island Cricket Club. In his May 2008 review of *Netherland* in *The New York Times*, Charles McGrath traces O'Neill's relationship to cricket and the Staten Island Cricket Club. He states that O'Neill has "clung to cricket because it is his "athletic mother tongue"." It is also interesting to note that O'Neill lives in the Chelsea hotel with his family, like Hans and his family do after 9/11.

which is “a lesson in civility,” can teach us ways of being in the world. That the cricket project is abandoned and the heteronormative coupling is restored at the end of the novel is significant. My argument is that the novel, much like the cricket that it promotes, envisions utopian existences only to end in compromise.

Much of the novel is devoted to Hans’s friendship with Chuck and their mutual passion for cricket. As we will see in this chapter, cricket affects them differently. Both draw on their early experiences with cricket in determining the role of cricket in their present and future lives. Rachel is the other significant character in the novel. But she is ambivalent toward cricket. Rachel’s response to 9/11 and the fracturing of the family unit draws attention to the affective situation of the characters, the emotional tonalities that surface within the novel acting as a foil to the exclusively homosocial world of cricket.<sup>3</sup> As we shall see, Rachel’s absence affords O’Neill a way to explore cricket and its possibilities for society and her return provides him a way out of the impossibility of his proposition with cricket and a way to restore heteronormative coupling which has traditionally been the nucleus of cultural values.

My interest in asking whether the novel is a purposeful postmortem and memory’s mower, in examining the significance of cricket within the novel and as an aesthetic practice, and in exploring the characters’ and O’Neill’s responses to 9/11 stems from the argument that culture as it emerges here, while conservative, functions in two distinct ways in helping characters and of course

---

<sup>3</sup> Drawing from Martin Heidegger’s notion of *Stimmungen*, Virno says that the emotional situation/ tonalities of the multitude are “ways of being so pervasive that they end up being common to the most diverse contexts of experience” (Virno 84).

the writer and readers of the novel to cope with public traumas such as 9/11. Culture here, explored through cricket, comes across as an amalgamation of two different though not incompatible models of culture – Herbert Marcuse’s dialectical character of culture as at once conservative and utopian (“The Affirmative Character of Culture”) and Clifford Geertz’s view of culture as sentimental education (“Deep Play: Notes on the Balinese Cockfight”).

In a passage that I will explicate later, Hans sees cricket as an agglomeration of individual longings, a hallucination of potentials, and tantalisms that touch on the undoing of private losses. Cricket then is a space, even utopian space, that allows for experiencing equality and justice even though these ideals prove elusive in real life. Marcuse’s critique of culture foregrounds the dominant mind/body dialectic of Western philosophy. What emerges as a result is the incompatibility of idealist claims with the material conditions of life. Culture offers compensations for what is absent from everyday life, and in so doing, allows that life to go unchanged (and thereby affirming), even as it allows us to imagine what another life might be like. The affirmative character of culture allows for the maintaining of the status quo and the material structures are absolved of the burden of fulfilling the transcendental claims, which are transferred to the realm of the soul. Culture becomes the realm in which the idealist promises are internalized and rationalized, in turn affirming the abstracted happiness while negating real material conditions of life. As Marcuse puts it, “Affirmative culture uses the soul as a protest against reification, only to succumb to it in the end” (217). However, the promises and possibilities of the bourgeois liberation of the individual can be at least glimpsed at through art.

Marcuse observes that:

Only in art has bourgeois society tolerated its own ideals and taken them seriously as a general demand. What counts as utopia, fantasy, and rebellion in the world of fact is allowed in art. The affirmative culture has displayed the forgotten truths over which “realism” triumphs in daily life.  
(222)

This is why art and culture occupies a place of privilege in bourgeois culture. Culture offers the possibility of escape, an affirmation of abstracted ideals (freedom, beauty, constancy, security, justice) while simultaneously negating the very ideals it promotes in the realm of the real. What Marcuse stresses is the importance of this possibility of escape. Hans sees cricket as a space for experiencing a sense of belonging on an equal footing with his teammates, comradeship and conviviality, which might otherwise be impossible in real life. It helps him realize, however briefly, his fantasies of justice and equality that are otherwise abstracted generalities.

For Chuck, cricket is very clearly “a lesson in civility” (O’Neill 15). Cricket here functions as an instruction in conduct, in modes of being in society or as Geertz describes it in the context of the Balinese cockfight – a sentimental education.<sup>4</sup> As with any art form, the cockfight renders ordinary experiences

---

<sup>4</sup> Geertz has argued that culture is a publicly acted document with hierarchical and meaningful structures of signification. Focus cannot be on the ontological status of signs and acts of culture but their import. Culture cannot be separated from the real, lived life. It is the imaginative universe in which acts become signs. A semiotic approach to culture gives access to the conceptual world in which the subjects live. Geertz describes the Balinese cockfight variously as a blood sacrifice to pacify demons (Geertz 420); rage untrammelled as a fact of nature and form perfected as a fact of culture (Geertz 424); “deep” play and “shallow” play – the primary and secondary significations acts of culture impose (Geertz 434 – 435); simulation of the social matrix (Geertz 436); dramatization of status concerns (Geertz 437); expression of institutional kinships, allegiances and

comprehensible, their meaning more powerfully articulated and more exactly perceived. The cockfight as a cultural text, and its function in Balinese society is its use of emotion for cognitive ends, that is, a sentimental education. The Balinese not only learn the thrill of risk, the despair of loss, the pleasure of triumph, but that the society is built on these emotions. In the cockfight, the Balinese forms and discovers a particular facet of his temperament and his society's temper at the same time. Cricket in the context of this novel performs a similar function – it teaches players how to be. It gives them a code to live by. As we will see, for Chuck, in the context of post-9/11 America, cricket will perform this instructive function for America and Americans, helping them overcome their blindness and “really see the world,” starting “a whole new chapter in U.S. history” (O'Neill 211). This as we will see, turns out not to be the case. That Chuck relies on cricket to be instructive complicates the notion of “sentimental education” because colonial longing has to be factored in as well. Unlike the Balinese cockfight, which is specific to Bali, cricket instructed the colonial subjects on how to be British, or in Chuck's case a good postcolonial subject.

### **Hans, Cricket, and Becoming American**

The novel is the detailed process of “purposeful postmortem” that Hans, the autobiographical narrator and protagonist conducts on his own life and the lives of those around him. For a person who claims, “I, however, seem given to self-estrangement. I find it hard to muster oneness with those former selves

---

hostilities (Geertz 438 – 439); and a metasocial commentary on the hierarchical organization of humans and organizing of collective existence around these groupings (Geertz 448). But the fundamental value of the cockfight, Geertz posits, is its “use of emotion for cognitive ends,” “a sentimental education” (Geertz 449).

whose accidents and endeavors have shaped who I am,” Hans indulges in a novel-length narrative about his past and its influence on his present self (O’Neill 49). The loss of family, “the spine of [his] days,” triggers introspection and nostalgia (O’Neill 30). While he is fairly ambivalent about his other former and current selves—the schoolboy, the student at university, the trainee executive at Shell, the analyst in London, and even the individual who flew to New York with his excited wife—what preoccupies a significant portion of the narrative is his memory of his former cricketing self. As he admits:

But I still think, and I fear I will always think, of myself as the young man who got a hundred runs in Amstelveen with a fury of cuts, who took that diving catch at second slip in Rotterdam, who lucked into a hat trick at the Hague Cricket Club. These and other moments of cricket are scorched in my mind like sexual memories, forever available to me and capable, during those long nights alone in the hotel when I sought refuge from the sorriest feelings, of keeping me awake as I relived them in bed and powerlessly mourned the mysterious promise they held. (O’Neill 49-50)

The events of 9/11 have taken an emotional toll on Hans. As we will see throughout this chapter, he is clearly depressed. In the above passage we see that he is alone, even lonely; he suffers from insomnia; he has the “sorriest feelings;” and he mourns the self that is long gone and the potential it once held. But it is in this calcified image of his former self that his sense of self is most confident. The stabilized memory of cricketing success is safe from woes, threats, and losses that his current self must negotiate. The public successes of cricket are comparable to the private, presumably pleasurable, sexual memories. Cricket then becomes both a public as well as a private experience; it sustains his public persona as a

good cricket player while shoring up his self esteem, even years later. These memories of cricket are both pleasurable, providing refuge from his depression, and at the same time inducing a state of mourning. They both affirm his sense of self while also reminding him of the loss of that particular self thus negating his present self, that the potentialities of that former self are inadequately expressed in the present self. The choice of the word “fear” is crucial here. Nothing he does in his life beyond that cricketing self of the past will compare. The issue is that associating his self worth to successes, even experiences on the cricket field alone, is a very limited view of oneself.

The self that Hans idolizes belongs in the ideal space of the cricket field, not the self that is trying to negotiate a world that is fraught with sorrow, loss, anxiety, and unfulfilled desires. The beauty of “cuts,” “diving catches” and “hat tricks” of the cricket field and the sense of fulfillment they engender are undercut by the realities of life. As has been noted earlier, affirmative culture, through art, allows for experiencing possibilities that are unavailable in real life. Cricket provides Hans a glimpse of an idealized self, the potential of this self. His flat in Tribeca which he called home is no longer home, his family is disintegrating, and he is skeptical of his own role as a stock analyst; the financial markets are ostensibly the locus of the critical mass that the attacks of 9/11 represent. Even when that former cricketing self is passed, the memory of that self sustains the fantasy, compensating for present losses. Additionally, it is this stabilized narrative of his self, that provides him refuge from the present depressed self.

Cricket provides him comfort during what he has already identified as the “the time when [he] had been unhappy for the first time in his life.” Not only does Hans seek refuge in the memory of his cricketing past, he builds a shrine for

the experiences of this past self. He is unable to adapt this self to his present cricketing needs. As he notes, "Self-transformation has its limits; and my limit was reached in the peculiar matter of batting. I would stubbornly continue to bat as I always had, even if it meant the end of making runs" (49). He has been able to move to different countries—Netherlands to England to America; he has changed jobs; he is dealing the best he can with the separation from his family; he has mourned the loss of his mother and so on. But adapting to the unique needs of American cricket is positively repulsive to him. He goes on to say, "To reinvent myself in order to bat the American way, that baseball-like business of slugging and hoisting, involved more than the trivial abandonment of a hard won style of hitting a ball. It meant snipping a fine white thread running, through years and years, to my mothered self" (50). Cricket and its elegant batting style and its associated camaraderie, "the fine white thread" is like an umbilical cord, a cord he is unwilling to cut. He finds it impossible to "lower" his cricketing standards, reducing it to what Chuck describes as "bush cricket" (9). Cricket has always been a source of Hans's self-image, for as long as he can remember, something inculcated to his young self, growing up in The Hague.

Cricket as he remembers it, as he was trained to play it, gives him a sense of self, a way to be which he casts as elemental. Changing this self, altering that identity is tantamount to sacrilege. Having transitioned smoothly, or perhaps unselfconsciously into other roles and identities, for the first time Hans encounters a dichotomy between the real and the ideal. Marcuse notes that, "Affirmative culture was the historical form in which were preserved those human wants which surpassed the material reproduction of existence" (Marcuse 227). Hans is in the "thick" of the material reproduction of existence. An equities



analyst at “a merchant bank with an enormous brokerage operation,” Hans analyzes large cap oil and gas stocks (O’Neill 25). Even though the exaggerated status of analysts had been undercut and had lost some of its sheen, even slipping into infamy in some cases, Hans is still respected within the field. He is ranked number four in his sector, a feather in his bank’s hat and more specifically on his own hatband. His informal catchphrase, Dutch for ordinary recommendation and Double Dutch for strong recommendation has entered the lexicon of the bank and of the industry as well (O’Neill 25-26). Financially, he is very successful. When he considers following his wife back to London, he inventories their assets – “The loft would be sold, and the proceeds, comfortably over a million dollars, would be invested in government bonds, a cautious spread of stocks, and ... gold. We had another two million dollars in a joint savings account and two hundred thousand in various checking accounts” (O’Neill 31); it must be added, that he is still a respected analyst (at a time when analysts are blamed for the financial crisis and occupy a hazy relationship to the production of value) and will continue to bring in a good salary. He is easily able to request transfers, moving from country to country “to drop in on New York City for a year or three” and then go back to the other financial and political epicenter, London (O’Neill 3). Materially, he is in an enviable position by most standards.

However, after years of having lived comfortably in this world Hans is skeptical and dissatisfied. With his family gone, he glimpses at the “soulless regions” of material existence (Marcuse 224). His work and his colleagues used “to be capable of filling [him] with joy.” Now, even his work “the largest of pots and pans [he] had placed under [his] life’s leaky ceiling, had become too small to

contain [his] life's misery." His work now feels like a "masquerade," and that he is "cooking up myths from scraps and peels of fact" (O'Neill 52). He encounters his abstracted, alienated self in all its nakedness. The masquerade has ended so to speak. It is at this moment that cricket, the idealized space of affirmation and validation, of equality, happiness, and justice gives him refuge. It is able to encapsulate his wants, needs, and desires that "surpass the material reproduction of existence." He is now realizing that it is not inconsequential to be the "political-ethical idiot" that he claims he has been (O'Neill 100). After all, as oil analyst, he is in the thick of circulation of capital, which is central to the economy of the moment than production of actual goods and services.

Hans's nostalgia for cricket stems from the nurturing function of cricket from his early days at the cricket club Houdt Braef Standt – HBS and the idea of achievement that it inculcated in him. He is too young to realize that his acceptance into the club at the age of seven was because his late father had been a member of the club and that,

[I]t must have given them great pleasure to take his son under their wing. For that's how these sports clubs functioned: they took on scores of boys almost as hatchlings and bestowed parental care on them for years, even on those who were athletically hopeless. (O'Neill 43)

This nurturing environment continues to be part of Hans's youth right up to the point when he goes off to university. The mothering that he receives at the club extends to his adulthood, memories of cricketing accomplishments offering him refuge "from the sorriest of feelings." The social atmosphere of the club, the ease and familiarity with which he is able to carry himself in the community, and most importantly his mother's presence on the field constitutes the ethos of

cricket for him. The emotional, sentimental education that the cricket clubs provide is far more important than their athletic aims and goals. He observes that cricket in the Netherlands is undertaken with a seriousness characteristic of all Dutch sports and that in The Hague it, cricket, is the purview of the conservative, stuck-up stratum of society, imbued with bourgeois snobbishness, where “the players are ghosts from an Anglophile past” (O’Neill 42).

Much like the cockfight teaches the Balinese how to be Balinese, cricket in The Hague instills conservative, stuck-up, bourgeois, snobbish Dutchness in Hans. More importantly, it frames and permeates his emotional subjectivity. Treating the cockfight as a text highlights its value as an emotional and sentimental education. Geertz notes:

What the cockfight says it says in a vocabulary of sentiment—the thrill of risk, the despair of loss, the pleasure of triumph. Yet what it says is not merely that risk is exciting, loss depressing, or triumph gratifying, banal tautologies of affect, but that it is of these emotions, thus exemplified that society is built and individuals are put together. (Geertz 449)

The familial character and the kinships it engender is what Hans emphasizes in describing cricket clubs in the passage above. The clubs compensate for the ways of nurturing that are unavailable to him in the lack of a father figure in his family unit. His earliest induction into the cricketing world is on the strength of his late father’s association with the club not his elegant cuts, diving catches, or the hat tricks he can produce. The clubs assume the role of surrogate fathers, filling in the role of the missing father figure in his life. Athletic abilities are secondary to a club that is ostensibly about athletics. It is not as Geertz says about the excitement of risk, the depression that loss can produce, or that triumph is

gratifying. It becomes an example of society, and because it is cricket in this case, the world at large.

C. L. R. James sees a similar function for cricket in his 1963 memoir *Beyond a Boundary*. Just as Geertz emphasizes the representation of social organization as central to the Balinese cockfight, James too hones in on the organizational structure at the core of the spectacle that is cricket. He writes:

The batsman facing the ball does not merely represent his side. For the moment, to all intents and purposes, he is his side. This fundamental relation of the One and the Many, Individual and Social, Individual and Universal, leader and followers, representative and ranks, the part and the whole, is structurally imposed on the players of cricket. (James 259)

Cricket, much like the Balinese cockfight, becomes a showcase of social hierarchies and relationships. Hans learns to become Dutch through cricket, particularly the conservative, snobbish Dutchman from The Hague. But cricket also builds kinships, which might otherwise be unavailable to the only child of a widowed mother. Through the cricket clubs he becomes aware of the relations that James lists above between one and many, individual, social, universal, and so on. He acquires community and camaraderie through cricket. Cricket not only builds the Geertzian webs of signification, but one is self-conscious of the process of the building of these webs.

Cricket also functions as a special bond between the widowed mother and the fatherless son. A closely associated second memory of these early days in the cricketing world is that of his mother among the spectators. A school teacher, known to many of the youngsters playing in the club, "it was her habit to unfold a portable chair by the western sightscreen and to sit there for hours, grading

homework and occasionally looking up to follow the game” (O’Neill 43). He notes that his cricket career dwindled once he left The Hague and went to university and the adult world of jobs and responsibilities. Cricket, however, was never quite as appealing when he tries it again later in London, at the coveted Lord’s stadium. He admits that, “With my mother no longer watching, cricket was never quite the same again” (O’Neill 44). Emotionally fulfilled with his job and relationship with Rachel he does not quite need cricket anymore. While he believes that his mother came to the games to follow his progress, he is surprised to learn later that his mother had continued to show up at the club games even after he had left. Cricket had continued to provide his mother with emotional sustenance (O’Neill 44-45). Coming back to the present, Hans finds himself orphaned and abandoned – his mother is dead; his wife has left him; and his job no longer offers him joy. He (re)turns to cricket for nurturing and to rediscover the carefully mothered self. Therefore, he is appalled by the thought that the aesthetic of cricket has to be altered and this, to him, is tantamount to desecration.

Hans introduces Chuck and his cricketing experiences in America with a litany of complaints against American cricket: the ground, Walter Park, is half the regulation size, the outfield is uneven and overgrown, the pitch is clay not turf and must be covered with coconut matting, the bounce doesn’t stay true for long and lacks variety and complexity, and the boundary is blurred by trees. What particularly assaults his cricketing sensibility is:

[A] rank outfield that largely undermines the art of batting, which is directed at hitting the ball along the ground with that elegant variety of strokes a skillful batsman will have spent years trying to master and

preserve: the glance, the hook, the cut, the sweep, the cover drive, the pull, and all those other offspring of technique conceived to send the cricket ball rolling and rolling, as if by magic, to the far-off edge of the playing field. (O'Neill 8 – 9)

He cannot imagine abandoning this aesthetic, the skill that he has mastered, so much so that he refuses to play “this degenerate version of the sport.” Nostalgia for playing the sport in this “orthodox” manner on perfectly manicured grounds only magnifies the other losses he has suffered—his former self, his lost family, his mother’s death, the loss of a home. Hans could not control or manage to avoid those other losses and as a result, he stubbornly clings to the “fine white thread,” the sacred memory of playing elegant cricket. Modifying his carefully learned skills of batting constitutes a “spiritual upheaval”(O'Neill 49). Abdicating muscle memory constitutes an existential crisis.

The aesthetics of cricket which so define Hans’s sense of self, recalls the question that C. L. R. James asks in *Beyond a Boundary* and is an extension of Marcuse and Geertz’s ponderings on the nature and function of culture. James asks, “What is cricket? Is it mere entertainment or is it an art?” (James 257). The answer is that it is both. He says, “Cricket is first and foremost a dramatic spectacle. It belongs with the theatre, ballet, opera and the dance,” and that, “What matters in cricket, as in all the arts, is not finer points but what everyone with some knowledge of the elements can see and feel” (James 258, 261). The performative aspects of cricket are inseparable from that which one sees and feels. Aesthetics and emotions are then interlinked, the one engendering the other, whether it is in theatre, music, painting, or cricket. “The glance, the hook,

the cut, the sweep, the cover drive, the pull, and all those other offspring of technique” so dear to Hans’s heart are fundamental to his sense of being.

Hans wonders what it means to be a cricketer in America. Much like the club of his youth in The Hague had taken him under their wing, Hans recognizes that his cricket buddies had been caring for him in his time of personal crisis. A fellow-cricketer Shiv is devastated when his wife of ten years leaves him for another man. The team takes turns staying with him, making sure he is never by himself. After spending a night at Shiv’s, Hans wonders why the respect of his teammates mattered so much to him. He concludes that,

These people, who in themselves were no better or worse than average, mattered because they happened to be the ones, should anything happen to me, whom I could prevail on to look after me as Shiv had been looked after. It was only after the fact that I figured out they’d already been looking after me. (O’Neill 174).

Here we see cricket in both the Marcusean and the Geertzian manifestations of culture. It is dialectical in that it both affirms and negates life; it is a sentimental education in that it helps with emotional or affective mapping.

“These people” are “in themselves no better or worse than average.” This is the abstracted, monadic, supposedly equal individuals that, Marcuse says, the bourgeois epoch gave rise to. “In themselves” they are all essentially the same, no better or worse. But the comparative here is incomplete – better or worse than average what? There is nothing to compare to, or, to quote Marcuse again, “Without distinction of sex or birth, regardless of their position in the process of production, individuals must subordinate themselves to cultural values” (207).

In this particular instance, the racially and socio-economically privileged Hans,

who is typically self-conscious of these privileges, glosses over the very real differences between them. Unlike Hans, most of his teammates are trying to make it in the “real” world – most of them are hustlers like Chuck, or are gas station attendants, or like Shiv live in impoverished Jersey City. What Hans is alluding to is the positive rather than the negative – what Marcuse calls the “inner life” rather than the material conditions. They are all the average “good” guys, guys who will be there for him if he should need them. But culture, or cricket here, makes the contact between their two different worlds possible. It allows for Hans and his fellow cricketers to meet on an equal footing. While cricket does not change the material conditions of life, it makes possible these friendships, this camaraderie and conviviality. Cricket offers him refuge not merely in terms of nostalgic memories but in very real comfort and caring at the present moment. The homosocial bonding of grown men, otherwise reticent about expressing their feelings, are convivial in ways that extend beyond the playing field and function as mutual caretakers.

Cricket in its corrupted, American “bush” version still retains its instructive function. The sense of paralysis (O’Neill 19), the feeling of disembodiment (O’Neill 30), the loneliness and depression that he experiences at the present moment have left Hans emotionally disoriented and in a state of limbo. Cricket retrains him to feel the mothering and nurturing that he fondly recalls and which he sorely needs. “These people” were taking care of Shiv and would and have been taking care of Hans. It helps him to learn what Geertz has said one learns in culture, that “what his culture’s ethos and his private sensibility look like when spelled out externally in a collective text; that the two are near enough alike to be articulated in the symbolics of a single such text”



(Geertz 449). The proximity of individual and collective sensibilities is revealed in the shared experiences of the cricket field, which is then able to sustain the wants and desires that surpass the material conditions of life. The realm of friendship, which eludes him in his professional life, even maybe American way of life, becomes available through cricket. We will see further evidence of this in the text when Chuck is introduced to the readers, in his story of the Trobriand Islands, and in his vision for America.

Cricket and cricketers are exotic in an America with its own set of sporting preferences. In fact the first time that Rachel and Hans come upon “scores of cricketers swarmed on a tract of open parkland” in July 1999, they are surprised (O’Neill 9). Hans points out that from their “elevated vantage point the scene appeared as a cheerful pell-mell,” each game overlapping the next, seven or eight games being played in a space that could accommodate three maybe four games, Rachel finds that the scene looked like a Breughel (O’Neill 10). Even Rachel and Hans, coming as they do from cricketing cultures, are stunned when they come upon cricket in New York/America. Once he is firmly entrenched in the cricketing microcosm, Hans wonders about the commitment of so many immigrants to playing a marginalized sport in America, playing in what Chuck describes as “a difficult environment” (O’Neill 15). He finds social scientists’ explanation in terms of “the immigrant’s quest for sub communities,” inadequate (O’Neill 120). He offers his own explanation:

But surely everyone can also testify to another kind of homesickness, one having to do with unsettlements that cannot be located in spaces of geography or history; and accordingly it’s my belief that the communal

contractual phenomenon of New York cricket is underwritten, there where the print is finest, by the same agglomeration of unspeakable longings that underwrites cricket played anywhere—longings concerned with horizons and potentials sighted or hallucinated and in any event long ago, tantalisms that touch on undoing of losses too private and reprehensible to be acknowledged to oneself, let alone to others. I cannot be the first to wonder if what we see, when we see men in white take to cricket field, is men imagining an environment of justice. (O'Neill 120-21)

The refuge that cricket offers addresses the issue of “not feeling at home” at a fundamental level than the mere loss of familiarity in terms of geography and history, or spaces and people. What Hans focuses on here is the “communal contract” that underlies the game of cricket, whether it is in a cricketing country like Netherlands or England, or in a place like America where the players and the game tend to be an exotic curiosity. The contract is a yearning for “an environment of justice,” the cricket ground and the logic of the game soothing one’s losses and private suffering. The words “hallucination,” “tantalisms” and “potentials” allude to possibilities that are like the promise that Hans’s cricketing skills held in his youth – something that has to be remembered, treasured, and even mourned because it will never quite materialize. But the true value lies in the imagining of this environment, the shared longing that translates into nurturing friendships and relationships.

This passage from the novel is remarkably similar to the passage from Marcuse quoted earlier. It is here that cricket’s compensatory function comes to light. Cricket played anywhere is an “agglomeration of unspeakable longings,” Hans claims, and is underwritten by “longings concerned with horizons and

potentials sighted or hallucinated and in any event long ago." Cricket allows for the expression of and to a certain degree the fulfillment of the ideals of bourgeois enlightenment, which in reality are considered as utopia or fantasy. It is the imagining of the world that is crucial, an imagining that is only allowed in art, in cricket. Again, as Marcuse point out, "Culture is not so much a better world as a nobler one" (Marcuse 213). The negation that is experienced privately, losses that are too reprehensible to be acknowledged even to oneself, find their affirmation and reprieve in cricket. It is this universal good, truth, equality, and justice that is unavailable in material facticity that for Hans is the lure of cricket for him personally, for immigrants in a foreign land, and for those others who play it anywhere in the world.

It is the above epiphany about cricket and its promise that lead to a change in Hans, a transformation he had resisted, something he had likened to spiritual upheaval. Making this shift from the personal to the communal enables him, with Chuck's encouragement, to "go deep" and heave the ball overhead, in baseball fashion, and score runs (O'Neill 175). Using Geertz's analogy, Hans has moved from the peripheral "shallow" play to the central "deep" play, hitting the ball in the local baseball fashion. In other words, he goes "native."<sup>5</sup> Even more remarkably, he recalls, "I'd hit the ball in the air like an American cricketer; and

---

<sup>5</sup> In the Balinese cockfight, Geertz identifies layers of narrative that mimics social structures and hierarchies. What he calls "deep" play, borrowing Jeremy Bentham's utilitarian concept, is the central bet, where significant amounts are wagered and where social allegiances and hostilities come into play. "Shallow" play occurs in the periphery, where the amounts are insignificant and where honor and prestige are less important. Even in "shallow" play, one remains discreet about his wager with his kinsman in order to avoid embarrassment if they find themselves on opposite sides of the wager (Geertz 425-432).

I'd done so without injury to my sense of myself. On the contrary, I felt great" (O'Neill 176). The comfort that Hans feels in his new self indicates a growth that finally enables him to feel at home with himself, his environment, and his life. It is at this moment he is convinced of Chuck's vision for cricket in America and for America. After the game, on his ferry ride back from Staten Island to Manhattan, he imagines endless possibilities stemming for himself, cricket, and America from this existential shift:

All of which may explain why I began to dream in all seriousness of a stadium, and black and brown and even a few white faces crowded in bleachers, and Chuck and me laughing over drinks in the members' enclosure and waving to people we know, and stiff flags on the pavilion roof, and fresh white sight-screens, and the captains in blazers looking up at a quarter spinning in the air, and a stadium-wide flutter of expectancy as the two umpires walk onto the turf square and its omelette-colored batting track, whereupon, with clouds scrambling in from the west, there is a roar as the cricket stars trot down the pavilion steps onto this impossible grass field in America, and everything is suddenly clear, and I am at last naturalized. (O'Neill 176)

This long, single-sentence paragraph captures Hans's almost breathless excitement at the change that has happened. He is finally able to conceive a future and is optimistic about that which is to come. Sure it is a dream, a fantasy, another person's dream and fantasy at that. What is significant is that cricket, which was crucial to his sense of his past self, acts as a conduit to his reconciliation and anticipation of his future self. Nostalgia gives place to an ideal, idyllic, romantic view of the future – a stadium full of people in anticipation of a

good game of cricket, Chuck and he enjoy drinks in the important sounding members' enclosure, the perfect weather, the pristine cricketing gear, the toss and umpires laying the framework for "the environment of justice" previously mentioned, the perfectly laid out ground providing the backdrop to the game, and the all important cricket stars eager to start the game. He is finally "naturalized" in America and is able to appreciate his American self, and he can now appreciate himself as a person and is naturalized with himself. Going back to Geertz, he can now see himself in the banalities of his American existence; he now has access to the American conceptual world and is willing and able to converse in it (Geertz 14, 24). But this shift comes at the cost of "justice," friendships and conviviality he has been emphasizing thus far. The exclusive pleasures of the members' box overtake the ideal community of equals he has experienced in their taking care of each other. Radical transformation is abandoned. He has come a long way from the existential crisis that plagued him. The paragraph above concludes the penultimate chapter/section of the book. What is even more significant is how he begins the final chapter/section of the book.

There is yet another eighty pages of narration left with details of important events such as his return to London, his reconciliation with his wife and Chuck's death to be told. Yet the epiphany from the previous chapter and his naturalized self sets the tone for the rest of his narrative. The last chapter starts of by bringing us back to the present moment and starts to tie up loose ends, so to speak - "I'm still working at M—," he informs us. He has run into the SVP again but he hasn't commiserated with him about their "shared exilic lot" (O'Neill 177). While 9/11 caused such upheaval in their lives he almost cavalierly

brings up the events of 7/7 in London describing it as a “frightening but not a disorienting occurrence” and that “Londoners remain in the business of rowing their boats gently down the stream” (O’Neill 178). He is quite comfortable in what he describes as the unchanged attitude in London, “the general down-the-hatch, who-are-we-fooling lightheartedness that’s aimed at shrinking the significance of our attainments and our doom, and our contributes” (O’Neill 178). The chapter recounts the fading of his friendship with Chuck, the elaborate process of reconciliation with his wife, and the somewhat sentimental scene in which the novel ends – the reunited family happily meeting for a fun afternoon at the London Eye.

### **Chuck, Cricket and America**

As Hans clearly states above, his self-transformation and the epiphany that follows is facilitated by his friend Chuck – “Go deep!” encourages Chuck and the dream that Hans has, following this transformative moment, is Chuck’s dream of building a cricketing arena in New York. Of the three well-developed characters in the novel, Chuck is the “other” – racially, economically, and socially marginalized – “A fat coolie from the bush. No job, no money, no rights” (O’Neill 133). While Hans has a privileged upbringing in The Hague and goes on to become a wealthy oil analyst, and his wife is the daughter of a wealthy banker who goes on to become a corporate lawyer, not to mention that they are both white, Chuck is from Trinidad, a descendant of obscure, indentured laborers from Madras (O’Neill 18). Growing up in a shack next to the recreation ground of his village, Chuck witnesses the careful, labor-intensive conversion of the ground into a cricket field. However, as his father is dead against cricket and forbids his sons from setting foot in the field, “he never truly plays the game”

(O'Neill 150). This elusive sport comes to represent for the young boy a different world, a world that he yearns for, and a world that is everything that his present world is not.

Chuck, the boy, romanticizes about the forbidden game and becomes quite obsessed with it. The radio gives him virtual access to a world he can only imagine. He "listened to the BBC for the first time: the ball-by-ball commentary on the West Indies' tour of India." He listens to commentaries of the historic 1960-61 West Indies tour of Australia under the captaincy of Frank Worrell, the West Indies' first black captain.<sup>6</sup> The voices of commentators travelling in waves over the Pacific Ocean trigger his imagination. Hans narrates:

You got your sense of the wider world in this way. You heard about Sydney and Calcutta and Birmingham. It was from cricket commentators like John Arlott, Chuck Ramkissoon told me, that he learned to mimic and finally perfect "grammatical English," learned words like "injudicious" and "gorgeous" and "circumspect": and he'd always whisper a running commentary to himself, he said, whenever he was able to escape from his father and watch a cricket game. (151)

While for Hans, cricket presents a nurturing environment, for Chuck it presents access to the forbidden, the unavailable, and the distant. It provides him a geographical perspective, a linguistic lesson, as well as a conduit to self-discovery and self-fashioning, of privilege and class mobility. Though he never

---

<sup>6</sup> The run up to Worrell's appointment as the first black man to captain the West Indian team is chronicled in C. L. R. James's *Beyond a Boundary*. As editor of the political newspaper *Nation*, James campaigned relentlessly "to break the discrimination of sixty years and have a black man, in this case, Frank Worrell, appointed captain of a West Indies team" (297). After a grueling four year battle Worrell finally became the head of the 1960-61 West Indies squad to Australia.

actually, physically plays the game, the game becomes essential to his sense of self and to his sense of the world. Operating under the logic of colonial legacy, articulation and annunciation become crucial to his self-fashioning.

Homi K. Bhabha identifies mimicry as “one of the most elusive and effective strategies of colonial power and knowledge”(Bhabha 122). The high ideals of civilizing the colonial subject in the colonial imagination, says Bhabha, takes a comic turn in “its low mimetic literary effects” (Bhabha 122). Playing cricket, which is mimicry in itself, being out of reach for Chuck, in the tradition of T. B. Macaulay, he turns to language to adapt his marginalized self.<sup>7</sup> Adapting Samuel Weber’s formulation of the marginalizing vision of castration, Bhabha defines colonial mimicry as:

The desire for a reformed, recognizable Other, *as a subject of a difference that is almost the same, but not quite*. Which is to say, that the discourse of mimicry is constructed around an *ambivalence*; in order to be effective, mimicry must continually produce its slippage, its excess, its difference.  
(Bhabha 122)

Reform, recognition, and difference are the vertices of the desire that is colonial mimicry. The colonial subject desires reform but the reform does not elide his difference. He should be recognizably other, or as Bhabha describes it, “almost the same but not quite.” Colonial mimicry hinges on ambivalence, constantly reaffirming its slippage, its excess and its difference. Culture according to Marcuse, asserts “a universally obligatory, eternally better and more valuable

---

<sup>7</sup> T. B. Macaulay was largely responsible for creating the breed of Indians who would be English in the matter of tastes and opinions to act as translators in the service of the Empire (Bhabha 125).



world that must be unconditionally affirmed: a world essentially different from the factual world of the daily struggle for existence” (Marcuse 207). The privileged culture of the colonist, similarly promises a better and more valuable world and the colonial legacy continually deploys this narrative and elicits affirmation. It is an ideal and idealized culture that does not quite change his station in life but gives him a glimpse of the possible. This culture however is different from the factual world of the colonized subject. As we see in the passage, it provides Chuck “an escape.” Much as art captures the excesses of material desires and wants, mimicry, in its ambivalence, and its insistence on difference emphasizes the slippage and excess and in its own way becomes “an insurgent counter-appeal” (Bhabha 129-130). We will get to the insurgent aspect of mimicry later. For now, I want to emphasize that it is in this sense that Chuck is what Bhabha calls “a mimic man” (125).

Chuck’s mimicking cricket commentators stems from his desire to access a language, which will release him from his parochial trappings and re-form him. Additionally, in the vein of Geertz’s sentimental education, the listening to and the mimicking of cricket commentaries help Chuck develop a global perspective. In a reversal of Geertz’s description of the cockfight where the anthropologist tries to gain access to a very particular social context, Chuck gains access to the “conceptual world” in which the cricketing subjects live all over the world – the world of Calcutta, Sydney and Birmingham. Learning “perfect grammatical English” and using words like “gorgeous,” “circumspect,” and “injudicious,” Chuck understands not merely the social mechanics, how things are done, but that the social semantics, what is the significance, for instance, of the 1960-61 West Indian squad to Australia (Geertz 448). This education through radio

commentaries prepares him for his life in America and his idea of cricket as a solution to America's problems after 9/11.

While Rachel and Hans mourn their former selves and the potential and promise that those selves held, Chuck does not dwell on losses or mourn them, but focuses instead on the potential and the promise of the becoming. As an immigrant in the United States, he is forced to negotiate systemic racism. He is able so do in innovative, often questionable, ways such as starting a kosher food business with a Russian Jew, Abelsky, using him as a front man, or starting an illegal network of "weh-weh" gambling. He is also able to acquire prized real estate in areas where he typically might not have had access, through his partnership with Abelsky. His tenacity and resilience reflect his response to 9/11, which stands in contrast to and acts as a foil to the responses of Hans and Rachel. Claiming a personal motto, "Think fantastic," Chuck reaches back to the liberatory function that cricket played for him to solve the mess that he finds America and the world is in (O'Neill 80).

While Hans and Rachel are left stunned and disoriented by the events of 9/11, Chuck volunteers at an emergency triage set up by the Humane Society of New York at Pier 40, an old shipping terminal. Rescuing cats, dogs, guinea pigs, rabbits, pigs, lizards, cockatoos, monkeys, and lemurs; meeting and making friends with fellow New Yorkers, and people from Idaho, Wisconsin, New Jersey, New Hampshire, North Carolina, Ireland, Portugal and South Africa, Chuck thrives in the atmosphere of community, conviviality and congeniality. It is also where he says he gets his "cricket idea" when he discovers that the whole place for redevelopment and thinks, "Why not?" (77-78) This is *his* project; he does not want Abelsky as front man. However, he also realizes that there is no

way he will be able to acquire prime Manhattan real estate for a marginalized sport played by racial “others.” Instead, he finds the Floyd Bennett Field in Brooklyn to build an arena. He elaborates:

A sports arena for the greatest cricket teams in the world. Twelve exhibition matches every summer, watched by eight thousand spectators at fifty dollars a pop. I’m talking about advertising, I’m talking about year-round consumption of food and drink in the bar restaurant. You’re going to have a clubhouse. Two thousand members at one thousand dollars a year plus initiation fee. Tennis, squash, ten-pin bowling, indoor facilities, a gymnasium, a swimming pool, a sports bar: something for everyone. But at the center of it, cricket. The only true cricket club in the country. The New York Cricket Club. (O’Neill 79 – 80)

Chuck is, indeed, thinking fantastic with this project. What he is conceiving here mimics an old school country club with cricket rather than golf or tennis at its center. He uses numbers and figures to accord this seemingly impossible dream a sense of reality – twelve matches, eight thousand spectators, number of members, membership fees and so on. In his attempt at convincing Hans about his vision, Chuck throws more statistics at him regarding the growing numbers of immigrants in New York from avid cricketing nations and their increasing wealth and spending potential. While his project is aimed primarily at this particular demographic of West Indians, Indians, Pakistanis, and Bangladeshis, Chuck gestures toward the social and economic legitimacy he is seeking in America with ideas for a clubhouse, tennis, squash, bar and restaurant, supposedly, “something for everyone.” In other words, he acknowledges that

for his project to sustain itself, he will need to make it attractive to the local population too. However, his vision is unrealistic on multiple levels.

At a price tag of fifty dollars per game, he is not exactly appealing to maids and janitors. A thousand dollar annual membership fee continues to breed exclusivity. In a sense, he is keeping out people like his former economically disadvantaged self. He is aiming this project at successful professionals and businessman. The problem of economics is just one part. As we shall see Chuck, rants against the American ignorance of, both in the sense of not knowing and in the sense of not caring about, cricket. Again, as we will see, Chuck believes that cricket is the magical potion that will solve America's problems and bring it out of its isolationism. However, the plan above does not reach out to the non-immigrant population in any way shape or form. Local cricket players who play under appalling conditions will not play on the manicured grounds. Instead, cricketing powerhouses such as the Indian and Pakistani national teams with their superstars will play here. There is no attempt to bring cricket to the local youth along the lines of Major League Soccer or AYSO. Therefore, his supposed "fix" for the current American problems does not stem organically from within. Even those who can afford the steep membership fees would not come for the love of cricket but other amenities like the golf course and the swimming pool. His plan, as it is laid out here, will only lead to further marginalization rather than the acceptance and legitimacy he is seeking.

Coming from Trinidad as well, Chuck's plan recalls C. L. R. James's description of the organization of cricket clubs on the island. The top tier clubs, in order of prestige included – members of the Queen's Park Club were white and wealthy and a few members from "old well-established mulatto families;"

old white Catholic families belonged to Shamrock; the Constabulary were the cricket detachment of the local police force; Stingo was dominated by the plebians; the brown-skinned middle class formed Maple; and Shannon had members from the black lower-middle class (James 65 – 67). The separation from the natives that the white ruling class enforced was further replicated based on race, religion, and economic considerations. Chuck's colonial mimicry is extended to his vision of cricket for America, which mimics this race and socio-economic based clubs common in colonies. The most significant aspect of this aspect of his mimicry is its exclusion, or lack of connection with the locals.

Chuck's vision of cricket, one he shares with Hans, in America is problematic. However, it stems from nostalgic memories, memories of boyhood when cricket was an "agglomeration of unspeakable longings," "longings concerned with horizons and potentials sighted or hallucinated," "tantalisms that touch on undoing of losses too private and reprehensible to be acknowledged to oneself, let alone to others," and "men imagining an environment of justice." The big speech that introduces Chuck to Hans and to the readers reflects these thoughts and expectations. It is at the first game of cricket that Hans plays in America. On this occasion the marginal status of cricket in America is made abundantly clear, or as Chuck puts it, it is evident that they play "as a matter of indulgence" and that they are a joke (O' Neill 15). The game is delayed by an hour because the softball game is not over and, "Cricketers were not licensed to take the field until the completion of any authorized softball game" (O'Neill 10). Chuck describes this as a difficult environment for cricketers as "baseball players have first right to play in this field" (O'Neill 15). This difficulty of being marginalized because of their sport of choice leads to

frustration. The St. Kittian (one of the teams playing that day) supporters find themselves milling around, consuming alcohol, waiting for the game to begin. When it does begin, the players are riled up as well, resulting in some wild plays. As umpire, Chuck has to intervene, eventually asking one player to leave because he continued to ignore the umpire's warnings. This precipitates an already testy situation, with one St. Kittian supporter walking on to the field with a gun. Spectators and players scatter, running for cover. The trio of Hans, Chuck, and Tino, the man with the gun, are left at the center of the field. Hans dismisses courage or heroism as the reasons for his stay, stating that he "experienced the scene as kind of emptiness" (O'Neill 13). Chuck is the only one who seems to have a rational response to the whole situation. He later recalls that he was trying "to understand the logic of his situation" (O'Neill 14). This attempt at logic results in Chuck calmly asking the man to leave the field on the grounds that he is interrupting the play. He diffuses the situation by asking the Kittian captain to escort the man off the field. The man leaves without further trouble and play resumes.

Chuck quite happily indulges his audience when he is asked to make a speech after the game, addressing the incident. He reminds them of the particularly marginalized position they find themselves in as cricket players in America. He describes their situation thus: "We have to prove ourselves. We have to let our hosts see that these strange-looking guys are up to something worthwhile" (O'Neill 15). The word "host" is significant here as it emphasizes their status as foreigners, immigrants who do not quite belong. But as Hans has observed earlier it is not merely a matter of "homesickness" or immigrant angst. Chuck further emphasizes that in this difficult environment they "have an extra

responsibility to play the game right,” to prove that they are doing something worthwhile (O’Neill 15). He elaborates what this means to them as cricketers, not merely as cricketers in America, in a difficult environment. He says:

We have an expression in the English language. [...] The expression is ‘not cricket.’ When we disapprove of something, we say ‘It’s not cricket.’ We do not say ‘It’s not baseball.’ Or ‘It’s not football.’ We say ‘It’s not cricket.’ This is a tribute to the game we play, and it’s a tribute to us. [...] But with this tribute comes a responsibility. [...] Now, games are important. They test us. They teach us comradeship. They’re fun. But cricket, more than any other sport, is, I want to say a lesson in civility. (O’Neill 14 – 15)

Chuck, once again, opens by drawing attention to the language of games and sports, particularly that of cricket. What is curious is that he begins by emphasizing what it is not rather than what it is. It is cast as a tool of censure, a disciplinary mechanism. Cricket becomes a metaphor, whose moral code extends to life – it is a tribute, a responsibility, and a lesson in civility. Cricket gave Chuck access to and a framework for functioning in the world. We have seen its nurturing role in Hans’s life. What appeals to Chuck is that it instills a moral code for the group as a whole in terms of community and camaraderie, while simultaneously placing responsibility on individuals that constitute the group. The aesthetics of the game – the elegant batting stroke, the mind game between bowler and batsman – shapes Hans’s identity and for the longest time he is unable to compromise and adjust to American needs. Chuck on the other hand has no problem advising his friend to go deep. Adaptability is his strong suit. Therefore his emphasis on its moral code is questionable, especially in light of his own questionable ethical practices in business. His plan for the stadium appears

increasingly as a business decision rather than as a solution that he proposes to America's problems. He perceives it as a chance to reclaim all the losses that his marginalized self has suffered. Cricket functions as a way for him to couple his nostalgia for the game with recouping the legitimacy that has been denied him thus far.

C. L. R. James has addressed the important role and value of the code of cricket in his own school experiences in Trinidad. It teaches him a code to live by; something Chuck feels is crucial to their status as cricketers in "a difficult environment." The code teaches Chuck and James how to be cricketers and by extension how to live their lives, as the etiquette of a cockfight teaches a Balinese how to be Balinese. James describes this code as Puritan, writing:

I never cheated, I never appealed for a decision unless I thought the batsman was out, I never argued with the umpire, I never jeered at a defeated at a defeated opponent, I never gave to a friend a vote or a place which by any stretch of imagination could be seen as belonging to an enemy or to a stranger. My defeats and disappointments I took as stoically as I could. If I caught myself complaining or making excuses I pulled up. If afterwards I remembered doing it I took an inward decision to try not to do it again. (James 34)

As James describes it, honesty, fair play, gentlemanly attitude and behavior, assuming responsibility for one's actions and the results thereof, and self-control form the essence of the code of cricket. Tino with his gun on the field and the raucous behavior of the St. Kittian supporters are anathema to this code. The high moral standard of this code for the game and its players is what Chuck refers to as "a tribute" to the game and the players, that they are able to maintain



this decorum. The code is a sentimental education, a lesson in civility. In the colonial context it served to elicit submission of colonized subjects and affirmation of the colonial project. Here, Chuck uses the code to seeks the validation of his “hosts,” simultaneously marking the group as superior in its endeavor, something that they could, perhaps should, emulate.

Seen in this light, Chuck’s reliance on the colonial logic to justify his project for America makes sense. He argues the merits of his project with Hans insisting that, “The U.S. is not complete, the U.S. has not fulfilled its destiny, it’s not fully civilized, until it has embraced the game of cricket” (O’Neill 210). An eerie reminder of the erstwhile colonial policy of the U.S., Chuck uses terms like fulfilling destiny, becoming complete, and becoming civilized, substituting nineteenth century westward expansion with modern day cricket and its associated global, neoliberal economy. Chuck continues this line of colonial argument, using the story of cricket in the Trobriand Island to make his point:

Trobriand Island is part of Papua New Guinea [...]. When the British missionaries arrived there, the native tribes were constantly fighting and killing each other—had been for thousands of years. So what did the missionaries do? They taught them cricket. They took these Stone Age guys and gave them cricket bats and cricket balls and taught them a game with rules and umpires. You ask people to agree to complicated rules and regulations? That’s like a crash course in democracy. Plus—and this is the key—the game forced them to share a field for days with their enemies, forced them to provide hospitality and places to sleep. Hans, that kind of closeness changes the way you think about somebody. No other sport makes this happen. (O’Neill 210-211)

Chuck deploys all the classic colonial stereotypes and binaries – Stone Age natives versus civilized Europeans, godless savages versus the missionaries, brutal, violent tribal culture versus rational democracy, illogical tribal warfare versus the environment of cricketing justice – to make his case. He ignores the complicated history of colonialism and racism and focuses instead on the traditional warfare that was stopped. Never mind that the islanders may have had sporting practices of their own; never mind that missionaries descended on the island to preach religion; never mind that anthropologists descended on the island, subjecting the islanders and their culture to scrutiny, or the increase in resistance amongst the islanders to colonial practices. All that he focuses on is the peace and camaraderie that emerged as a result of the introduction of cricket. Trobriand Island becomes another of those far away places like Sydney, Calcutta and Birmingham, cricket forming and shaping the worldview of its people as well as Chuck's.

Needless to say, Chuck oversells the exclusive value of cricket to building community and camaraderie, and in the case of America, as we shall see a paradigm shift. As we have seen earlier, Hans notes the nurturing function of sports clubs in Holland, "They took on scores of boys almost as hatchlings and bestowed parental care and effort on them for years, even on those who were athletically hopeless" (43). Any number of cultural practices—parades, festivals, weddings, and celebrations—function toward promoting social ties and bonds. Even in the example that he provides, that of Trobriand Island, Annette Weiner observes that, "Trobriand cricket is seen as a sophisticated activity, thoughtfully and creatively adapted by the local people, an adaptation that reflects the importance of fundamental cultural premises" (Weiner 506). Chuck fails to note

that cricket, in the Trobriand version, was merely an adaptation of the traditional *kayasa*, ritual warfare with spears and that “precolonial warfare activities were incorporated almost item for item into the local version,” including face paint, ritualistic song and dance, and courtship practices (Weiner 507).<sup>8</sup> For Chuck, cricket was about learning about the world, learning a language and its grammar, rejecting or overcoming his own drawbacks and inhibitions. This skews his understanding of cricket in the Trobriand Island, which stops at seeing it as cricket stopping tribal warfare. In his simplified rendering of the tale, he fails to see what has been termed an “ingenious response” of the Trobrianders, who Chuck describes as Stone Age guys, to the dominating colonial influence of Europeans. Furthermore, the object of the matches is not winning or losing, as the hosts are always winners. Weiner notes that,

Live pigs, huge amounts of yams, betel nuts, and taro puddings are presented by the host village with as much spectacle as the games themselves produce. This enormous distribution is the real political game (*mwasawa*) underlying all the rounds of matches (Weiner 507).

---

<sup>8</sup> Trobrianders have taken the very controlled game of British cricket, first introduced to them some 70 years earlier by Methodist missionaries, and changed it into an outlet for mock warfare and intervillage competition, political reputation-building among leaders, eroticized dancing and chanting, and wild entertainment. The game is a major symbolic statement of the Trobrianders' feelings and experiences under British colonialism. Trobriand cricket players still bat, bowl, score runs, field, and make outs. The sides, however, are no longer eleven players plus a reserve but are made up from all the men of the competing villages. Teams average 60 players or more, the main rule being that the sides must be roughly equal. Each team brings its own "umpire" who overtly declares outs and keeps his own side under control while secretly performing war magic against the opposition. The main purpose is not to win by scoring but to put on a fine display. Review of *Trobriand Cricket: An Ingenious Response to Colonialism*. Produced by Gary Kildea and Jerry Leach. Berkley Media LLC. [http://www.berkeleymedia.com/catalog/berkeleymedia/films/arts\\_humanities/trobriand\\_cricket\\_an\\_ingenious\\_response\\_to\\_colonialism](http://www.berkeleymedia.com/catalog/berkeleymedia/films/arts_humanities/trobriand_cricket_an_ingenious_response_to_colonialism)

In all of these instances, Trobriand cricket is unique. The indigenization process here, unlike in former British colonies like India, the West Indies and so on, is not as Arjun Appadurai has suggested in those cases, “a product of collective and spectacular experiments with modernity” (Appadurai 90). It has much more to do with preservation of premodern practices, the barter system still dominating economic exchange. In any case, Chuck uses any justification available in his monomaniacal pursuit of cricket in America.

In response to Chuck’s example of Trobriand Island, Hans asks him if he is suggesting that Americans are savages. He denies that Americans are savages, but launches a lengthy oration whose grandiosity and Napoleonic excess make Hans uncomfortable. Of course, Chuck is responding to the American political response to 9/11 in the form of the “War on Terror.” He says:

I’m saying that people, all people, Americans, whoever, are at their most civilized when they’re playing cricket. What’s the first thing that happens when Pakistan and India make peace? They play a cricket match. Cricket is instructive, Hans. It has a moral angle. I really believe this. Everybody who plays the game benefits from it. So I say, Why not Americans? [...] Americans cannot really see the world. They think they can, but they can’t. I don’t need to tell you that. Look at the problems we are having. It’s a mess, and it’s going to get worse. [...] With the New York Cricket Club, we could start a whole new chapter in U.S. history. (O’Neill 211)

Chuck attributes civility and morality to cricket, a logic that can be traced to Victorian England. We have seen how the code of cricket dictated C. L. R. James’s conduct as a schoolboy. As Appadurai has noted, “cricket came closer than any other public form to distilling, constituting, and communicating the

values of the Victorian upper classes in England,” and that these codes of cricket “were expected to govern all masculine behavior: sportsmanship, a sense of fair play, thorough control over the expression of strong sentiments by players on the field, subordination of personal sentiments and interests to those of the group, unquestioned loyalty to the team” (Appadurai 90 – 91). This version of the code recalls Marcuse’s observation that affirmative culture works towards maintaining the status quo, eliciting subordination and acquiescence from its subjects. All of the outcomes that Chuck expects from his project are based on Victorian values. His first major speech in the novel encapsulates these sentiments, that cricket’s moral code is a tribute and a responsibility. It is what Hans romanticizes in his epiphany, the imagining of the environment of justice. This is why Chuck claims that cricket is civilizing, that it has a moral angle and that it is instructive.

Much like the fallacy of his Trobriand example, cricket matches between India and Pakistan to promote peace that Chuck mentions, are just that. The peace at the time of the matches is not really sustained; the benefits that Chuck alludes to are transitory. Rather, tension between the neighbors is the norm. There is a further dichotomy here in that, per his plan it will not be Americans playing the matches at all. It will be teams and players flown in here to provide entertainment, and that to the local immigrants mostly. How then will this translate to America seeing the world and getting it through the problems it faces? In typically self-absorbed Chuck-style, he sees the New York Cricket Club as “starting a whole new chapter in U.S. history.” Apparently, he is just as blind as he thinks the Americans are, that geopolitical conflicts can be solved with a

sports arena in New York whose *raison d'être* is cricket. How new could this chapter be if it is proposing divisive, oppressive Victorian ideals as the solution?

### **Rachel and Post-9/11 Angst**

Rachel, Hans's wife and the third significantly developed character in the novel, brings a non-cricket related response to 9/11. Chuck grasps at what he sees as an opportunity to restore America's standing in the world through the particular moral logic of cricket. Hans, crushed by the separation from his family reevaluates his life through cricket, while also seeing hope in Chuck's dreams for himself and America. Rachel, on the other hand, is consumed by the ethical lapses in the geo-political response and the implications of this response in the future, particularly as it might impact her son.

The first articulated response to the events of 9/11 in the novel comes from Rachel when she tells Hans of her plans to move back to London with their son. The family has been living in the Hotel Chelsea since the attacks, a move which Hans describes as follows: "We'd been holed up in there since mid-September, staying on in a kind of paralysis even after we'd received permission from the authorities to return to our loft in Tribeca" (O'Neill 19). The term "paralysis" captures the state of emotional limbo that the family finds itself in. They seem to take comfort in their "homeless" state rather than go back to their apartment with its reminders of their previous life. One October night, as they lie in bed, Rachel says:

I've made up my mind. I'm taking Jake to London. [...] I can't see any other way. It's simply not fair to our little boy. [...] It came to me when I thought about packing up and going back to Tribeca. Then what? Start again as though nothing has happened? For what? So we can have this

great New York lifestyle? So I can keep risking my life every day to do a job that keeps me away from my son? When we don't even need the money? When I don't even enjoy it anymore? It's crazy, Hans. (O'Neill 22)

Rachel is trying to come out of the sense of paralysis that Hans has described above and to negotiate the sense of loss that she experiences for herself and for her son. Indeed, how does one start over again? Does the attempt to start over again necessarily imply that one is pretending that the event did not happen? What does starting over mean? What Rachel is mourning, is the fact that life, as she knew it up to that point, the life that she was comfortable in, is over. It had been her idea "to drop in on New York City for a year or three and then come back" (O'Neill 3). Going back to London was always the plan. However, it was supposed to be on their terms, without being coerced into it. The glamour that lured them to New York is lost as she mockingly states "this great New York lifestyle." To put it another way, any place not New York, or not the United States, as we shall see, represents a place of refuge for her. Once this has been established, she provides a litany of justifications for her proposed response to the event – she feels she is unnecessarily risking her life to do a job that keeps her away from her son; she does not enjoy it anymore; they do not need the money; she can give her son the attention he needs; and that it might even do them some good.

The adoption of an itinerant life, which seemed so attractive when they decided, "to drop in on New York," now, after the events of 9/11, simply accentuates this feeling of homelessness. She resents "living like this in a crappy hotel, in a city gone mad" (O'Neill 22). Rachel mourns the loss of home and yearns for the refuge that a home is expected to provide. Hans captures the

mood best when he sums up their situation in the following manner: “It is truly a terrible thing when questions of love and family and home are no longer answerable” and further that, “Life itself had become disembodied. My family, the spine of my days had crumbled. I was lost in invertebrate time” (O’Neill 23, 30). The home as a place of refuge is lost and he and his family are left disoriented in time and space. He takes up a semi-permanent residence in the ultimate symbol of transitory spaces – a hotel, while Rachel tries to find solace in her parents’ home, the “original” home.

Moving to London does not afford Rachel solace When she first tells Hans about her decision to move to London, Hans is devastated and counters her proposal with one of his own: “[W]e’ll head off together as a family. London would be just fine. Anywhere would be fine. Tuscany, Tehran, it doesn’t matter. OK? Let’s do it. Let’s have an adventure. Let’s live” (O’Neill 28). What Hans is saying in effect is that, when one suffers the loss of home, any place can become home. To him the family unit becomes synonymous with home. The loss of this unit to him is the ultimate loss. Rachel responds, “[T]his isn’t a question of geography. You can’t geographize this” (O’Neill 28). Physical space is important to Rachel and defines home for her. The loss of this space is insurmountable to her. So it is interesting that six months after returning to England she goes from being a corporate lawyer to becoming a lawyer for an NGO concerned with the welfare of asylum seekers—people forced from homes, people who have lost everything. Not surprisingly, the most clearly articulated argument against the United States and its declaring and handling of the war on terror comes from Rachel. She uses various epithets to describe the United States and its people – “‘ideologically diseased country,’ ‘mentally ill, sick, unreal, country whose



masses and leaders suffered from extraordinary and self-righteous delusions about the United States, the world and ... the universe'" (O'Neill 97-98). Seeing no hope for the future, she mourns the loss of ethical direction for the world at large.

This is a brief summary of Rachel's response to 9/11. The reason I chose to summarize her response, instead of giving it the elaborate treatment I have given Hans and Chuck's responses, is twofold. For one, hers is a non-cricket centered response, and the aesthetics of cricket as it functions in the novel is my primary concern in this chapter. Secondly, the summary is meant to mimic her disappearance from the narrative for a significant portion of the novel. But that it is non-cricket related and that minimal space is devoted to her response in the novel only makes it stand out even more. Her response emphasizes the fact that *Netherland* is "a 9/11 novel" as Lauren Berlant calls the slew of novels that have been published since. The trauma of 9/11 with its resultant anxiety, fear, and displacement are at the heart of Rachel's response. She is emotionally disoriented because she does not know how to "go back" and restart, which is also the definition of trauma – an event that cannot yet be processed; an experience to which preexisting frameworks do not seem to apply. "As if nothing has happened" bothers her in two ways. Personally, she does not seem able to reconcile to this. Politically, she is baffled that the Bush administration is using traditional responses to a non-traditional situation. How can one fight an enemy that one cannot identify? While Hans is skeptical of his profession and feels culpable in the turn of events, he is able to continue to function relatively successfully at his job. Rachel is disturbed by what Marcuse has called "insufferable mutability of a bad existence" that comes into view when the

vener of affirmative culture is ripped by 9/11 (Marcuse 225). It is through Rachel that O'Neill attempts to apprehend "heightened moments in which certain locales become exemplary laboratories for sensing or intuiting contemporary life" (Berlant 845).

Analyzing two of the many novels that she says are quickly written in the context of disasters like 9/11 Berlant observes that,

[D]espite the singularities of affect, the historical novel points to a unity of experience in an ongoing moment that historians can later call epochal, but that at the time was evidenced as a shared nervous system that it was the novelist's project to put out there for readers. (Berlant 847)

In this sense Rachel's experiences summarizes the affective experience of 9/11 of the various peripheral characters in the novel as it does our own, the readers responses. Hans's depression and Rachel's response are indeed O'Neill's responses to 9/11. As I have indicated in an earlier footnote some of Hans's character is autobiographical – O'Neill, of Irish-Turkish ancestry, spent his early years in the Netherlands, and lived in London before moving to New York. He lived with his family at the Chelsea Hotel, the hotel Hans and his family move into after 9/11. And, he is an avid cricketer. I will address the cricketing similarity in a bit. First, I want to elaborate on how O'Neill uses Rachel to draw attention to the extreme emotional divide that was unleashed by post-9/11 politics.

Hans, the "political-ethical idiot," "the reticent good egg," can hardly be the source of political critique of 9/11 (O'Neill 100, 48). Neither can Chuck, the "oddball," "crazy son-of-a-bitch," espousing cricket as the solution to America's problems (O'Neill 19, 58). Rachel, having lived in New York, which insists on

“memory’s mower,” but now having moved back to London, enjoys the vantage position of insider and outsider to offer a critique of political responses to 9/11. Additionally she can claim “the privileged standing of eyewitness and survivor,” having “been there” (O’Neill 182). Finally, Hans frequently reminds us that she is a lawyer, “a corporate litigator,” “she spoke as one trained in making legal submissions, in short sentences made up of exact words” (O’Neill 96, 28). So Rachel become the only plausible character through whom O’Neill offers his critique of 9/11, to articulate the shared responses, emotional and political, that might in future come to be seen as “epochal.”

O’Neill ends his September 2007 review of C. L.R. James’s *Beyond a Boundary* with the question, “What do they know of America who only America know?” This is of course a revision of James’s familiar question, “What do they know of cricket who only cricket know?” The response comes in what is considered the best cricket book ever written. *Beyond a Boundary* discusses the joy, the aesthetics and the socio-political implications of cricket. While O’Neill’s review surveys in some detail the history of cricket in America, and its current status as a marginalized sport, his response to the question he asks comes in the form of *Netherland* and Chuck.<sup>9</sup> I have to add here that the ghost of James is

---

<sup>9</sup> Chuck recounts some of the same history that O’Neill discusses in the review. O’Neill states that, “cricket was, as it happens, the first modern American team sport -- which is to say, a sport properly organized and monitored. Benjamin Franklin was very interested in cricket, and by 1779 at least two teams, Brooklyn and Greenwich, were turning out regularly. More teams sprang up, and in 1838, the first formally constituted club, the St. George Club of New York City, came into being. Matches for money were played: In 1844, a Toronto team won a \$1,000 purse in front of several thousand spectators in New York. Most of the players were British expats, but in Philadelphia, significant numbers of homegrown Americans took up the sport as an elite pastime and produced great cricketers and great clubs. Earlier this year, I played in Philadelphia at the

recalled in the melding of the aesthetic form of the novel and that of cricket. As has been mentioned earlier, James is very clear that cricket is an aesthetic form in the same league as theater, ballet, opera and dance. Furthermore, James foregrounds the dual influence of cricket and literature in his early life, starting very early his “own collection of books and bats and balls” (James 22). James also has a very elegant comparative reading of the puritan basis of some literary classics and the code of cricket (James 37-55). Clearly, O’Neill intends *Netherland* to be a similar kind of intervention. Cricket and the novel as aesthetic practices offer glimpses of utopian possibilities and are spaces where fantasies just might be fulfilled. At least, the limits of these possibilities can be tested. They offer us means of understanding and situating ourselves in our socio-cultural milieus. They educate us on ways of being and exploring the consequences of pushing boundaries and limits. In moments of trauma, they help explore the shared nervous system and contemporary affective tendencies.

---

Merion and Germantown and Philadelphia cricket clubs, where for a few weeks a year the tennis nets are stowed away and the gigantic, magnificently maintained lawns are restored to their original use.

My own club, Staten Island C. C., dates back to 1872, and is the oldest continuously active cricket club in the country. For almost a century and a quarter it has made its home at Walker Park, a little ground on the island's north shore. Walker Park and its cricketers once formed a hub of New York society, hosting fêtes champêtres and lawn tennis and attracting coverage in the sports and society pages.”

## CHAPTER 2 EMPATHIC UNSETTLEMENT THROUGH RELATIONALITY: DÍAZ'S OSCAR WAO

The bulk of Junot Díaz's 2007 novel *A Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* (*Oscar Wao*), the tale of the fat Dominican nerd from New Jersey is set well before the events of 9/11. The titular character, it is safe to assume, dies about 1995. The narrator tells the tale early in the new century. The novel never once mentions 9/11. But that the novel was published in 2007 and that the term Ground Zero is referenced in the first page places the novel squarely in the contemporary context. In fact, as we shall see, Díaz is attempting a new, hybrid historiography. This historiography, I posit, seeks to place the trauma of 9/11 in relation to other historical, mostly forgotten, or less privileged traumas. I see Díaz's novel eliciting empathic unsettlement, which Dominick La Capra has stated, is a necessary aspect of writing trauma. Furthermore, I argue that Díaz elicits this response through relationality, a notion that, according to Eduoard Glissant, puts historical events and experiences in relation to one another. Such a move resists isolated, self-contained, amnesiac narratives of history. Articulation and narration become key and serve to break silences surrounding less privileged events in history. Putting all events and episodes in history in relation to one another also resists closure and gives a way for victims of trauma to articulate their experiences.

In his 2008 interview with Rafael Pi Roman, Díaz states that he had started to write a novel about the destruction of New York City, a kind of post-apocalyptic novel, a novel that his character Oscar might write. But then the character of Oscar Wao came to him and *Oscar Wao* was born. Díaz talks about the importance of compassion and empathy to the process of writing. He insists that it is only when he writes he comes closest to his best possible human self. It

is this underlying compassion and empathy that Díaz insists is essential to our reading of history. The relational understanding of history that Díaz undertakes collapses spatial and temporal distances and elicits empathic unsettlement through relationality.

The novel begins with a detailed explication of the term *fukú*. The first two paragraphs, quoted below, trace a brief history of *fukú* in the Caribbean. Díaz recounts:

They say it came first from Africa, carried in the screams of the enslaved; that it was the death bane of the Tainos, uttered just as one world perished and another began; that it was a demon drawn into Creation through the nightmare door that was cracked open in the Antilles. *Fukú americanus*, or more colloquially, *fukú*—generally a curse or a doom of some kind; specifically the Curse and the Doom of the New World. Also called the *fukú* of the Admiral because the Admiral was both its midwife and one of its great European victims; despite “discovering” the New World the Admiral died miserable and syphilitic, hearing (*dique*) divine voices. In Santo Domingo, the Land He Loved Best (what Oscar, at the end, would call the Ground Zero of the New World), the Admiral’s very name has become synonymous with both kinds of *fukú*, little and large; to say his name aloud or even to hear it is to invite calamity on the heads of you and yours.

No matter what its name or provenance, it is believed that the arrival of Europeans on Hispaniola unleashed the *fukú* on the world, and we’ve all been in this shit ever since. Santo Domingo might be the *fukú*’s

Kilometer Zero, its port of entry, but we are all of us its children, whether we know it or not. (Díaz 1-2)

Díaz casts the history of the fukú in the vein of myths, folklores, and legends with the generic beginning, "They say." He infuses the history of fukú, "generally a curse or a doom of some kind; specifically the Curse and the Doom of the New World," with a certain inexplicable, unknowable quality even while trying to understand and explain it. In general it could be a curse or a doom but it specifically refers to a generalized Antillean condition of violent and traumatic experiences. It is general and particular, large and small. It stands at the cusp of the death of one way of life and at the beginning of another, "it was the death bane of the Tainos, uttered just as one world perished and another began." The Admiral, Columbus "was both its midwife and one of its great European victims." His name evokes nightmares unleashed by fukú and engenders fukú of the future, both the garden-variety everyday fukú and the generalized condition that afflicts the New World. It is experienced but never named for fear of inviting calamity. Santo Domingo both made and destroyed Columbus. Fukú is both the cause and the effect of the condition of the New World. The narrator points out that the origins and the provenance of fukú, or, the fact that we are not able to entirely grasp it or understand it are irrelevant; we are all implicated in it, "whether we know it or not." Fukú, in a sense, becomes a placeholder for the traumatic experiences of the Antilles and a figure for history itself, for its violent unfolding implacable logic. The experience is real but the causes remain mysterious. One only knows one is experiencing it. The distinctions between perpetrator and victim are blurred. One may or may not realize that they are implicated.

Díaz's narrator Yunior tells the story of the brief, wondrous life of Oscar de Leon by way of his life in New Jersey, as the son of Dominican immigrants and through the curse, or fukú, that haunts his family in particular and the Dominican Republic in general. An aspiring writer, aspiring to be the Dominican Tolkein, Oscar finds himself an outlier of Dominican masculinity in that he is fat, nerdy, and a fanboy who speaks a language alien to the community he grows up in. Ostensibly, Yunior's purpose is to trace the story of Oscar's search for love, and his goal to not die a virgin. But this story is inseparable from the story of his maternal grandparents the Cabrals and the story of the Dominican Republic during the long running and violent reign of the American-backed dictator Rafael Leónidas Trujillo Molina. The trauma of this family is not unique, but it is something that Yunior claims grabbed him by the throat. In writing the trauma of the family and of the Dominican Republic, Díaz's narrator traces a long history of trauma in the Americas, claiming that it all started with the arrival of the Europeans on Hispaniola and the death of the Tainos. This fukú, according to Yunior, haunts us all, the victims of trauma, the narrators of trauma stories, the readers of these stories, and we are all its children. The victims, the witnesses, the narrator, and the reader experience it differently. And yet, everyone is implicated.

Díaz juxtaposes the familiar with the unfamiliar casting the familiar story of the arrival of Europeans on Hispaniola in terms of the unfamiliar, at least to non-Dominican readers, the fukú. He retells historical fact, the extinction of the indigenous Tainos and the ruthlessness of the Trujillo regime in terms of the magical and the inexplicable fukú. In order for his unfamiliar narrative to succeed, Díaz's narrator Yunior solicits his readers' sympathy and empathy by



implicating them in the story. Whether we know it or not, whether we accept it or not, we are all its (fukú's) children. While the Tainos ceased to be so long ago, we are not immune to the fukú as we have all been in this shit ever since. Fukú is not to be thought of as occurring only on a grand scale; it is something that can occur in little, everyday things as well. This implication of the reader, this chapter argues, is crucial to Yunior's narrative because he not only seeks the reader's empathy, he also attempts to defamiliarize the familiar and familiarize the unfamiliar. He wants to mark the Antillean condition as a familiar story of trauma by using terms like "Ground Zero," terms that have been appropriated to privilege the trauma of 9/11. And yet, he repeatedly points out that this is a unique story of trauma. It is unique because of its long history in the continent and because it is not a commonly told story. I argue that the response he seeks is what Dominick La Capra has called "empathic unsettlement" (La Capra x-xi). He sees such an unsettlement as an ethical responsibility that guards against facile closure. Yunior's narrative achieves this empathic unsettlement, I posit, through what Edouard Glissant has termed relationality. Betsy Wing states in her introduction to *Poetics of Relation*, that for Glissant "relationality" is "a transformative mode of history," "based more on associative principles than any steady progress toward irrefutable proof" (Glissant xii). As many critics have argued, Díaz has attempted a new kind of historiography of trauma, a historiography that straddles the lines between fact and fiction, between the real and the magical, and by juxtaposing the familiar with the unfamiliar. What I will argue here is that Díaz's project goes beyond the attempt at a new kind of historiography. My aim is to show that in narrating this tale, a tale that ends long before 9/11, he forces his readers to see 9/11 as one in a long history of trauma

and the importance of narrating that trauma. 9/11 is only another manifestation of the long history of colonial and racist violence that is part of the history of the United States in particular and of history in general. Díaz picks up the story when the Europeans arrive in the New World, a moment that also spawns slave trade from Africa. He wants to short circuit the (en)forced silence regarding Dominican history as well as the amnesiac historical rendering of 9/11 in the United States. *A Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* is the writing of trauma that engenders empathic unsettlement through relationality.

### **Díaz and Historiography**

Various critics have noted that Díaz engages in historiography of a new kind in his recounting of the tale of the de Leon/Cabral family, a tale familiar to twentieth century Dominicans, as much as it is a tale of many twentieth century Dominicans. Machado Saez has noted that,

Junot Díaz writes a foundational fiction that embodies the contradictory forces shaping historical narratives, the difference being that rather than recording the origins of a nation, the novel recounts the pressures that shape the historiography of a diasporic community. The blurring of narrator and character, of author and subject, produces an ambivalent narrative. (Saez 552)

Saez observes historical narratives are necessarily ambivalent because of the “contradictory forces” that shape them. Díaz’s narrative is challenged even further because he attempts to recover the historiography of a diasporic community where the roles of narrator, character, author, and subject are blurred. Díaz’s challenge is not only how to narrate the story but also what of the story to narrate. Díaz’s narrator straddles the line of narrator and character as he

does of author and subject. The ambivalence stems from these blurred lines as it does from attempting to tell the tale of a community.

Monica Hanna describes this tension between the what and the how of narration in Díaz's novel as a "historiographic battle royal: a struggle over who controls the narration of history, including both its content (what is told) and form (the way in which it is told)." Díaz's task is complicated by the fact that the stories he wants to narrate are not readily available, as they have been subsumed by the officially endorsed history of the Trujillo regime.<sup>1</sup> Calling it a "resistance history" Hanna writes that,

Yunior's historiography acts as an intervention against this official historiography, yet it is an imaginative reconstruction that can only take place in the literary realm, since traditional histories rely on what can be considered objective fact supported by accepted forms of evidence whereas Yunior's history explicitly relies on imagination and invention. (Hanna 504)

Yunior repeatedly claims that some of the aspects of (hi)story fall well outside the realm of belief and enter the realm of magic. He chalks this up to being a necessary aspect of the Antillean condition. When there are gaps in his story with dead witnesses and lost manuscripts, when gaps in his stories are generated by incomprehension, the only way to attempt to fill these gaps is by imagination and invention. With the national narrative shaped and stabilized by the Trujillo

---

<sup>1</sup> Lauren Derby states that the public space become one giant tribute to Trujillo as Díaz has described, she adds that, "National time was also reconstructed to highlight the achievements of Trujillo; not only did the dates of his inauguration and birthday become national holidays, but the calendar itself was transformed to date from the first year of the Era of Trujillo" (Derby 5).

regime—examples include, renaming streets, cities, and landmarks to honor Trujillo, “insisting on absolute veneration from his pueblo,” and most tellingly the national slogan “Dios y Trujillo” or, “God and Trujillo”—the unsaid and the unspoken acquire a magical status. Evidence is simply unavailable. His literary narrative allows him the freedom to explore the unavailable stories.

Ramon Saldivar claims that the imagination and invention are crucial to narratives that he terms “historical fantasy.” He sees such narratives signaling a radical turn to a postrace era in American literature. He argues that,

[I]n the twenty-first century, the relationship between race and social justice, race and identity, and indeed, race and history requires these writers to invent a new “imaginary” for thinking about the nature of a just society and the role of race in its construction. It also requires the invention of new forms to represent it. (Saldivar, 575)

What Saldivar is saying is that, narratives such as Díaz’s are imagining new ways of narrating race and imagining the nature of a just society from the perspective of the dispossessed, the dispossessed not only in terms of equality and justice but also in terms of those that have lacked a voice thus far. In order to accomplish this, Saldivar notes, Díaz traces multiple story lines; he also employs an “odd amalgam of historical novel, bildungsroman, postmagical realism, sci-fi, fantasy, and super-hero comic romance that structures the story of Oscar Wao” (Saldivar, 585). Traditional modes, or singular modes of narration are inadequate to his purpose. It defies the limits of genre. Saldivar posits that through this new kind of historiography, “historical fantasy” Díaz seeks to unite the various presences, African, Native American, and European strands that have formed the deep history of the Americas, and that “*Oscar Wao* turns historical fiction inside out in

the hope of undoing the aesthetic and social history of the New World” (Saldivar 585).

That Díaz has attempted a novel historiography is clear, as the various critics above have shown. The question that follows is what does this attempt at a new historiography signify in the present context? Allen Meek has observed that, Traumatic memories are experienced with a sense of great vividness and immediacy: they seem to retain an indelible imprint of the past and thereby an incontestable link with history in an era of pure simulation. Yet since 9/11 we have again been reminded of the ways that “traumatic” events participate in a construction of past and future that imposes a homogeneous narrative on an explosive terrain of political conflict. ... 9/11 almost immediately became the logo for a new spatial aggression (the War on Terror) as well as enshrined as a national trauma of the gravest kind. Meanwhile a hegemonic silence was imposed regarding any other historical traumas these events may have recalled.

Meek draws attention to homogeneous narratives that arise out of traumatic events such as 9/11. Not only do the vividness and immediacy of these events dictate future events, they also alter our perception of past events. In the case of 9/11, traumas of the past were minimized, even forgotten. Díaz intervenes with his account of the forgotten trauma of the Tainos, the African slaves and the Dominican diaspora. Simultaneously, he resists what Meeks calls homogenous narratives and hegemonic silence.

Díaz foregrounds the term Ground Zero in the opening lines of the novel, calling Santo Domingo “the Ground Zero of the New World” and then extends the term, nominating Santo Domingo “fukú’s Kilometer Zero.” Published in

2007, the term Ground Zero necessarily recalls 9/11 and the scenes of planes flying into the World Trade Center towers. The term Ground Zero was first used during the Manhattan Project to reference the ground on the surface of the earth on which an atomic bomb was dropped. The blast radius is determined from this point. Subsequently, this term has been appropriated to describe the point on which any large bomb is dropped, the epicenter of epidemics and so forth. More recently, World Trade Center towers were referred to as Ground Zero following the attacks on 9/11. In this sense, Díaz's appropriation of the term is an anachronism. The term was unavailable at the time of the "discovery" of America. But it serves to emphasize the misappropriation of the term in the context of 9/11 and the tendency to use the term exclusively to site of the World Trade Center towers, or as Meek puts it "enshrined as a national trauma of the gravest kind," silencing any reference to any other trauma. We see here, Díaz employing "resistance history" as Hanna describes it. In co-opting the term Ground Zero in his origin story as depicting the starting point of the curse and doom of the new world, Díaz necessarily unsettles his readers. He puts the sense of victimization felt by Americans in Relation to what he sees as the original traumatic event of the New World. This chapter will posit that Díaz evokes empathic unsettlement in his readers through relationality. Relationality is the crux of the story in that Díaz attempts a transformative mode of history. The long history of trauma makes post 9/11 readers conscious of their own implication in other traumas. The empathic unsettlement that comes with this consciousness is the transformation that Díaz seeks and that Glissant and La Capra see as crucial to writing history and to writing trauma.

### **Empathic Unsettlement**

La Capra sees the vision of history in its contemporary modern and postmodern iteration as traumatic, “a symptomatic response to a felt implication in excess and disorientation which may have to be undergone or even acted out if one is to have an experiential or empathic basis for working it through” (La Capra, x-xi). Trauma is a disorienting experience, or as La Capra defines it, “a shattering break or caesura in experience which has belated effects” (La Capra 186). History, or writing of trauma acts out, or performs this disorientation while it engenders empathy, and helps to work through the trauma. La Capra goes on to say that, “Indeed, I insist on the need for empathic unsettlement, and the discursive inscription of that unsettlement, in response to traumatic events or conditions” (La Capra, xi). Empathy with the victims of trauma in of itself is not enough. The empathy should also shake the reader out of their familiarity and comfort. Empathic unsettlement brings readers closer to the shattering break or caesura, which victims have experienced. As La Capra notes, “Trauma is a disruptive experience that disarticulates the self and creates holes in existence; it has belated effects that are controlled only with difficulty and perhaps never fully mastered” (La Capra 41) As we will see in Díaz’s story, diasporic populations live in a state of permanent break or caesura which is an additional challenge to the articulation of trauma. *Oscar Wao* attempts fill these gaps or holes in their existence. But the crucial point is that the disruptive experience of trauma can never fully be mastered. Empathic unsettlement becomes a way to communicate this gap to readers, or, as La Capra points out, a way to respond to victims of trauma without appropriating their experience. Per La Capra, empathic unsettlement translates into writing in the form of “stylistic effects or, more broadly, effects in writing which cannot be reduced to formulas or rules of

method" (La Capra 41). As we shall see, Yuniór's narrative is part third person narrative, part autobiographical, part myth, and part magical in the form of fukú. As this chapter will elaborate, Yuniór frequently reminds his readers that one may never know the whole story, or his story cannot be confirmed, or, how he constantly shifts his point of view from first person to omniscient narrator. Fukú holds together the disparate elements of the story, as it becomes the primary means of achieving empathic unsettlement. While one purpose of such unsettlement is to prevent the appropriation of the experience of trauma, Yuniór's method is unsettling in that it deliberately resists his own narrative from becoming a stable, or homogeneous, or hegemonic account. Indeed, the magical elements we see in the book, the repetitive experiences of trauma in the de Leon/Cabral family, the constant reliance on the genres both by Oscar and Yuniór are consistent with what La Capra says is crucial to narration of trauma – hyperbole. He observes that trauma "registers in hyperbole in a manner that is avoided or repressed in a complacent reasonableness or bland objectivism" (La Capra xi). He insists that empathic unsettlement and hyperbole are discursive symptoms and necessary affective responses to trauma. Hyperbole and empathic unsettlement together demarcate the experience as outside of the norm and bring them to the forefront of consciousness. Additionally, as La Capra reminds us, "At the very least, empathic unsettlement poses a barrier to closure in discourse and places in jeopardy harmonizing or spiritually uplifting accounts of extreme events from which we attempt to derive reassurance or benefit" (La Capra 41-42). As this chapter explicates, multiple endings to this story is one way that it resists closure and does not quite offer solace.



As we have seen, Monica Hanna has described *Oscar Wao* as a historiographical battle royal between hegemonic, received history and new conceptualizations of history from the point of view of the victims of trauma, of the dispossessed voices of trauma. Another way to look at Díaz's narrative is in the distinction that La Capra makes between writing about trauma and writing trauma. Writing about trauma, according to La Capra, involves reconstructing the past as objectively as possible without necessarily denying one's own implication in that past. In other words it is a process of writing history. What Díaz engages in, on the other hand, can be seen as writing trauma. Writing trauma, for La Capra is a metaphor. It indicates some distance from the trauma being written while simultaneously being bound up in the trauma being written. While writing trauma relates to particular events, "It cannot be localized in terms of discrete, dated experience." La Capra describes it as a performative act that involves "acting out, working over, and to some extent working through in analyzing and "giving voice" to the past" (La Capra 186). As we will see, Díaz's narrative is about performance of the Dominican identity as it is inherited through a traumatic past. Yunior's performance of the hyper-masculine Dominican male hides a secret that cannot be articulated and surfaces as a blank at the end of the novel. Trauma produces both the blank/silence as well as the hyper-masculine performance. Oscar's nerdiness challenges this performance while also resorting to the performance of the fanboy to cope with his own trauma.

### **Relationality**

La Capra insists that writing trauma "cannot be localized in terms of discrete dated experience." Díaz's origin story picks up at the birth of the New

World, with the coming of the Europeans. His strategic use of the term Ground Zero is a reminder that an amnesiac view of history leads to violence; in the present context, the context of 9/11, it took the form of the War on Terror. Díaz frames 9/11 as a manifestation of the fukú engendered from the screams of the Tainos and the enslaved Africans. While the story explicitly deals with the hegemonic narrative of Trujillo's Dominican Republic, it cautions against all homogenizing histories. Following Deleuze and Guattari, Glissant states that, "Rhizomatic thought is the principle behind what I call the Poetics of Relation, in which each and every identity is extended through a relationship with the Other" (11). Glissant emphasizes that, "Relation is not made up of things that are foreign but of shared knowledge" (8). Sharing of knowledge is crucial here, sharing implying that which is already familiar, or is made familiar. His idea of Relation encapsulates that which is relative, relayed and related. Hence, the kind of narrative, or poetics, that Glissant prioritizes or values, is one that is never stable but constantly evolving. It promotes and allows for relations to proliferate. In service of this idea, Glissant introduces the concept of errantry to clarify this notion of shared knowledge. As with the rhizome, errantry puts identity in Relation,

Because the thought of errantry is also the thought of what is relative, the thing relayed as well as the thing related. The thought of errantry is a poetics, which always infers that at some moment it is told. The tale of errantry is the tale of Relation (18).

The idea of errantry repudiates any thought of isolation because it is always already in relation – relative, related and relayed. Errantry or wandering resists stability and constantly resists attempts at harmonizing or closure. It is always

open-ended, in perpetual motion. It relies on associative principles in order to transform experience and understanding of history. As such, the notion of errantry lends itself to the writing the history of a diasporic community.

Errantry and the idea of movement, of people, of ideas, and of experiences and the interlinking of their (hi)stories is central to Díaz's thinking in this novel about Dominican diaspora. Brent Hayes Edwards reminds us in his entry on diaspora in *Keywords for American Culture Studies* that,

"Diaspora" is first of all a translation, a foreign word adopted in the Jewish intellectual discourse of community. As such, it should serve as a reminder that there is never a "first," single dispersion of a single people, but instead a complex historical overlay of a variety of kinds of population movement, narrated and imbued with value in different ways and to different ends. (Edwards 83)

The term diaspora is as complicated and complex as the ideas it denotes. It defies attempts at exclusionary usage or singularity of status. More importantly, it defies any originary claim of "first." It is a historical overlay of movements of peoples. It is always already relative, related, and relayed, to cast it in Glissant's term. Edwards also emphasizes the narrative and political aspects of diaspora. Díaz's narrative may ostensibly be about the Dominican diaspora and their silences. But it is no surprise that he identifies the coming of Europeans and the death of Tainos as the Ground Zero of fukú. Edwards further notes that this complex overlay of movements of histories have to be especially considered in the contemporary context. He states:

With regard to the study of the movement of peoples under globalization in the contemporary period, this history of usage should make us

skeptical of an overarching concern with the movement of groups considered as discrete or self-contained, and compel us to focus on the ways in which those movements always intersect, leading to exchange, assimilation, expropriation, coalition, or dissension. (Edwards 83)

He warns against indiscriminate and loose usage of the term, conflating a whole host of other ideas and terms. Again, we see the idea of errantry as Glissant describes it. There can be no harmonizing or closure. There cannot be an isolated diaspora but always occurs in the context of other diasporas. What is relevant to this discussion in Edwards's concept of diaspora is the idea of contact and exchange amongst the various diaspora. As La Capra sees writing trauma as metaphor, a particular, localized event and a metaphor at the same time, diaspora becomes a metaphor in the vein of errantry as Glissant describes it.

Glissant describes the poetics of Relation as a new form of historiography. The poetics of Relation, he posits, has evolved from the previous trajectories of poetics, which tended chronologically from center to periphery, periphery to center, and periphery to periphery. While these trajectories retained the binaries of center and periphery, the poetics of Relation, in keeping with rhizomatic thought, is one of networks. There are no trajectories or itineraries, only global dynamics. This is because though knowledge of totality is sought in the context of errantry, one is always already aware that this can never be accomplished. Hence, "The poetics of Relation remains forever conjectural and presupposes no ideological stability. ... A poetics that is latent, open, multilingual in intention, directly in contact with everything possible" (32). Both La Capra and Glissant understand narrative, of trauma, history, or identity, as open ended, unsettling, and as only in relation to other events and histories of trauma.

Glissant's poetics of Relation is an intervention in the traditional understating of narrative. According to Glissant, imperatives of filiation are central to Western thought with its linear conception of time and consequently the privileging of rooted thought over rhizomatic thought. Filiation here is considered in all its senses – paternal/parental relationships, linguistic and cultural descent and derivations, and the associated legal ramifications of such relationships, descent, and derivations. Glissant states that,

The retelling (certifying) of a "creation of the world" in a filiation guarantees that this same filiation—or legitimacy—rigorously ensues simply by describing in reverse the trajectory of the community, from its present to this act of creation. (47)

In other words, what Glissant is saying is that filiation, as Díaz sees it in the history as told by the Trujillo regime, or as it developed in the aftermath of 9/11, builds and maintains legitimacy and, further, is essential to maintaining the status quo. The individual becomes subsumed in the interests of the community. But identity necessarily challenges filiation and legitimacy because as Glissant has said, identity is "the search for a freedom within particular surroundings." This gap between filiation/legitimacy and identity engenders violence. What he calls "root identity" is sanctified by the hidden violence of a filiation" that stems from "a vision, a myth of the creation of the world" (Glissant 143). "Relation identity" of rhizomatic thought does not demand filiation and legitimacy because it is linked "to the conscious and contradictory experience of contacts among cultures" and "is produced in the chaotic network of Relation and not in the hidden violence of filiation" (Glissant 144). Insisting on global dynamics and networked narratives of relationality, Glissant sees history emerging at nodal

points of contact. Identity for a diasporic population hinges on relationality than on filiation. So the history of a diasporic community is also necessarily relational as we have seen Edwards describe it.

### **A Telling Silence: Fukú and Zafa**

Díaz starts by giving us the back-story to the story of Oscar Wao. This is the "mandatory two seconds of Dominican history" – the story of the Dominican Republic in the mid-twentieth century as well as an explication of fukú, the idea that frames Oscar's story (Díaz 2). As stated earlier, fukú was unleashed on the world with the arrival of the Europeans and Santo Domingo becomes the epicenter of the fukú. Fukú is not unique to Oscar's family or even the DR. It is a pan-Caribbean phenomenon. "We have all been in the shit;" "we are all it's children whether we know it or not;" it is quite commonplace. Yuniór claims that he posted the thread fukú on the DR1 forum and:

"[T]he talkback blew the fuck up. You should see how many responses I've gotten. They just keep coming in. And not just from Domo. The Peuertorocks want to talk about fufus, and the Haitians have some shit just like it. There are a zillion of these fukú stories." (Díaz 6)

Díaz strategically uses the phrase "fuck up" in close proximity to the word fukú, with their proximal spelling and pronunciation. Yuniór appears to be saying that we are all children of the fukú; it is all fucked up; we are all fucked up. Later in the novel Oscar rehearses the same play on words when he is lying in bed injured, "Fukú. He rolled the word experimentally in his mouth. *Fuck you*" (Díaz 304). The notion of fukú, however, engenders feelings of sympathy, empathy, and community, a shared experience that constitutes us both as individuals and as communities. Oscar's brief and wondrous life is engendered by the fukú,

much like communities of the DR1 forum and the readers of the novel. There are innumerable fukú stories, a vast majority of them untold but bursting to come out. A small trigger, the word, draws innumerable responses. The fukú stories appear to be lurking just under the surface, national and racial identities notwithstanding. But the telling of these stories among the various Caribbean peoples, the Haitians, the Puerto Ricans, the Dominicans and so forth is not as commonplace as the stories themselves. A shroud of silence surrounding fukú seems just as commonplace. Yuniors indicates that in his own family the fukú stories are not shared, "Even my mother, who almost never talks about Santo Domingo, has started sharing hers with me" (Díaz 6). Family stories of fukú seem to surface only when the community talks about it. The silence surrounding fukú is not anything new. Christopher Columbus, referred to here simply as "the Admiral" was both its "midwife and one of its great European victims" and whose name "has become synonymous with both kinds of fukú, little and large." More importantly, "to say his name aloud or even to hear it is to invite calamity on the heads of you and yours" (Díaz 1). Fukú is difficult to describe because no one talks about it. But not talking about it does not necessarily spare one from its effects. Fear of inviting fukú upon oneself means the silence surrounding fukú gets compounded. A perpetrator of fukú is also its victim.<sup>2</sup>

---

<sup>2</sup> In his May 2012 interview with Paula Moya, Díaz makes a similar claim about the silence surrounding white supremacy. He observes: "How can you change something if you won't even acknowledge its existence, or if you downplay its significance? White supremacy is the great silence of our world, and in it is embedded much of what ails us as a planet. The silence around white supremacy is like the silence around Sauron in *The Lord of the Rings*, or the Voldemort name which must never be uttered in the *Harry Potter* novels. And yet here's the rub: if a critique of white supremacy doesn't first flow through you, doesn't first implicate you, then you have missed the mark; you have, in fact, almost

Breaking the silence that appears to accompany fukú is crucial to Yuniór. “I have a fukú story too,” he declares. Yuniór commiserates with the reader; he too has a fukú story, like his readers might also have. But he qualifies this statement by stating that his story is just one of many. He adds, “I wish I could say it was the best of the lot—fukú number one—but I can’t. Mine ain’t the scariest, the clearest, the most painful, or the most beautiful. It just happens to be the one that’s got its fingers around my throat” (Díaz 6). Yuniór is quick to dismiss any presumptions of exclusivity or privilege for his story. All fukú stories are stories of violence and suffering. There cannot be a grading of violence and suffering; it is all the same to the sufferer. It does not ease one’s suffering to know that others suffered more. In a sense, violence and suffering are great equalizers, or as Yuniór describes it “we have all been in this shit ever since.” It is this common suffering that elicits empathy. That violence is not a single act but systemic and relational is what Yuniór emphasizes here. The Dominican story is not isolated. It is linked to the pre-WWII politics, Cold War politics, colonial history, racial cleansings and genocide, and rampant socio-economic disparities. Its history can be traced back to territorial claims and conquests of the fifteenth century to contemporary neoliberal politics. But the fukú is not something that happens to one. In his initial description of the Dominican dictator Rafael Leónidas Trujillo Molina, “the mandatory two seconds of Dominican history,” the story that gets lost in the scheme of geo-politics, Yuniór says that, just like the

---

guaranteed its survival and reproduction. There’s that old saying: the devil’s greatest trick is that he convinced people that he doesn’t exist. Well, white supremacy’s greatest trick is that it has convinced people that, if it exists at all, it exists always in other people, never in us.” “The Search for Decolonial Love: An interview with Pulitzer Prize-winning novelist Junot Díaz,” Paula M.L. Moya, Boston Review.

[http://www.salon.com/2012/07/02/the\\_search\\_for\\_decolonial\\_love/](http://www.salon.com/2012/07/02/the_search_for_decolonial_love/)



Admiral “No one knows whether Trujillo was the Curse’s servant or its master, its agent or its principal, but it was clear he and it had an understanding, that them two was tight” (Díaz 3). Categorizations become impossible in a networked context. We are all implicated. Narration, or, relation is the only defense against fukú. The violent trauma of Dominicans is particular and unique but it cannot be remain isolated.

If fukú is a curse and it engenders silence, the counter spell to fukú that the narrator offers here is zafa. The narrator elaborates:

Traditionally in Santo Domingo anytime you mentioned or overheard the Admiral’s name or anytime a fukú reared its many heads there was only one way to prevent disaster from coiling around you, only one surefire counterspell that would keep you and your family safe. Not surprisingly, it was a word. A simple word (followed usually by a vigorous crossing of index fingers).

Zafa.

...

Even now as I write these words I wonder if this book ain’t a zafa of sorts. My very own counterspell. (Díaz 6-7)

That disaster is going to happen is a given. It will rear “its many heads.” But all is not lost. A single word will counter any calamity: “zafa.” The narrator editorializes thus, “Not surprisingly, it was a word. A simple word.” It is not surprising because the counterspell is in the tradition of myths, legends, and folklore. If fukú is a curse that engenders silence in its victims, then zafa invites language in the gaps that emerge as a result of silence. Zafa is narration that breaks fukú and counters the language of the perpetrators, in this case Trujillo’s

appropriation of language. Additionally, a counter spell is necessitated at times of duress and therefore cannot be anything complicated. Just as fukú can be anything from a mundane, everyday affliction to major calamities like the arrival of the Europeans to the New World, zafa too can be used on anything, as Díaz points out – “if the Yanks commit an error in the late innings” to this book which describes in great detail the fukú that coiled around the de Leon/ Cabral family (Díaz 7). Zafa becomes writing trauma, a way of acknowledging potential, future or past trauma. It is writing trauma in the sense that it is a process “of coming to terms with traumatic “experiences,” limit events, and their symptomatic effects that achieve articulation in different combinations and hybridized forms” (La Capra 186). This book is Yuniór’s zafa, a counterspell, and writing trauma, a way to achieve empathic unsettlement.

### **Fukú in Relation**

As stated before, the fukú of the Dominican Republic is neither exclusive nor is it isolated. That fukú is both the general and the particular is made clear right away. It is particular to the Dominican Republic and the Americas, but related to its inheritors as well. The pseudo-scientific nomenclature *Fukú americanus* is a play on the familiar binomial nomenclature of Carolus Linnæus. The two-part naming or classification system is the final step in taxonomy that includes the genus and specific names of all known living species. The generic and specific names of species make them uniquely identifiable in this classification system. Díaz’s *Fukú americanus* identifies it as a uniquely Antillean condition, while recognizing it as related to universal violence and trauma that pre-exists European contact with the Tainos. Hence it is “generally a curse or a doom of some kind; specifically the Curse or Doom of the New World.” It has

European roots in the person of Columbus, but it is particularly the death bane of the Tainos. It is both large and small. It is not just ancient history or a ghost story from the past; it is in the present and of the present. Díaz describes it as follows:

In my parents' day the fukú was real as shit, something your everyday person could believe in. Everybody knew someone who'd been eaten by a fukú, just like everybody knew somebody who worked at the Palacio. It was in the air, you could say, though, like all important things on the island, not something folks really talked about (Díaz 2).

Fukú is ever present but something that is left unacknowledged. It is this disavowal that simultaneously demands narration. The all-encompassing, generalized condition normalizes fukú. In other words, it is the normalizing of trauma, violence, and suffering. There is a sense of futile acceptance that normalizes fukú and the associated suffering. Normalizing of violence and suffering has the effect of maintaining status quo thus perpetuating further violence and suffering. Trauma that this violence engenders is a break or caesura in experience but the break itself is co-opted as a norm in order to cope with it. If fukú is the norm, it must be real; it must be something people can believe in, not some ancient ghost story.

If Columbus both unleashed and became the victim of the fukú, the modern incarnation of fukú in the Dominican Republic comes, according Díaz's narrator, in the form of Rafael Leónidas Trujillo Molina, the dictator who ruled the Dominican Republic for various stretches from 1930 to 1961. "No one knows," Yunior says, whether Trujillo was the fukú's "servant or its master, its agent or its principal." (Díaz 2-3). The excesses of Trujillo's regime were such that fact and fiction got blurred and Yunior has to once again resort to language of

myths and legends – “No one knows.”<sup>3</sup> Footnoting a brief overview of the Trujillo regime, Yuniór surveys significant moments of Cold War history and traces the disastrous outcomes back to the fukú spawned by Trujillo. These events include the Kennedy assassination (even the so-called Curse of the Kennedys) and the American defeat in Vietnam. Díaz’s networked narratives emphasize his insistence that we are all implicated in the fukú and the deep relationality is in keeping with the taxonomical system he borrows from life sciences – a general curse or doom, but specifically the curse of the New World. In this case, the effects of Trujillo’s reign mimic that of Columbus’s arrival in Santo Domingo. Hence Santo Domingo becomes Ground Zero or Kilometer Zero of fukú.

While fukú is a generalized condition, it is the particular effects that make it recognizable as such – Trujillo’s reign of terror, the 1937 genocide against Haitians and Haitian-Dominicans, the Kennedy assassination, and the American defeat in Vietnam in the larger political context and “everybody knew someone who’d been eaten by a fukú” in the individual context. There is a twelve-daughter uncle who thinks he is a victim of fukú because he does not have male progeny having been cursed by a former lover, or, an aunt who thinks she is accursed for having laughed at a rival’s funeral, or, if the Yanks commit an error in the late innings. It is hardly surprising that Yuniór’s post pertaining to the fukú “blew the fuck up.” Everyone from the Dominicans to the Puerto Ricans to

---

<sup>3</sup> Derby observes that deception and secrecy were integral to the operations of the Trujillo regime. She states that, “‘Secretism’ thus generated popular narratives about the occult and even the magical powers of the ubiquitous yet invisible inner circle—such as the stories about Trujillo’s “animal magnificence,” about his never sweating ... People knew that Trujillo was up to something, but they did not always know exactly what” (Derby 4).

the Haitians has fukú stories and there are zillions of fukú stories. While fukú is a generalized condition, it is the particular story that grabs one by the throat that gets narrated. In Yuniors case it is the story of the de Leon/Cabral family in general and Oscar in particular that affects him and the result is the story told in *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*.

Filiation engenders legitimacy and normativity which helps sustain the status quo. Díaz's networked narrative challenges this legitimacy by insisting that we are all implicated in the Antillean condition. For instance, he contextualizes American defeat in Vietnam by framing it in terms of fukú. He recalls that just as the Johnson administration was getting involved in Vietnam, they launched an illegal invasion of the Dominican Republic in 1965. He suggests that some of the very same military and intelligence units that participated in the "democratization" of Santo Domingo were immediately shipped off to Saigon. He elaborates:

What do you think these soldiers, technicians, and spooks carried with them, in their rucks, in their suitcases, in their shirt pockets, on the hair inside their nostrils, caked up around their shoes? Just a little gift from my people to America, a small repayment for an unjust war. That's right, folks. Fukú. (Díaz 4).

Díaz stresses the interconnectedness of narratives to counter simplistic views of history, or, as La Capra notes that in a sense "the after effects of traumatic events are not fully owned by anyone and, in various ways affect everyone" (La Capra xi). In other words, writing trauma cannot be "localized in terms of a discrete dated experience." In imagining fukú as microscopic particles embedded in the bodies and possessions of American military personnel, Díaz dramatizes the

deep embeddedness of these bonds. It further emphasizes his earlier claim that “we are all of its children whether we know it or not.” As both La Capra and Glissant insist, denying these relations does not make them go away. As Yunior puts it, “It’s perfectly fine if you don’t believe in these “superstitions.” In fact, it’s better than fine—it’s perfect. Because no matter what you believe, fukú believes in you”(Díaz 5). Much like the many fukú stories that demand our witness, which are waiting to be narrated, these bonds are waiting to emerge at the cusp of the particular and the general. As Glissant states, errantry assumes that at some point it is going to be told. Fukú engenders the zafa of narration.

### **Knowing/Not Knowing**

One of the ways that Díaz exposes the reader to unsettlement of the self is by straddling the line between knowing and not knowing. Yunior, the primary narrator of Díaz’s tale and a character within the story, for the most part, assumes the position of an omniscient narrator. Naturally, this raises the question, how does a character within the novel have access to his fellow-characters’ internal thoughts and feelings? How can he know? Or, does he know? Díaz’s framing devices of fukú and zafa allow Yunior to straddle the line between the known and the unknown. As Glissant states, “Relation informs not simply what is related but also the relative and the related. Its always approximate truth is given in a narrative” (Glissant 27). La Capra posits that the approximate truth given in narratives in fiction are crucial because they “involve truth claims on a structural or general level ... by giving at least a plausible “feel” for experience and emotion” (La Capra 13). Yunior’s narrative tends to the truth, provides us approximations of the truth, and constantly reminds us that it is merely an approximation. In addition to the phrase “they say,” Yunior

frequently uses the phrase “no one knows” to indicate this approximation to truth. The phrase “they say,” as we have seen, employs the narrative style of myths, folks, and legends. It alludes to accepted cultural truths while simultaneously recognizing the impossibility of proving their veracity. Any story, especially one that “grabs [the narrator] by the throat,” engenders an expectation of authenticity. The narrator is also a character after all. However what is available is “approximate truth.” Cast in terms of *fukú*, the narrative is both well known, and yet unknown, couched as it is in secrecy and silence. Yuniór also uses the device of the blank page or “*pagino blanco*” to indicate that which will always remain unknown. Many pages remain blank because manuscripts in the story keep getting destroyed, or stolen, or lost, or remain unfinished. The ultimate figure that portends evil and violence in the novel is the man without a face. Yet again, *fukú* and violence are unknowable, faceless even.

Yuniór claims knowledge of Oscar’s internal state of mind on numerous occasions. The first instance is when one of Oscar’s first two loves, Maritza dumps him. He observes, “Oscar had been too hurt to speak; he sat down on the curb and felt something overwhelming surge up in his chest, scared the shit out of him” (Díaz 16). A few pages later, Oscar is deeply hurt when Al and Miggs, his closest friends, find themselves girlfriends and do not bother to include him in their romantic trysts. Yuniór tells us that Oscar realizes that Al and Miggs “were embarrassed by *him*” (Díaz 29). Subsequently, Oscar is able to resist subjecting himself further to their hurt, insults, and abuse. Yuniór describes Oscar’s emotional state thus: “He’d finally showed some backbone, hence some pride, and although it hurt, it also felt motherfucking *good*” (Díaz 33). In his SAT class, Oscar befriends Ana Obregón and for the first time experiences an easy

friendship with a girl, a Dominican girl at that. After spending an evening with her, the closest experience that Oscar has had to a date, Oscar wakes up the next morning, “feeling like he’d been unshackled from his weight, like he’d been washed clean of his misery, and for a long time he couldn’t remember why he felt this way, and then he said her name” (Díaz 40). Yuniór similarly claims access to Oscar’s interiority during his stay at Rutgers, during his suicide attempt, when he falls in love with Ybon, and his state of mind when he finally meets his end.

Yuniór also claims access to other significant characters in the novel, especially those that are most deeply affected by *fukú* – Beli and Dr. Abelard. Yuniór describes in great detail Beli’s anger, loneliness, and desperation. He picks up Beli’s Dominican story after La Inca has rescued her from the cruel relatives she had been abandoned with, when he describes her as living “if not content, then certainly in a state of relative tranquility” (Díaz 78). The tranquility is only relative because contentment was unavailable to her despite her incredibly lucky escape from her previous life and the decent life that La Inca provided her: “Our girl had it *made*, and yet it did not feel so in her heart” (Díaz 79). Yuniór claims that it is not clear what exactly Beli wants and yet proceeds to inform his readers “If I had to put it to words I’d say what she wanted, more than anything, was what she’d always wanted throughout her Lost Childhood: to escape” (Díaz 79-80). It is a lost childhood, something La Inca and Beli did not want to talk about. It is lost to his readers, as Yuniór does not go into details. It is the one time period in the narrative that is entirely lost. And yet, he tells us here that the one thing that Beli wanted since that time, all of that time, was to escape. Yuniór really pushes his status as omniscient narrator in this instance. He shifts



seamlessly between his role as character and as narrator. Yuniór describes in great detail, Beli's transformation into a young woman and confidently claims that with the acquisition of secondary sex characteristics she becomes aware of her desirability and that she "finally had power and a true sense of self" (Díaz 94). In a similar vein, Yuniór carries his readers into Beli's state of mind through her romance with the Gangster. Just like with Oscar, we are given a detailed look into her mind as she is beaten up in the bushes, beaten into a state where she is unaware of her own self. Casting his story in the mode of *fukú*, Yuniór is able to achieve this shift.

Yuniór is privy to Dr. Abelard's internal state of mind in the horrifying last few months in the run up to his arrest. Remaining apolitical is not an option for anyone in the Dominican Republic during the Trujillo regime. If her dreams of elsewhere led to Beli's downfall, her father studiously avoided thoughts of elsewhere. Yuniór describes Dr. Abelard as follows:

Homeboy wasn't like his Mexican colleagues who were always keeping up with what was happening elsewhere in the world, who believed that change was possible. He didn't dream of revolution ... wanted only to tend his wealthy, ailing patients and afterward return to his study without worrying about being shot in the head or thrown to the sharks. ... The way Abelard saw it—his Trujillo philosophy, if you will—he only had to keep his head down, his mouth shut, his pockets open, his daughters hidden for another decade or two. By then, he prophesied, Trujillo would be dead and the Dominican Republic would be a true democracy. (Díaz 226-227)

Despite his best efforts to maintain a semblance of respectability, normalcy and freedom, while not offending Trujillo, Dr. Abelard quickly finds that we are all implicated whether we want it or not “we are all of us its children, whether we know it or not;” “fukú believes in you whether you believe in it or not.” He cannot outwait Trujillo or outlast fukú. There is no such thing as a model citizen – with pockets open, heads down, and shut mouths. In her 2009 study of the Trujillo era, Lauren Derby has noted that, “An important aspect of his regime’s hegemony was his recasting of forms of trust such as gossip and gift exchange into forms of terror” (Derby 9). As the fukú closes in on him, Abelard is unable to share his thoughts and feelings with anyone. In the end, it is suggested that he is brought down by gifts and gossip – gossip that his friends and neighbors carry to Trujillo in exchange for gifts. When fukú finds him, it finds him in the worst possible way. If the first chapter lays out the framework of the fukú, the story of Dr. Abelard, especially his illusions of remaining apolitical, dramatize the fukú that haunts the Cabral/de Leon family in particular and the Dominican Republic in general. Yuniors describes in great detail Abelard’s final months of torture while he tries to do the right thing by his children, vacillating between action and inaction. With a lack of definite knowledge of the circumstances that leads to his ultimate fall (was it something he said or the book he might have been writing), Yuniors gives us an approximate truth, gleaned from the numerous similar narratives in the Dominican Republic. While Yuniors adopts the role of omniscient narrator to most of the characters in the novel, the one voice he does not drown out, the one character he does not presume to know is Lola. She gets her own two chapters where she details her thoughts, feelings, and experiences, in her own voice.

Although this story grabs him by the throat, it is not dissimilar to the numerous stories floating around the Dominican Republic. He editorializes the narrative with “if stories are to be believed;” (235) “what follows is still, to this day, hotly disputed;” (236) “there would always be speculation. At the most basic level, did he say it, or did he not?” (242). And, there is this rather long comment:

So which was it you? you ask. An accident, a conspiracy, or a fukú? The only answer I can give you is the least satisfying; you’ll have to decide for yourself. What’s certain is that nothing’s certain. We are trawling in silences here. ... Which is to say if you’re looking for a full story, I don’t have it. (243)

We cannot be sure about any part of the story. The veracity of the story is up for grabs. It is whatever one believes it to be. Details and sequence of events are contested, disputed. Did he say it, did he not? There is always speculation. The story itself, as Yunior narrates it, maybe incomplete. Yunior questions this version of events as well, declaring the story “The Girl Trujillo Wanted” as painfully common, as “one of those easy stories because in essence it explains it all” (244). He interjects another story to explain the downfall of Dr. Abelard, “a less-known variant.”<sup>4</sup> According to this version of the story, Abelard was writing a book:

---

<sup>4</sup> Díaz alludes to the commonness of the story by footnoting the story of Anacaona, “One of the Founding Mothers of the New World.” Calling it an easy story, he inserts a stinging critique of Mario Vargas Llosa stating that, “Let’s be honest, though. The rap about The Girl Trujillo Wanted is a pretty common one on the Island.... So common that Mario Vargas Llosa didn’t have to do much except to open his mouth to sift it out of the air” (Díaz 244). In a footnote about Joaquín Balaguer, one of Trujillo’s henchmen and subsequent dictator of the

Sometime in 1944 (so the story goes), while Abelard was still worried about whether he was in trouble with Trujillo, he started writing a book about—what else?—Trujillo... His shit, if we are to believe the whispers, was an exposé of the supernatural roots of the Trujillo regime! A book about the Dark Powers of the President, a book in which Abelard argued that the tales the common people told about the president—that he was supernatural, that he was not human—may in some ways have been true. That it was possible that Trujillo was, if not in fact, then in principle, a creature from another world! (245)

In other words, Dr. Abelard was writing a fukú story, much like Oscar eventually writes, and a precursor to Yuniór's tale about Oscar and the fukú that destroyed his family. In many ways this paragraph is a retelling of the paragraph in the first chapter where Yuniór gives us a brief history of Trujillo and the Dominican Republic. So the idea of Trujillo as an alien, and a magical, supernatural entity would have conflicted with this agenda. As the book does not survive, Yuniór encourages his readers to believe in the story of the girl Trujillo wanted, trite as it may be, because there is no evidence to support the theory of a book that Abelard was writing. Yet again, Yuniór undermines the veracity of any story or explanation that he narrates. The fukú is the only possible explanation and plausible narrative, leaving the readers straddling the line between the known and the unknown.

Abelard's is not the only manuscript that gets lost. The last letter that Oscar writes to Lola anticipates a second package with a book manuscript, which

---

Dominican Republic, Díaz skewers Vargas Llosa for portraying him as a sympathetic character in *The Feast of the Ghost*.

“contains everything I’ve written on this journey. Everything you will need. You will understand when you read my conclusions. (It’s the cure to what ails us, he scribbled in the margins. The Cosmic DNA.)” (Díaz 334). But this package never arrives. Yuniór curates all of Oscar’s works of fiction, saving them for Lola’s daughter. But the one significant manuscript, which would have explained everything, is lost. Such is the fate all the manuscripts in the novel that make any kind of truth claims. In this sense, the Cabral family home Casa Hatüey becomes, at least to La Inca, a lost manuscript of the grandeur and exceptionalism of the Cabrals.<sup>5</sup> One of Maria Montez’s (a Dominican actress who had done photo ops for the Trujillato) book manuscripts is lost after her death, drowning in a bathtub in Paris (87). The dissertation of Jesús de Galíndez, a Columbia graduate student, about Trujillo is destroyed along with his body (97).

In addition to lost manuscripts, we often run into the trope of the blank page. As we have already seen, Beli’s lost childhood, the period when she lived with the cruel relatives from whom La Inca rescued her, is something that they never referenced or discussed and is what Yuniór calls “Their very own página en blanco” (Díaz 78). While in this case the blank page represents a dark and painful past, Joaquin Balageur, one of Trujillo’s henchmen and eventual ruler of the Dominican Republic, in his memoirs “claimed he knew who had done the foul deed [Trujillo’s assassination] (not him, of course) and left a blank page, a página en blanco, in the text to be filled in with the truth upon his death” (Díaz 90). Of course, the page itself remains blank. Yuniór describes this as impunity. It is not just the characters, fictional and historical that leave blank pages in their

---

<sup>5</sup> Itself named for the revolutionary Hatüey who died resisting the original Spanish invaders (Díaz 212, footnote 23).

narratives. The omniscient narrator, or the Watcher as he describes himself leaves blank pages. Before describing Beli's miraculous escape from the cane fields after being beaten to a pulp, Yunior says, "Whether what follows was a figment of Beli's wracked imagination or something else altogether I cannot say. Even your Watcher has his silences, his páginas en blanco" (Díaz 149). After Oscar's death, Yunior starts to have dreams in which Oscar is waving a book at him but the book itself is blank (Díaz 325). If pages are blank, information unverifiable, manuscripts lost, Yunior appears to compensate for this or by giving his narrative a sheen of authenticity with a series of footnotes in the style of Díaz's literary hero, Herman Melville. In a meta-fictional move, Yunior ruminates the believability of a character like Ybón, an atypical prostitute - "A puta and she's not an underage snort-addicted mess"(285)? He editorializes thus:

But then I'd be lying. I know I've thrown a lot of fantasy and sci-fi in the mix but this is supposed to be a *true* account of the Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao. Can't we believe that an Ybón can exist and that a brother like Oscar might be due a little luck after twenty-three years? (285)

Much like we are all implicated in the fukú, Yunior tries to solicit the complicity of his readers in the story. He demands that they believe his story, even though he is constantly interjecting his story with phrases such as, "I don't know" and "no one knows." He ends the paragraph with an appeal to his readers' kindness toward Oscar – that he deserves some luck. A fukú has to have a zafa. Though we will never know the truth, we have to believe the story and its proximity to the truth. We will have to believe that Oscar was lucky at some level because a character like Ybón exists. We will have to seek some solace that because of a character like Ybón, Oscar does not die a virgin. Part of the reason for this

unknowability is, according to Yuniors, an Antillean condition, with its belief in extreme phenomena and fukú.

La Capra reminds us that empathic unsettlement is crucial, indeed necessary to historiography and that it should resist closure or reassurance or any spiritual uplifting. To this end, knowledge of these events can be approximate truths or general or structural truth claims. He sees the purpose of historiography as coming to terms with the wounds and scars of the past. He adds, "Such a coming-to terms would seek knowledge whose truth claims are not one-dimensionally objectifying or narrowly cognitive but involve affect and may empathetically expose the self to an unsettlement" (La Capra 42). It does not matter how Yuniors knows or does not know. What unsettles us is the enforced silence. The number of manuscripts that attempted to break the silence that get lost is astounding. That the fukú affects the Antilles and the diasporic community that originates here is unsettling. Indeed we are all its children. We can never really know. It is always already an approximate truth.

### **Comprehension/Incomprehensibility**

Díaz's narrative is unknowable and inexplicable and yet yearns to be known and understood. The unknowable and the inexplicable defamiliarizes a narrative that is otherwise familiar. It resists harmonizing and closure of any sort. One way that Díaz achieves this is by allusions to sci-fi and fantasy, genres that push the boundaries of the known and the explicable. The experiences of the victims of trauma described here instantiate a break in everyday, knowable, and understandable experiences. The only way to make any sense of them, or the only way to work through them, or to render them plausible is by using parallel narratives and associations from sci-fi and fantasy genres.

In the all-important first footnote of the novel, where we see that the story of the de Leon/Cabral family is implicated in the story of the Dominican Republic and vice-versa, Díaz right away states that, “[Trujillo] was our Sauron, our Arawn, our Darkseid” (Díaz 2). Díaz introduces the genres early on. Fukú, in other words Trujillo, can be understood by those unfamiliar with Dominican history through this fictional character from DC comics, a character that seeks “to usurp all free will in the sentient universe.”<sup>6</sup> Díaz goes further back to the father of modern fantasies, J. R. R. Tolkien, and refers to the fukú/Trujillo dyad as Sauron, Morgoth’s chief lieutenant, Morgoth who, “through pride, malice and a desire to dominate the wills of others he fell into darkness.”<sup>7</sup> If twentieth-century mythology were not enough to legitimize Díaz’s claim of Trujillo’s extreme control and brutality, he refers to him as Arawn, a Welsh God of the Underground.<sup>8</sup> Again, Díaz is playing with the issue of provenance. It does not matter which we prefer, a DC Comics’ legend, Tolkienian legends, or Welsh mythology; Trujillo was the modern manifestation of evil in the Dominican Republic.

Díaz ends his fukú-inflected history of Trujillo’s Dominican Republic and Cold War history with a warning, “Be assured: like Darkseid’s Omega Effect, like Morgoth’s bane, no matter how many turns and digressions this shit might take, it always—and I mean always gets its man” (Díaz 5). To further reinforce this allusion, Díaz footnotes this reference with a quote of Morgoth’s words to Hurin:

<sup>6</sup> <http://dc.wikia.com/wiki/Darkseid>

<sup>7</sup> <http://lotr.wikia.com/wiki/Melkor>

<sup>8</sup> <http://www.pantheon.org/articles/a/arawn.html>



I am the Elder King: Melkor, first and mightiest of the Valar, who was before the world, and made it. The shadow of my purpose lies upon Arda, and all that is in it bends slowly and surely to my will. But upon all whom you love my thought shall weigh as a cloud of Doom, and it shall bring them down into darkness and despair. Wherever they go, evil shall arise. Whenever they speak, their words shall bring ill counsel. Whatsoever they do shall turn against them. They shall die without hope, cursing both life and death. (Díaz 5)<sup>9</sup>

This footnote matches Díaz's two-minute footnote introducing us to the history of the Dominican Republic. Much like Morgoth's purpose lay upon Arda, Díaz describes the history of twentieth century Dominican Republic as follows:

Trujillo came to control nearly every aspect of the DR's political, cultural, social, and economic life through a potent (and familiar) mixture of violence, intimidation, massacre, rape, co-optation, and terror; treated the country like it was a plantation and he was the master. At first glance, he was just your prototypical Latin American caudillo, but his power was terminal in ways that few historians or writers have ever truly captured or, I would argue, imagined. (Díaz 2).

The extent of Trujillo's power was such that "few historians or writers have ever captured or imagined." And yet, the methods adopted to achieve totalitarian power were potent and familiar – "a potent mixture of violence, intimidation, massacre, rape, co-optation, and terror." It is simultaneously comprehensible and incomprehensible. Darkseid and Morgoth terrorized their fictional universes just

---

<sup>9</sup> From J R. R. Tolkien's *Unfinished Tales*, "Narn I Hin Hurin: The Words of Hurin and Morgoth." (1988)

as Trujillo was acting out complete control in the Dominican Republic. Much like Trujillo was the all-encompassing power of the Dominican Republic, Morgoth is the all-encompassing power of Arda. Derby notes that “Indeed, the terror was so appalling that it has been described more readily in literature than in history” (Derby 3). She cites in particular, Gabriel Garcia Márquez’s *The Autumn of the Patriarch*, Llosa’s *The Feast of the Goat* and Julia Alvarez’s *In the Time of Butterflies*. Of course, Díaz finds Llosa’s account apologetic and turns to myths and legends to give his readers insight into the power and the terror of the Trujillo regime. More to the point, what both Díaz and Derby are implying/saying is akin to what La Capra says about trauma: that empathic unsettlement in writing trauma resists closure. This is part of the reason for the silence surrounding the stories of Dominican experiences during the Trujillo regime. The only way to comprehend these experiences is to look at fictional accounts of evil. Díaz refers to it as “the end of language, the end of hope” (Díaz 147). Closure implies a stable, hegemonic narrative. Díaz’s new historiography is about opening up possibilities, about rhizomatic thought, about relationality.

If fictional characters and myths and legends give us some insight into the very real traumatic experiences, there will always be aspects that will remain incomprehensible. Díaz consistently uses the image of “the man without a face” to segue into two particularly violent episodes in the story. The man without a face serves as a warning to both the characters in the novel and to the readers of impending violence and brutality. The man without a face first appears when the Gangster abandons Beli in Samaná, soon after she expresses her wish to be “free,” like the Gangster (Díaz 134). Infuriated by her plight, abandoned yet again, Beli finds a ride in a run-down Chevy. Passing through a derelict

community, Beli imagines “that a man sitting in a rocking chair in front of one of the hovels *had no face* and he waved at her as she passed” (Díaz 135). This is right before Beli finds out that she is pregnant, “a month before it all blew up” (Díaz 132). If this first appearance of the man without a face foretells her misfortune of being pregnant with the Gangster’s child, he reappears when she is picked up by the police at the behest of Trujillo’s sister, the Gangster’s wife: “Déjame, she screamed, and when she looked up she saw that there was one more cop sitting in the car, and when he turned toward her she saw that he *didn’t have a face*” (Díaz 141). Though she gets a temporary reprieve when her former employers at the Chinese restaurant intervene, the henchmen eventually find her and beat her till it is the “the end of language, the end of hope.”

Díaz describes Socorro—a nurse with “encyclopedic knowledge of folk cures and traditional remedies”, Dr. Abelard’s wife, and Beli’s mother—as “the family’s first catastrophist”(Díaz 219, 242). Two days after the atomic bombs were dropped on Japan, “Socorro dreamed that the faceless man was standing over her husband’s bed, and she could not scream, could not say anything, and then the next night she dreamed that he was standing over her children too” (Díaz 237). Sure enough, a couple days later, Abelard is arrested and the Cabral family is destroyed. The only time that a faceless man appears and causes terror but not actual violence is when Oscar appears in Yunior’s dreams, five years after his death (Díaz 325). Yunior wakes up screaming, haunted by Oscar, haunted by fukú.

If “the man without a face” portends the violence to come, the mongoose anticipates the escape from violence and death. The mongoose appears for the first time when Beli is beaten senseless by the goons sent by the Gangster’s wife.

Yunior claims, “How she survived, I’ll never know” (Díaz 147). Yet, we have just witnessed La Inca’s marathon prayer session. And then he slips in to the realm of the magical – zafa. Part of the zafa is knowledge, Beli’s understanding of her narrative:

All hope was gone, but then, True Believers, like the Hand of the Ancestors themselves, a miracle. Just as our girl was set to disappear over the event horizon, just as the cold of obliteration was stealing up her legs, she found in herself one last reservoir of strength: her Cabral magis—and all she had to do was realize that once again she’d been *played*, by the Gangster, by Santo Domingo, by her own dumb needs, to ignite it. (Díaz 148)

This realization, this self-knowledge is seen here as the strength necessary to retreat from the event horizon. In contrast to Beli, her father never realizes the reality of his situation and is paralyzed by his thoughts, even naïveté, into inaction. Beli, on the other hand, realizes her predicament and draws strength from it to come back from death. The Cabral magis, or zafa here, is knowledge. If innocence, or, ignorance, or, naïveté, led her into the arms of the Gangster, her awareness brings her back from sure death. Knowledge, here self-awareness, restores the hope that is lost. He casts this as miraculous, magical. Zafa is knowledge, magical, and miraculous. This understanding, this contextualizing saves Beli. If knowledge and understanding strengthen Beli’s resolve to survive, how she actually gets out of the fields to seek help is incomprehensible, fabulous.

Díaz, or Yunior, chalks this incomprehensible aspect down to the Caribbean condition where there is “an extraordinary tolerance for extreme phenomena” (Díaz 149). Of course, maintaining the non-didactic, multivalent

narrative strategy of the novel, Yunior says, “Whether what follows was a figment of Beli’s wracked imagination or something else altogether I cannot say” (Díaz 149). It could very well be a result of the extreme trauma suffered by Beli that conjures up a mongoose, encouraging her to rise, to survive, even offering her a glimpse of the future to come:

So as Beli was flitting in and out of life, there appeared at her side a creature that would have been an amiable mongoose if not for its golden lion eyes and the absolute black of its pelt. This one was quite large for its species and placed its intelligent little paws on her chest and stared down at her (Díaz 149).

This creature is mongoose-like, mythical. It is larger than mongoose with lion eyes and is absolute black. In the vein of myths, folklores, and legends, Yunior anthropomorphizes this creature giving it intelligent eyes, a voice “with a woman’s lilt,” and language. This imaginary creature talks Beli out of her hopelessness and out of the cane fields. Yunior compares Beli’s rescue to that of the Caribbean itself – without an extraordinary tolerance for extreme phenomena, how could the Dominicans and the people of the Caribbean have survived? The mongoose tells Beli:

*You have to rise.*

My baby, Beli wept. Mi hijo precioso.

*Hypatía, your baby is dead.*

No, no, no, no, no.

It pulled at her broken arm. *You have to rise now or you’ll never have the son or the daughter.*

What son? She wailed. What daughter?

*The ones who await.*

It was dark and her legs trembled beneath her like smoke.

*You have to follow.* (Díaz 149).

What is significant about the exchange is the serene, pragmatic, stoicism of the creature in contrast with Beli's emotional excess. She is still mourning the loss of her child and its implication for her life and her relationship with the Gangster. Her "No, no, no, no, no" here echoes the similar stubborn, melodramatic outburst from Beli when she is caught with Jack Pujols, the schoolboy, the Adonis she first has a crush on (Díaz 102). Beli's emotional state is balanced by the creature's flat statements, very specific instructions – "you have to rise," "your baby is dead," "you have to follow" and so forth. While Beli mourns her present loss, the creature turns her attention to the future to come, the son and daughter she is to have. The mongoose urges her to rise and leads her out of the impossible maze that is the sugarcane field. The fabulous mongoose helps Beli come to terms with the unimaginable pain and suffering that she is going through. The ways of coping with trauma appears repetitive as well. Oscar negotiates his inherited trauma and his personal sense of loss and isolation by delving into genres. Beli has the magical realism of her Caribbean present to help her cope with her present predicament.

Considering it is dark and the mongoose is dark, Beli is guided by the creature's singing voice that has a woman's lilt and a Columbian or Venezuelan accent. The creature's eyes are described as "chabine," which roughly translates to "mixed race." The creature's eyes are very similar to the lead singer of the music group in the truck, which finds Beli and delivers her back to her grandma. Once again, it is impossible to tell if Beli might have heard the group singing and

followed those voices out of the field. This combination of imagination, extreme phenomena, and rational explanation brings Beli back from the brink of the event horizon and makes possible the brief wondrous life of Oscar Wao. Díaz footnotes the strange tale of Beli's rescue with an originary tale of the Mongoose, describing it as, "one of the great unstable particles of the Universe and also one of its greatest travelers" (Díaz 151). In a Glissant-like tale of errantry and rhizomatic thought, Díaz traces the Mongoose's journey as having originated in Africa, travelled to India, and finally making its way into the Caribbean. He claims the Mongoose to be "an enemy of kingly chariots, chains, and hierarchies" (Díaz 151). In other words the Mongoose is an enemy of filiation. It is a symbol of the poetics of Relation, following multiple possibilities and trajectories of thought and relation. Ultimately, it is the zafa that saves Beli.

If believing and following the mongoose saved Beli's life, Oscar's life follows the course it does through to the violent end because he fails to recognize and follow the mongoose. In a moment of extreme abjection, Oscar attempts suicide while at Rutgers. As he stumbles drunkenly toward the railway track and hears the approaching train, Oscar closes his eyes recapitulating all his regrets. When he opens them:

[T]here was something straight out of Ursula Le Guin standing by his side. Later, when he would describe it, he would call it the Golden Mongoose, but even he knew that wasn't what it was. It was very placid, very beautiful. Gold-limned eyes that reached through you, not so much in judgment or reproach but something far scarier. They stared at each other—it serene as a Buddhist, he in total disbelief—and then the whistle blew and his eyes opened (or closed) and it was gone. (Díaz 190)

If Beli's experience is cast in terms of the Caribbean tendency to believe in extreme phenomena, Oscar's encounter with the mongoose is spun in terms of Ursula le Guin and science fiction. Whether it is seen in terms of a supernatural originary creature, or in terms of Oscar's favored Genres, the mongoose is serene, placid, and monk-like, as a Buddhist. It is surreal, beautiful, with gold-limned eyes. It does not reproach or judge. It merely seeks to guide you into the future. For all his confirmed fan boy status, Oscar is completely taken aback and is suspended between belief and disbelief. Golden Mongoose becomes a placeholder for the zafa that saves his life, at least in this instance.

Had he landed on the tracks, the train would have run over him and Oscar's life would perhaps be even briefer than it turns out. Instead, he makes a seventy-seven foot jump just off the track on to a soft, loamy garden divider and is left with two broken legs and a separated shoulder. But for Yuniur, the mongoose was a sign for Oscar to revamp his life. He observes:

Dude had been waiting his whole life for something just like this to happen to him, had always wanted to live in a world of magic and mystery, but instead of taking note of the vision and changing his ways the fuck shook his swollen head. The train was nearer now, and so, before he could lose his courage, he threw himself down into the darkness (Díaz 190).

Beli follows the mongoose out of the cane field into a life of relative quiet in America. But her experience of the mongoose is in the Caribbean where such experiences are believable. Oscar's American experience leaves him incapable of appreciating such extreme phenomena. He fails to recognize the magic when confronted with it. Aside from broken bones and a further depleted self-esteem,



Oscar's life continues unchanged up until his fateful trip to the Dominican Republic. Oscar's American experience of magic can be considered zafa in that it prolongs his life so that he is able to experience love and not be the only Dominican male to die a virgin.

For all his interest in the Genres, Oscar is never able to quite access the magical. During his dark days, after Rutgers and before Ybón, Oscar occasionally dreams of the Mongoose (269). After his near fatal beat down at the hands of the captain's men, he once again dreams of the Mongoose. But language is unavailable between them. The Mongoose asks him if it is to be more or less. Oscar asks for less pain. But, remembering his loved ones and his memorable experiences, he asks for more. ““ \_\_\_\_\_ \_\_\_\_\_ \_\_\_\_\_” said the Mongoose, and then blackness swept over him” (Díaz 301). It is Clive the taxi driver's ingenuity and quick thinking that saves Oscar's life this time. While the Cabral family fukú gets its throat around Oscar, Beli's zafa does not quite reach him.

But, as we have seen, just as this story arises at the cusp of the known and the unknown, the comprehensible and the incomprehensible, fukú and zafa are never straightforward. Beli's survival against all odds casts doubt on any neat categorizations of fukú and zafa. In a sub-section titled “Fukú vs. Zafa” Yúnior ponders this issue. For some it is “irrefutable proof that the House Cabral was indeed victim of a high-level fukú” (Díaz 152). However, that she survives and her tale gets told undermines this notion.

But other heads question that logic, arguing that Beli's survival must be evidence to the contrary. Cursed people, after all, tend not to drag themselves out of canefields with a frightening roster of injuries and then

happen to be picked up by a van of sympathetic musicians in the middle of the night who ferry them home without delay to a “mother” with mad connections to the medical community. If these serendipities signify anything, say these heads, it is that our Beli was blessed. (Díaz 152).

The very same event can be evidence of either fukú or zafa. It is fukú that she gets beaten but zafa that she does not die. In this sense, Beli is twice blessed. She is rescued from the horrible relatives who threw hot oil on her and kept her in a chicken coop. And now, she is saved from a near-fatal beating. The rest of her family did not make it – her father, her mother, her sisters. So while she is susceptible to the family fukú, she also seems to be blessed with a zafa.

In fact, Beli herself, much like this tale, emerges at the cusp of fukú and zafa. It is always speculated – did Abelard say it or did he not? What are guaranteed are his arrest and the destruction of his family, as it existed. Socorro visits her husband in prison and finds him “looking nearly destroyed, who shuffled like an old man, whose eyes shone with the sort of fear that is not easily shed. It was worse than she, in all her apocalyptic fervor, had imagined. It was the Fall” (Díaz 242). This knowledge that fukú has befallen her family is immediately followed by the realization that she is pregnant with her third and final daughter – Beli. “Zafa or Fuku?” Yuniór asks. Conceived while the forces of fukú are in full effect Beli keeps Socorro alive long enough to bear her child. Two months after Beli’s birth, plagued by postpartum depression which is compounded by her family’s horrific experiences, dogged by fukú, Socorro steps in front of a bus and ends her life. Through all this tragedy, Beli, given the gift of life, emerges as the sole survivor, surviving to a decent age. But as Lola philosophizes, “That’s life for you. All the happiness you gather to yourself, it

will sweep away like it's nothing. If you ask me, I don't think there are any such things as curses. I think there is only life. That's enough" (205). Later she adds, "[Y]ou can never run away. Not ever. The only way out is in. And that's what I guess these stories are all about" (209). We are already implicated. Narration or going back into it is the only "out" there is. Fukú and zafa merge.

As we have seen Oscar appears faceless in Yuniór's dreams. His books appear as blank pages. The faceless man and the mongoose appear simultaneously in a vision to Oscar as he is being driven away to his death.

They drove past a bus stop and for a second Oscar imagined he saw his family getting on a guagua, even his poor dead abuelo and his poor dead abuela, and who is driving the bus but the Mongoose, and who is the cobrador but the Man Without a Face, but it was nothing but a final fantasy, gone as soon as he blinked" (Díaz 320-321).

Fuku and zafa cannot be categorically separated. The known and the unknown, the real and the real, the living and the dead, all merge into a final fantasy. Perhaps death is Oscar's zafa and life itself is accursed as Lola sees it. The Man Without a Face and the Mongoose are different manifestations of the same accursed life. All we have is a palimpsest of tragedy. You scratch one layer and look deeper and you uncover further tragedy. Fukú is the tragedy written and zafa is the erasure. But zafa is also the recovery.

Yuniór tells a powerful story of a boy, his family, and the history of a nation. The sheer violence and suffering offers a perspective of trauma as a condition of history as La Capra has noted. While sympathy and empathy might be expected/anticipated responses to the tale, what La Capra calls for is significant. Empathic unsettlement is a call to action, a move beyond the feeling

of empathy. Empathic unsettlement is relative, related, and relayed as Glissant notes. It has to be told, narrated, and associated with other traumas. Or, in La Capra's words acting out, working over, and working through the breaks in normality. Writing, reading, and narration become crucial in coping with trauma and to recognizing as both a particular localized event as well as a metaphor of trauma. Albert Galindo sees Díaz's novel as a narrative that per Judith Butler's call in her 2004 essay collection *Precarious Life* is one of the "narratives that could and should decentralize the strongly binary post-9/11 discourse." It deploys associative principles of historiography that inform and transform in contrast to the binary us versus them mode of narratives that emerged post 9/11. These decentralized narratives foreground the interplay, overlay, and transversality of traumas. They also break through silences and give voice to traumas that get sidelined and ignored. Yuniors finding his voice becomes analogous to Dominicans finding their voice. With all the silences, pagina blancos, and lost manuscripts, one manuscript, one narrative makes it through. Díaz thus gets his readers to think in terms of relationality.

### CHAPTER 3 UNSETTLED COMMONS AND NARRATION: *OPEN CITY* AND *GOON SQUAD*

In *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*, Cathy Caruth defines trauma as more than a pathology or the simple illness of a wounded psyche. It is a “breach in the mind’s experience of time, self, and the world,” an event that is “experienced too soon and is therefore not available to consciousness until it imposes itself again, repeatedly, in the nightmares and repetitive actions of the survivor.” Similarly, in *Writing History, Writing Trauma* Dominick La Capra defines trauma as “a shattering break or caesura in experience which has belated effects;” “a disruptive experience that disarticulates the self and creates holes in existence; it has belated effects that are controlled only with difficulty and perhaps never fully mastered” (La Capra 186, 41). Both Caruth and La Capra see traumas as demanding a narrative in response precisely because they refuse meaning in themselves. Because they present themselves as unanchored, without place in a sequence, they demand narration to try to re-place them, to put them into some kind of order with a beginning, middle, and end. This can root them, and still the chaos that traumas produce around and after themselves. In her evocative description, Caruth sees trauma as “always the story of a wound that cries out, that addresses us in the attempt to tell us of a reality or truth that is not otherwise available.” Trauma takes the form of narrative that demands our attention or “witness,” a way to cover over the hole in reality consciousness was unable to process. The truth that seeks a voice and witness “in its delayed appearance and its belated address, cannot be linked only to what is known, but also to what remains unknown in our very actions and language.”

La Capra sees history as a form of writing, or a genre, that aims to put various traumas in context. In so doing, it acts out, or performs this disorientation while it engenders empathy, and helps to work through the trauma. La Capra sees working through as an “articulatory practice;” narration is necessary to remember and repeat the trauma (La Capra 22). However, the interpretations that inflect the narrative of trauma facilitate freeing the subject from repetition mechanisms. La Capra declares that, “Indeed, I insist on the need for empathic unsettlement, and the discursive inscription of that unsettlement, in response to traumatic events or conditions” (La Capra, xi). His insistence on empathic unsettlement is a way to ward off “harmonizing or spiritually uplifting accounts of extreme events,” “not one-dimensionally objectifying or narrowly cognitive,” but “a way to be cognitively and ethically responsible” (La Capra 40-41). Empathic unsettlement provides a way to access and acknowledge the break or caesura of the traumatic experience for the author and reader without facile attempts at providing closure or harmony. La Capra conceives of history, as “tensely involving both an objective reconstruction of the past and a dialogic exchange with it and other inquiries into it wherein knowledge involves not only the processing of information but also affect, empathy, and questions of value” (La Capra 35). Knowledge and information help with closing gaps and with processing affect and empathy. Additionally, La Capra finds that empathic

---

<sup>1</sup> “Freud makes scarcely any attempt to correlate the concept of working-through with those of remembering and repeating. All the same, it would seem that in his opinion working-through is a third term in which the other two are combined. And it is true that working-through is undoubtedly a repetition, albeit one modified by interpretation and-for this reason-liable to facilitate the subject’s freeing himself from repetition mechanisms.”

Laplanche, Jean and Jean- Bertrand Pontalis. *Language of Psychoanalysis*. London: Karnac Books, 1988. E-book.

unsettlement translates into writing in the form of “stylistic effects or, more broadly, effects in writing which cannot be reduced to formulas or rules of method” (La Capra 41). Trauma is unsettling to those who experience it, an experiential breach that can never quite be filled or as Caruth puts it, “mastered.” Narration of trauma can be unsettling both to the narrator and the audience or witnesses as it offers a glimpse of that breach. But the unsettlement for La Capra is a way to engender empathy, a narrative common space of understanding for the narrator and the audience, a cognitive and ethical responsibility that implicates victims, narrators, and witnesses. The two novels examined in this chapter, Teju Cole’s *Open City* and Jennifer Egan’s *A Visit From the Goon Squad*, employ various narrative devices that solicit empathy and indicate a desire to create what I want to call an unsettled commons.

The events of 9/11 were indeed a breach or caesura in the collective experience of those that witnessed it either while in New York and its vicinity or through the widely circulated images, both still photographs and videos of the events, albeit in very different ways. The falling buildings and bodies, the emptiness at the site, and the lack of physical bodies were and have all been traumatic both in collective experience and in private experience. The events of 9/11 were traumatic in the sense that they fractured the experience of what it means to be a city or a nation. Of course, the mass death in itself was not unprecedented, but the losses were delivered in a way that had never been experienced before. The use of airplanes as weapons of mass destruction was a breach that was incomprehensible to many; an entirely new experience that shattered previously held notions and expectations. The events of 9/11 were experienced as a trauma at the moment, but they often seem to have achieved

their effect by recalling or amplifying previous traumas. It is a nightmare that triggers repetitive actions of survivors of other traumas who seek to understand a breach that they have previously experienced of time, self and the world. The two novels discussed in this chapter recall previously endured traumas, both public and private, memories recollected in the context of 9/11.

Julius, the first person narrator of Teju Cole's novel *Open City* undertakes the project of collecting stories of trauma of various people he meets professionally as a psychiatrist and privately as a friend and traveler. Julius's manic collections of these stories of trauma appear to recover, or perhaps reclaim a repressed memory of a rape he committed as a teenager. Jennifer Egan, in her 2012 novel *A Visit from the Goon Squad* (*Goon Squad*), focuses on private traumas that burst out from the under the surface in the context of 9/11. For one character, Sasha, memories of a traumatic childhood are manifested in her impulse to kleptomania. For another character, Bennie, identifying and promoting new forms of music and music groups becomes a way for him to remember and repeat the traumas of repeated racist encounters. These two novels place the events of 9/11 in relation to a series of previous traumas and the practices – collecting above all -- that developed out of them. 9/11 thus appears not as an originary trauma but as one in a series of traumas – both historical and personal.

For Cole, the collection or (re)collection not only put the stories in context with each other, they provide a sort of community for the victims, the inheritors, narrators, and audience/readers and is also therapeutic in that it is a way to gain or regain control, a working through of trauma. The novel then becomes a common space for the characters within the story to share traumatic experiences;



it becomes a common space for the author and the readers of the novel to commiserate on shared experiences of trauma. The commiseration affords a way to relocate the “mind’s experience of time, self, and the world.” Additionally, in the vein of La Capra, these stories seek to engender empathic unsettlement in the characters that experience trauma and in the readers. What emerges is an unsettled commons, a shared space to work through traumas that generate empathy but do not provide “harmonizing or spiritually uplifting accounts of extreme events.” Following La Capra, while both these novels relate particular events, they are not or “cannot be localized in terms of discrete, dated experience,” and are “acting out, working over, and to some extent working through in analyzing and giving voice to the past.” The retelling of various public traumas that we will see in this chapter is an attempt at finding the common (as in familiar) and the distinctive through commiseration and a way of coping with said traumas. The novels record public traumas as moments in history while also narrating their disorienting impact on private lives and thoughts that haunt generations. The spectacular nature of 9/11 provided a visual focal point to coalesce the trauma and suffering experienced at the moment, while simultaneously triggering memories of past traumas. The empathic unsettlement that these novels achieve is not merely affective but also stylistic in the form that these novels adopt. The novels show their characters finding their way to an unsettled commons through various aesthetic practices. In so doing, they also indicate what they themselves, as novels, are hoping to create while also giving readers examples of how and why such an unsettled commons may be a way to live through – to survive – the aftermath of trauma.

Cole uses a peripatetic narrator while Egan, uses a peripatetic narrative style through temporal shifts and shifts in voice.

In both these novels collecting becomes a means of working through traumas. For Julius in *Open City*, the focus is on historical traumas and the inherited nature of suffering – Native Americans through the colonial period of American history and beyond, Germans during World War II, or the experience of Middle Easterners living in modern Europe and so forth. However, in focusing on stories of individual experience, Cole particularizes each experience and thus provides a way “to tell us of a reality or truth that is not otherwise available.” Partly because of his profession as a psychiatrist and partly through personal interest, Julius collects stories of trauma through multiple disparate conversations, particularly those stories that get lost or are left untold. He actively seeks out people’s stories and puts them in historical, social, and political context. He walks the streets of New York City and travels to Europe, meeting people and inquiring about their varied experiences. He meets with friends and acquaintances, recounting stories of their experiences. He recalls his family’s private struggle in the very public and devastating experiences of World War II. Cole attempts to create a virtual, international commons that commiserates on traumatic experiences. Julius serves as a conduit for the sharing of these stories.

While Cole’s novel is a first person narrative with a peripatetic narrator, Egan’s structuring of her novel is peripatetic in that it wanders between narratives of individual characters, goes back into the past and returns to the present, and ends with a vision of a hyper-surveilled future. Egan’s novel focuses on individual experiences of trauma – Sasha’s traumatic childhood experiences

and Bennie's experiences with racism – and how those memories resurface in the context of a historical event such as 9/11. Each of the stories shape and mold other characters, even well into the future. In this sense, the novel is like the found objects on Sasha's table or the found stories of Julius in *Open City*. New Yorkers in a highly controlled and surveilled future are haunted by the raw sound of Scotty's music, the kind of raw music that Bennie misses and yearns for. Scotty and Bennie would have been band mates in their younger days. If Sasha's found objects are random, Egan's narration too appears random both in terms of characters and sequence. However, just as the emotions associated with each object give them their value to Sasha, the characters' associations with Bennie and Sasha is what ties the narration together.

Characters in these novels seek witnesses to traumas or give voice to traumas that they explore. Both of these novels emphasize the therapeutic function of the telling of these stories. Cole's strategy is to help his characters remember the various forgotten public traumas and suppressed private traumas, particularly Julius's raping of a fellow teenager. Julius is a psychiatrist by profession and he draws out stories from his patients and from random strangers helping them remember and helping the readers of the novel remember these stories. The most significant remembering that comes through this varied collection of stories is Julius's own.

Egan focuses on the various repressed private traumas that "imposes itself again, repeatedly, in the nightmares and repetitive actions of the survivor," following the public trauma of 9/11. Sasha in Egan's novel is in therapy to help her work through her kleptomania, a symptom of her own repressed memories of childhood trauma. The stated goal of these sessions with her therapist is to

change the story of her life – “a story whose end had already been determined: she would get well;” “a story of redemption, of fresh beginnings and second chances” (Egan 6, 8 – 9). The writing or rewriting of the various stories in these novels facilitates working through various traumas. Readers of these stories, in responding to these traumatic experiences, constitute an empathic, unsettled commons.

### **Unsettlement and (re)collecting**

*Open City* begins with a series of disparate topics much like the “aimless wanderings” of the narrator’s walks (Cole 3). Julius describes his state of unsettlement post-9/11. He recalls his isolation and difference as a mixed race child and his experience with racism as a Nigerian American. He responds to the unsettlement by (re)collecting memories of other traumas – his own and those of his patients and eventually of random strangers he meets in the course of his walks and travels. The (re)collections offer him a way to locate himself and get his bearings in his unsettled state, a way to cope with his isolation while also enabling to find a common space to articulate his thoughts. The disparate topics establish connections that may not seem obvious while also creating a bond between Julius and his audience, just as he does with the his patients and other people he encounters at random. His musings on his walks and about his walks are intriguing and draw the reader into the narrative.

Julius describes the route he took when he started his daily evening walks, “a counterpoint to [his] busy days at the hospital” which “steadily lengthened, taking [him] farther and farther afield” (Cole 3). He describes the migratory birds and their patterns he watched for prior to starting his peripatetic evenings “like someone taking auspices, hoping to see the miracle of natural

migration” (Cole 4). He tries to imagine the city from the birds’ perspective, the city skyscrapers as firs and so forth. He describes the music (classical, having been an avid listener of the genre for fourteen years) and radio stations he listened to as he waited for the birds generally avoiding “American which had too many commercials for [his] taste—Beethoven followed by ski jackets, Wagner after artisanal cheese—instead tuning to Internet stations from Canada, Germany or the Netherlands” (Cole 4). He finds comfort in the calm voices from elsewhere of the announcers on these radio stations and identifies with them, drawing “comparisons between [himself] in [his] sparse apartment and the radio host in his or her booth” (Cole 5). He describes the various books he reads as he listens to the various radio stations; he specifically mentions Barthes’s *Camera Lucida*, Peter Altenberg’s *Telegrams of the Soul*, and Tahar Ben Jelloun’s *The Last Friend*. He describes how he reads aloud as he tries to meld his voice and his reading with that of the radio announcers and their words even though they speak in a tongue that is foreign to him. He contemplates the shift from reading out loud in St. Augustine’s time to the habit of silent reading of modernity. He ponders the conversational nature of a book, a conversation between the author and the reader. A couple pages into these musings he informs his readers that it was to break the monotony of these evenings that he undertook walking the streets of New York. He then launches into an explication of the walks themselves and his experience of his adventures on foot. This is how the first person narrator introduces himself to his readers.

*Open City* opens as if mid-sentence, “And so when I began to go on evening walks last fall, ... (Cole 3).” The narrator seems intent on informing his readers of the geographical details of his walks – Morningside Heights as an easy

place to start from, going along the Hudson, into Harlem, and so on. It is only after he has established his location and the place of New York city in his life do the readers get the above mentioned reasons of why he started taking these walks in the place. He describes the first few walks as such:

At first, I encountered the streets as an incessant loudness, a shock after the day's focus and relative tranquility, as though someone had shattered the calm of a silent private chapel with the blare of a TV set. I wove my way through crowds of shoppers and workers, through road constructions and the horns of taxicabs. Walking through busy parts of town meant I laid eyes on more people, hundreds more, thousands even, than I was accustomed to seeing in the course of a day, but the impress of these countless faces did nothing to assuage my feelings of isolation; if anything, it intensified them. I became more tired, too, after the walks began, an exhaustion unlike any I had known since the first months of internship, three years earlier. (Cole 6)

As evidenced from the passage above, at first the walks are disorienting. The loudness of the city is a shock and appears intrusive in comparison to the tranquility at work; the crush of people on the streets only amplifies his loneliness; and the physical exhaustion is a new sensation that appears to take a toll on his mind and body. His initial response to the walks is consistent with his earlier presentation of himself to the reader. He does not like the intrusion of commercials on his experience of classical music and so avoids American radio stations. On his walks, the sounds of construction and the horns of taxicabs are "like the blare of a TV set" in a silent private chapel. He readily assumes that the throngs of people are "shoppers and workers" among whom he is the lone

observer much like Altenberg in fin-de-siècle Vienna, whose book he mentions, sending out telegrams of his observations. He also establishes a timeline for the readers – he started his internship three years earlier. Not only is he attempting to establish his erudite, cultured, hardworking self in the mind of his readers he is also attempting to situate himself as part of the city and its people and yet distinctive in his tastes and his musings. He seeks to convince his audience that he is a reliable storyteller, the narrator of all the stories of trauma that he is (re)collecting and retelling.

Following the events of 9/11, Sasha and Bennie are in an unsettled state at the start of *Goon Squad*. Sasha's memories of traumatic childhood experiences with abuse and abandonment have resurfaced. As a result, her kleptomania, a symptom of this trauma has also become aggravated. The opening details one such attempt at stealing, while also introducing us to the various objects she has collected over the course of a few months. Bennie's traumatic experiences with racism bubble to the top as he feels threatened with marginalization in the music industry where he has crawled his way to the top. They each respond to these memories with their own (re)collections – kleptomania for Sasha and nostalgia for the music industry in the past, the musical groups he has collected, and his angst with its current condition for Bennie.

Egan introduces Bennie to the readers in the midst of one his many "shame memories" that constantly haunt him, memories that frequently haunt him while he listens to yet another new music group as a music producer, a music group he might help "discover" as the next big hit for the music industry and the world (Egan 19). When Egan introduces Bennie, he is constantly plagued by the dual angst of "shame memories" and of his disdain for the

industry that he helps sustain. He is ashamed of his lack of libido and the gold flakes he consumes in his coffee to cure it; he is ashamed when he remembers kissing a Mother Superior on the mouth in a church; he is depressed and as such ashamed of his divorce and the fight with his ex-wife over their son; ashamed at the memory of an inadvertently copied email that referred to him as “hairball;” ashamed of the memory of the discovery of lice in his child’s hair; ashamed at the memory of a date gone wrong; and most significantly, at the sense of shame in sustaining an industry that he hates. As they listen to a group that Bennie’s record company Sow’s Ear might potentially produce, they pass by the site of the World Trade Centers. Sasha “hates” the empty site of the World Trade Center towers, “whose blazing freeways of light had always filled her with hope” (Egan 12). Sasha’s experience of the emptiness at the site recalls Eve Sedgwick’s “furtive glances” at the site and the sense of shame she feels at “the hapless visibility of the towers’ absence now, the shockingly compelling theatricality of their destruction” (Sedgwick 35).<sup>2</sup> She remarks, “It’s incredible how there’s just nothing there” (Egan 36). The “nothingness” of this space is unsettling because it appears as a metaphor for the nothingness that they sense in their own lives. An astounded Bennie thinks this is an appropriate description of his own thoughts about the music industry, “his hatred for the industry he’d given his life to” (Egan 36). He misses the “muddiness” of musicians actually playing; “nowadays that quality (if it existed at all) was usually an effect of analogue signaling rather than bona fide tape—everything was an effect in the bloodless constructions” that were being churned out (Egan 22). He finds them too clear, too clean, devoid

---

<sup>2</sup> Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky. *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity*. Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2006. Print.



of life, imbued with nothingness. According to Bennie, “The problem was precision, perfection; the problem was *digitization* which sucked the life out of everything that got smeared through its microscopic mesh. Film, photography, music: dead” (Egan 23). In stripping music of all variations, Bennie finds that digitization renders music lifeless, just as it does all other art forms. The resulting uniformity is deprived of the uniqueness of individual objects that enrich a collection. Bennie describes it as “aesthetic holocaust” (Egan 23). The “muddiness” of music of years past mark moments of memory, where there was a moment of bonding, or a moment of error. The lack of “muddiness” that Bennie finds abhorrent is akin to LaCapra’s disdain of closure or harmonizing. He finds the music sterile, lifeless, and similar to his own lack of libido, almost as if the aesthetic impotence had infected him and rendered him impotent as well. Bennie seeks to cure his lack of libido by consuming gold flakes, “after reading in a book of Aztec medicine that gold and coffee together were believed to ensure sexual potency” (Egan 21). However, he cannot share his struggle with his libido or his distaste for the music industry in the contemporary moment with anyone. If shame is associated with a lack of libido, Bennie cannot express his yearning for the raw sound of music of yesteryear because “Nostalgia was the end—everyone knew that” (Egan 37). The “hapless visibility” of the absence of the towers, echoing as it does their past traumas and the resulting disorientation of the present, leaves Bennie and Sasha discombobulated.

The shame memories that haunt Bennie belie his image as a successful music producer who shapes contemporary tastes in music. Within the first pages of introducing Bennie, the readers become familiar with his internal struggles – his shame at the lack of libido; his consumption of gold flakes in his coffee as a

cure for lack of libido; kissing a Mother Superior in a convent; his divorce; his age - forty four; he is swarthy and unkempt-looking and would never fit in with the country club crowd that his ex-wife aspired to; his hatred for the music industry he perpetuates; his nostalgia for the old songs that induced “the rapturous surges of sixteen-year-old-ness” (Egan 23); his old high school gang of Scotty, Alice, Jocelyn, and Rhea, all of whom appear in the novel; and his relationship with his son Christopher which is described in his therapists terms as determined by a “Will to Divulge” and by “Betrayal Bonding.” Bennie is overwhelmed by the urge to “divulge” his innermost thoughts and feelings to his nine-year-old son. Defying his wife’s restrictions and allowing his son to have, for instance coffee, gave Bennie great pleasure – bonding with his son by betraying his wife. Most importantly for the purposes of this examination, at his therapist’s behest, Bennie writes his thoughts down. Bennie recalls, “The Will to Divulge, Dr. Beet had called this impulse, and had exhorted Bennie to write down the things he wanted to confide, rather than burden his son with them” (Egan 24). Per the therapist, it is important that Bennie write his thoughts but it is also important that he be aware of his audience.

But it is the music industry, which shapes his personal memory. Many of the aforementioned memories and the people in them are associated with music either directly or tangentially. It is not just his personal memories, the music industry determines the way he categorizes those memories and the people around him. He describes his son as being “part of the postpiracy generation, for whom things like “copyright” and “creative ownership” didn’t exist” (Egan 26). Evidently, Egan references the post-Napster generation that changed the dynamics of music distribution. Bennie calls what can be deduced as the Napster

generation as “the dismantlers who had murdered the music business” (Egan 27). If digitization has caused an aesthetic holocaust and the music industry has undergone a dramatic shift commercially, it is little wonder that Bennie is going through a crisis in self-identity and self-orientation. For Bennie, there can be no separation between his mental and emotional state and music. Egan blends the two when Sasha inquires about Bennie’s shame memories he has noted to combat his “Will to Divulge” on a parking ticket he had got the day before. Egan writes:

Bennie handed it to her, his reluctance to have the list seen by human eyes overwhelming him a half second late. To his horror, she began reading it aloud:

“Kissing Mother Superior, incompetent, hairball, poppy seeds, on the can.”

Bennie listened in agony, as if the words themselves might provoke a catastrophe. But they were neutralized the instant Sasha spoke them in her scratchy voice.

“Not bad,” she said. “They’re titles, right?”

“Sure,” Bennie said. “Can you read them one more time?”

She did, and now they sounded like titles to him, too. He felt peaceful, cleansed. (Egan 37)

Even if Sasha does not get the context of the words, the articulation of those words in a voice other than his own give Bennie immense relief. More importantly, he has divulged his secrets without jeopardizing his pride and his sense of self. Significantly, they come across to Sasha and eventually to Bennie as titles to songs/albums satisfying both his will to divulge and his creative

endeavors as a music producer. The transformation of traumatic events and the accompanying raw emotions into album titles with potential for artistic articulation also “neutralizes” the shame associated with them and Bennie feels a sense of relief. Music and music production, which had been Bennie’s refuge from racist encounters, yet again provide him succor from shame. The relief stems from the articulation, the speaking of the traumatic experiences.

If Bennie (re)collects his many shames as a result of his unsettlement, Sahsa steals objects as result of her unsettlement and (re)collects her emotional state at the moment of acquisition of those objects. Music, or her current loss of interest in it, retriggered by the events of 9/11 has aggravated Sasha’s urge to steal. As indicated earlier she sees her sessions with her therapist Coz as “writing a story of redemption, of fresh beginnings and second chances.” She muses:

She and Coz were collaborators, writing a story whose end had already been determined: she would get well. She would stop stealing from people and start caring again about the things that had guided her: music; the network of friends she’d made when she first came to New York; a set of goals she had scrawled on a big sheet of newsprint and taped to the walls of her early apartments:

Find a band to manage

Understand the news

Study Japanese

Practice the harp (Egan 6-7)

Writing the story is important to her as it is to Bennie and to America post-9/11.

Writing the story is a way to move forward by generating signposts to follow.

More importantly, it is about control and framing the narrative. For Sasha it is a

self-conscious process that she seeks to achieve during and through her therapy sessions. And music is a huge part of it. It was something that had guided her before the onset of kleptomania. Two of her four early goals are music related. While she does not want to look to the past and its set of hindering, traumatic experiences, she still finds the goals she aspired to in the past as a way forward. Her goals are curiously conscious of the global perspective in the expressed wish to study Japanese and the necessity of being present expressed in the desire to understand the news. Just as Bennie yearns for the “muddiness” of the music of the past and the raptures of his sixteen-year-old-self, Sasha too reaches for the goals that she had set in the past as a way to move forward. Just as the events of 9/11 appear as a repetition of previous traumas, repetition of stable moments in the past appear to be the way to move forward for both Sasha and Bennie

Sasha collects objects by stealing them. *Goon Squad* opens with a detailed look at Sasha’s kleptomania. We see her process to acquire the stolen objects, her emotions during the process and in the aftermath of the process. More importantly, we are introduced to Sasha’s table of nicked objects via Alex, her date for the night. When the novel opens the scene shifts between the hotel where Sasha has recently swiped a wallet, to her therapist’s couch where she is narrating this episode, to Sasha’s room where she goes back with her date after having successfully (read without embarrassment to herself) returned a stolen wallet to its owner. Her condition having aggravated over the past year, we get a glimpse of the objects she has stolen, now accumulating on two tables in her room. Sasha has lifted:

Five sets of keys, fourteen pairs of sunglasses, a child’s striped scarf, binoculars, a cheese grater, a pocket knife, twenty-eight bars of soap, and

eighty-five pens, ranging from cheap ballpoints she'd used to sign debit card slips to the aubergine Visconti that cost two hundred sixty dollars online, which she she'd lifted from her former boss's lawyer during a contracts meeting. (Egan 4)

The random "Found Objects," as the chapter is significantly titled, have no utilitarian value for her. She does not use any of these objects. However, she is attached to the story of how these objects came into her possession, the emotion attached to the story, and the people they used to belong to. Sasha's collection of objects gives her access to the past that is "somewhere beyond the reach of the intellect, and unmistakably present in some material object (or in the sensation which such an object arouses in us)" (Benjamin 158).<sup>3</sup> The object gives her access to the emotions she wants to recover. Egan clarifies, "Sasha no longer took anything from stores—their cold, inert goods didn't tempt her. Only from people" (Egan 4). Her acquisition of the child's scarf and of the screwdriver from the aging plumber are told in great detail, giving the sense that there is a method to the randomness. Much like geologic sediments tell a story, the narrator observes that the objects on Sasha's table:

... looked like the work of a miniaturist beaver: a heap of objects that was illegible yet clearly not random. To Sasha's eye, it almost shook under its load of embarrassments and close shaves and little triumphs and moments of pure exhilaration. It contained years of her life compressed. (Egan 15)

---

<sup>3</sup> Benjamin, Walter. "Unpacking my Library: A Talk about Book Collecting." *Illuminations*. New York: Schocken, 1978. Print.

That it looks like the work of a miniaturist beaver indicates both skill and comfort with the activity of acquiring these objects. It is illegible to a random viewer. But Sasha feels exposed under her date Alex's scrutiny. The "found objects" visualize Sasha's psyche – embarrassments, risks, triumphs, and exhilaration. It is possible to read her life through these objects, albeit in brief. If Alex is curious about these apparently random objects on the table, Sasha herself has a "mix of feelings:"

The pride she took in these objects, a tenderness that was only heightened by the shame of their acquisition. She'd risked everything, and here was the result: the raw warped core of her life. Watching Alex move his eyes over the pile of objects stirred something in Sasha. (Egan 15)

Her feelings are described in terms of the maternal – "pride," "tenderness" – acquired at great risk. This visualization of "the raw warped core of her life" stirs carnal feelings in her; it makes her alive. What had previously been a lame date on the verge of being aborted, results in a one-night stand, where Sasha, Alex, Sasha's therapist Coz, and the readers are presented with "the raw warped core of her life," "compressed." She is overwhelmed by the emotional onslaught, or as Walter Benjamin describes it, "the springtide of memories which surges toward any collector as he contemplates his possessions" (60). This exposure leaves Sasha empty: "All her excitement had seeped away, leaving behind a terrible sadness, an emptiness that felt violent, as if she had been gouged" (Egan 16). She is left drained, the found objects having lost their ability to inspire and enliven. In effect, she has collected memories on that table and any sorts of scrutiny of those memories leave her feeling exposed.

The unsettlements that these characters experience are dual – the immediate trauma of the events of 9/11 which in turn unsettle the suppressed traumas of the past. Julian inscribes these unsettlements with walks and the stories that he collects thereby. The book, a first person narration emerges as a result, demanding witness to the traumas of the people he meets as well as, eventually, his own. Sasha’s unsettlements are narrated by her destructive and disruptive tendencies of kleptomania followed by seeking a cure for it through therapy and an attempt at rewriting the story differently both in terms of content and in terms of method. Bennie’s unsettlements are narrated on little scraps of paper that take on the form of found titles for music much like Sasha’s found objects and Julian’s found stories. These narratives are akin to what La Capra describes as a performative act that involves “acting out, working over, and to some extent working through in analyzing and “giving voice” to the past” (La Capra 186). Julian’s walk, Sasha’s stealing, and Bennie’s Will to Divulge are all performative, acting out to give voice to the past. The formal setting of therapy that they are each involved in, facilitate the performance and the giving voice, encouraging narration of the unsettlements that they are each experiencing. They offer a space to work through their traumas.

### **The wound and the story**

The (re)collecting is not an end in itself. It provides access to the gaps that have been created by the sudden break or caesura caused by a traumatic experience. They help to orient the victims and give their audience access to a reality that is not otherwise available. One of the challenges is how to narrate the story. One of the effective means of narration that these novels employ is the sorting of the stories or objects that are collected and making the connections that



may not otherwise be evident. Both of these novels engage in various kinds of sorting and analysis of their (re)collections in order to find a way to navigate and negotiate the break or the caesura that they have experienced. The sorting helps them find commonalities that help with the plugging of the gaps in experience but are not necessarily conclusive or final. The (re)collections themselves remain unsettled despite the commonalities.

For Julius, the sorting of the various experiences he collects on his walks is a way for him to orient himself. Julius informs his readers of his tendency to place himself, his thoughts, and his ideas. He recounts a particular walk that took him furthest afield thus:

One night, I simply went on and on, walking all the way down to Houston Street, a distance of some seven miles, and found myself in a state of disorienting fatigue, laboring to remain on my feet. That night I took the subway home, and instead of falling asleep immediately, I lay in bed, too tired to release myself from wakefulness, and I rehearsed in the dark the numerous incidents and sights I had encountered while roaming, sorting each encounter like a child playing with wooden blocks trying to figure out which belonged where, which responded to which. Each neighborhood of the city appeared to be made of a different substance, each seemed to have a different air pressure, a different psychic weight; the bright lights and shuttered shops, the housing projects and luxury hotels, the fire escapes and city parks. My futile task of sorting went on until the forms began to morph into each other and assume abstract shapes unrelated to the real city, and only then did my hectic mind finally

show some pity and still itself, only then did dreamless sleep arrive. (Cole 7)

The narrator is very specific about the distance travelled and the destination arrived at but is disoriented by fatigue and struggles to hold his body up. Too tired to sleep, too awake to sleep, he begins “sorting” encounters, sights, and neighborhoods. The differences in “substance,” “air pressure,” and “psychic weight” of the various neighborhoods that he identifies are obvious ones like, socioeconomic disparities – “housing projects” and “luxury hotels;” levels of activities – “bright lights and shuttered shops;” and open and closed spaces “fire escapes and city parks.” The sorting, analyzing, and classifying are a way to navigate and negotiate the unsettlement that he experiences. They are puzzles that need to be solved. And yet, he admits to the futility of the task and finally falls asleep. Why then pursue this apparently futile task?

He describes his attempts at sorting as futile, the walks as “a release from the tightly regulated mental environment of work,” “work as a regimen of perfection and competence” where improvisation is not allowed, the walks involved decisions that were “inconsequential” in terms of direction and sights and were therefore “a reminder of freedom.” Yet, he cannot give up control, “covering city blocks as though measuring them with [his] stride, and the subway stations served as recurring motives in [his] aimless progress.” He ends this introductory passage restating the sense of “solitude” he feels among the crowd of people, each “jostling for space and breathing room, all of us reenacting unacknowledged traumas” (Cole 7). The sorting comes across as an attempt at dealing with the past, some unspoken maybe unacknowledged trauma, a mapping of thoughts and experiences. He seeks to sort the geography of his

surroundings as if he is looking to orient himself physically. If the novel is seen as Julius's attempt to recover his own suppressed trauma, the rape that is revealed at the end, this exercise in sorting becomes important as Julius appears to be trying to define his identity as if to place himself existentially; and, finally, he appears to be at a crossroad, trying to define a self for the future.

Julius's attempts at self-orientation are also attempts at narrative orientation of narratives of traumas in that they are a series of stories of friends and acquaintances, a motley collection of people of different socio-economic strata, racial and ethnic identifications, and philosophical and political leanings. Through these stories Cole attempts to locate people, all of them informed by trauma caused by political and historical events that crisscross geographical and temporal boundaries, bringing them together into a common space as victims of trauma. The very first story is that of a former teacher and now friend. Professor Saito, a Japanese American who is forced to leave England at the start of the Second World War just as he was finishing his studies in Early Modern English literature, finds himself along with his family in the internment at Minidoka Camp, Idaho. The narrator mentions a couple well-known books from the early modern period *Beowulf* and *Piers Plowman* to reinforce the authority he is claiming to undertake this task of cognitive mapping. It is here that we find out the narrator's name when Professor Saito addresses him as Julius, a name that is itself problematic as discussed later (Cole 12). The professor states that, "We were all very confused about what was happening; we were American, had always thought ourselves so, and not Japanese. There was all this time of confused waiting" (Cole 13). In recalling the persecution of Japanese Americans,

Cole reminds us of the similar fate being meted out to Muslims and Arab-Americans post-9/11.

Throughout the novel, Julius references various works of literature, books that shore up his image of himself as an educated and thinking man. However, there is one book that he mentions that is entirely fictional. *The Monster of New Amsterdam* is summarized as the biography of Cornelis Van Tienhoven, a secretary of the Dutch East India Company. He was responsible for innumerable atrocities against Indians, particularly the Canarsie and the Hackensack. The author of the book V., a patient of Julius and a member of the Delaware tribe is traumatized by “the horrors Native Americans had had to endure at the hands of white settlers.” But for V., as it is for Julius in his narration of these traumatic events and how they shape self-identifications, these events cannot be relegated to the past; they cannot be forgotten. She confides in Julius that,

I can't pretend it isn't about my life [...] it is my life. It's a difficult thing to live in a country that has erased your past. [...] There are almost no Native Americans in New York City, and very few in the Northeast. It isn't right that people are not terrified by this because this is a terrifying thing that happened to a vast population. And it is not in the past, it is still with us today; at least it's still with me. (Cole 27)

The fictional biography (“real” in the novel) that Cole mentions here appears to be devised to introduce the collective trauma of Native Americans in the novel. In comparing this biography to those of Hitler and Pol Pot, Julius reminds readers that the horrors of genocide are not unique to the twentieth century, nor are they episodes that only ever occurred elsewhere. V. is a professor at New York University with a successful book. Yet, what primarily informs her identity

is a trauma of the past, which has been written out of the dominant narrative of the United States as “a land of the free and home of the brave.” V. is terrified by this collective historical amnesia. V.’s remark that that trauma “is still with us today” contextualizes the trauma of 9/11, that there have always been victims, the vast majority of them blameless, that get caught up in historical events that have little to do with them. And yet, the trauma itself haunts the future and defines identities for generations to come. The survivors of genocide suffer repeatedly because of absence and erasure from memories of the dominant narrative. Inherited traumas persist in the repetition that is experienced with each new instance of a public trauma. Additionally, the marginalization of native Americans threatens their stories with erasure thus denying them access to those experiences in order to work through them. V. insists on memory and remembering as a way to cope with trauma and as a way to stem the erasure of narratives of previous traumas.

Erasure of stories and histories brings in its wake a superimposition of other stories, histories and narratives. Julius ponders this as he views the site of the collapsed World Trade Center towers. He observes that while atrocities are not new to human history, the latest contribution is the absence of bodies as in the case of the attacks of 9/11. It has to be noted that absence of bodies is a twentieth century phenomenon, the nuclear bombings at Hiroshima and Nagasaki being the prime example. The erasure at the site of the events of 9/11 is not the first of its kind. Julius recalls:

Before the towers had gone up, there had been a bustling network of little streets traversing this part of town. Robinson Street, Laurens Street, College Place: all of them had been obliterated in the 1960s to make way

for the World Trade Center buildings, and all were forgotten now. Gone, too, was the old Washington Market, the active piers, the fishwives, the Christian Syrian enclave that was established here in the late 1800s. The Syrians, the Lebanese, and other people from the Levant had been pushed across the river to Brooklyn, where they'd set down roots on Atlantic Avenue and in Brooklyn Heights. And, before that? What Lenape paths lay buried beneath the rubble? The site was a palimpsest, as well as the city, written, erased, rewritten. There had been communities here before Columbus ever set sail, before Verrazano anchored his ships in the narrows, or the black Portuguese slave trader Esteban Gómez sailed up the Hudson; human beings had lived here, built homes, and quarreled with their neighbors long before the Dutch ever saw a business opportunity in the rich furs and timber of the island and its calm bay. (Cole, 58-59)

While the tendency is to mourn the latest loss, the latest erasure of lives, the rewriting constitutes a second erasure. It is this double erasure that V. mourns in the loss of her ancestors. In recalling the buried, forgotten history of Manhattan, Cole contextualizes the prevalent narrative of unprovoked attack surrounding 9/11 in relation to other multiple erasures at the site. He is also trying to unseat the privileging of narratives of erasure that are Euro-centric. Verrazano, Gomez, and Van Tienhoven's boss Peter Stuyvesant can be named and therefore their stories told and retold. But not for the Syrians, the Lebanese, and the Lenape who were erased from the site. If people from the Middle East are being held accountable for the current erasure, he reminds us that they have suffered their own erasure at the site. The idea of a palimpsest accurately describes human and

geological history and it also aptly describes the multiple traumas that lay beneath the current one. History in this sense is a sedimentation of traumas. Each trauma informs and shapes the next forming networks of trauma. As Julius's patient V. reminds us, "it is not in the past, it is still with us today." Repressed memories are not lost but are simply not accessible. Their belated address through repetition is essential to recovery of the stories and recovery of the victims. It is in this recovery that we bear witness to the cries of the wound and achieve the empathic unsettlement that LaCapra calls for.

Although he appears to meet people at random, Cole engineers it such that, he meets people who have been caught up in major historical events that engendered other collective traumas in various parts of the world. Julius recalls the misery and continued trauma of the Atlantic crossing of the slaves and their descendants when he realizes that it is this shared memory that random Africans are referencing when they insist on calling him "brother" (Cole 55). The atrocities committed by Charles Taylor are referenced during his conversation with an illegal immigrant from Liberia being detained at a federal facility (Cole 65-70). The story of indentured servants in Haiti and the untold misery of Haitians are recounted in a conversation with a Haitian shoe shiner (Cole 70-74). These stories haunt Julius. After his chat with Pierre the shoe shiner, as he is walking in Manhattan, he is shocked and frightened when he sees, "in the farther distance, beyond the listless crowd, the body of a lynched man dangling from the tree. The figure was slender, dressed head to toe in black, reflecting no light" (Cole 75). Of course, this references the sordid saga of lynching of blacks in the Jim Crow era of the south in the United States. Quite literally, the ghosts of the past haunt Julius. As it turns out, the "lynched man" here is merely a "dark canvas sheeting

on a construction scaffolding, twirling in the wind" (Cole 75). For the few minutes that the illusion lasts, however, his terror is real. Julius's momentary terror recalls V.'s terror at the plight of her ancestors.

*Goon Squad* offers two different kinds of sorting. Sasha places all of her stolen objects randomly on a table and recalls the sensations she experiences when she pinches these objects. Her emotional responses to each of those moments when she acquired those objects help her cope with her feelings of unsettlement. Narrating these experiences to Coz the therapist is her way to work through her trauma. For Bennie, music and his sense of shame and alienation are indelibly linked. This link appear as titles of albums to Sasha who is unaware of the context of the phrases that Bennie notes down.

Sasha's wounds are traumas from a childhood in an abusive home – her mother being physically abused by her father. Sasha disappears from her home at the age of seventeen, leading an itinerant life travelling from Tokyo to Hong Kong to China finally ending in Naples where her uncle Ted comes in search of her at the behest of her mother Beth and her partner Hammer. While in Naples, Ted recalls Sasha's turbulent childhood and adolescence:

Sasha had disappeared two years ago, at seventeen. Disappeared like her father, Andy Grady, a berserk financier with violet eyes who'd walked away from a bad business deal a year after his divorce from Beth and hadn't been heard from again. Sasha had resurfaced periodically, requesting money wires in several far-flung locales, and twice Beth and Hammer had flown twice wherever it was and tried in vain to intercept her. Sasha had fled an adolescence whose catalog of woes had included drug use, countless arrests for shoplifting, a fondness for keeping



company with rock musicians (Beth had reported, helplessly) four shrinks, family therapy, and three suicide attempts, all of which Ted had witnessed from afar with a horror that gradually affixed to Sasha herself (Egan 213)

Much like Julian's cataloging, Egan catalogs Sasha's traumatized childhood and her attempts at coping with it. Sasha's destructive behavior, a cry for help, is a narrative of wounds calling for witness. She has always tried to narrate her trauma or write her story as she does with her therapist Coz when the novel opens. Shoplifting or full-blown kleptomania always appears as a symptom when there is a breach in her everyday expectation of experiences. When her experiences do not match the expected norm, she breaks with the norms of societal behavior, giving voice to her wounds. Stealing is a controlled way to encounter far less intense unsettlements that mirror the unsettlement. The danger of being found out or discovered makes the experience unsettling. When she steals successfully, the relief she feels becomes a surrogate for the reliefs she seeks for the wounds of trauma. In this sense, suicide – a taking away, or stealing of one's own life – seems to be that ultimate act of writing of the story. Egan explores this notion further with Bosco.

Bosco, a sick aging guitarist of The Conduits, the first band that Bennie helps break into stardom, is trying to comeback with a new album *A to B*. He asks the question that haunts the book, "How did I go from being a rock star to a fat fuck no one cares about" (Egan 127)? As with other characters, Bosco finds that time has caught up with him because "Time's a goon" (Egan 127). It is evolving identity, self-identity that has him and the other characters flummoxed. The world feels upside down indeed. Memories, traumas, time and age, feel like

the goon squad that challenge valued beliefs, norms, and frames of reference. He wants to claim some of that former self as a performer, though he is ill with cancer and is dying. Bosco wants this, his next tour to be the Suicide Tour. He explains to Stephanie and Jules what he means by it:

I'm old, I'm sad—that's on a good day. I want out of this mess. But I don't want to fade away, I want to flame away—I want my death to be an attraction, a spectacle, a mystery. A work of art. ... Suicide is a weapon; that we all know. But what about an art? (Egan 129)

If Bennie sees digitization as aesthetic holocaust, Bosco conceives of suicide as an aesthetic form. In an age of suicide bomb attacks as public protest and political statement, the spectacle of 9/11 etched in the public consciousness, Bosco deems personal suicide as an art form. He reorients the view of death as tragedy to death as art form, particularly death that is embraced on one's own terms. Suicide is another way of making a spectacle of identity. Bosco wants to capitalize on this attraction of spectacle, particularly one where the timing and method of the ending cannot be predicted, to reinvent himself and his identity. He not only wants to re-imagine his identity, he wants to reengineer the perception of his audience and his fans.

Egan uses shifts in point of view to draw attention to the different kinds of trauma that the characters experience. Not only are the experiences of trauma unsettling and the narration of traumas unsettling to readers and audiences, the shifts in point of view defy any sort of normalization of the experience or the narration. As seen earlier, LaCapra has observed that empathic unsettlement translates into writing in the form of "stylistic effects or, more broadly, effects in writing which cannot be reduced to formulas or rules of method." The

characters' experiences of unsettlement extend to unsettlements of narrative styles. While Sasha's traumas are the result of abuse and a feeling of powerlessness, Bennie's traumas stem from being a racial other. His feelings of otherness are also traced to his early years, like Sasha's, and are narrated in first person by Rhea, a girl who has a crush on him. Egan shifts point of view and narration from third person to first and back. While the first two chapters "Found Objects" and "Gold Cure" that focus on Sasha and Bennie respectively have been in the third person, the third chapter "Ask me if I Care" takes us back to 1979 and Bennie's formative years in San Francisco as narrated by Rhea one of the original gang in high school. She describes their late night jaunts listening to "bootleg tapes," smoking cigarettes, sneaking gin off of parents' supplies, dressed in "dog collars and safety pins and shredded T-shirts" (Egan 39, 40). Most significantly, Rhea describes how they are sick of the hippies saying, "The hippies are getting old, they blew their brains on acid and now they're begging on street corners all over San Francisco. Their hair is tangled and their bare feet are thick and gray as shoes" (Egan 40-41). If Rhea sees the once rebellious hippies as irrelevant, Bennie, at the present moment, finds that his generation of punk rock musicians may be becoming irrelevant now. This is a large source of his insecurity and crisis in identity. Shifting identities and indefinable identities are a part of Bennie's charisma as a youth. Their band has been variously called The Flaming Dildos, the Crabs, the Croks, the Crimps, the Crunch, the Scrunch, the Gawks, the Gobs, the Flaming Spiders, and the Black Widows. His friends are unsure if he has Hispanic heritage because he appears to move seamlessly between various groups. While they dress the part with chains, dog collars, safety pins and Mohawks, hanging out in Mabuhay gardens listening to music

and gossip about musicians, they feel they are getting closer to being considered a legitimate punk band. Rhea wonders, "When does a fake Mohawk become a real Mohawk? Who decides? How do you know if it's happened" (Egan 46)? And this, as has been discussed is Bennie's problem. He still cannot figure out if his Mohawk has become legitimate. It is an ever-moving target, an indefinable state, even at Bennie's stage of career and the success he has achieved. We find him meeting his mentor Lou Kline, the Bennie Salazar of that moment. Lou's decline into irrelevance is what Bennie recalls in his present moment of crisis as he finds himself nostalgic for his youth, his past, when he was finding and establishing trends. Even when the Mohawk becomes real, he is finding it is a transitory state as it was with Lou and as it is with him. Unkempt and swarthy Bennie is the son of hard working parents, being raised by a grandmother, B is a place where he does not belong—living in a gated community of Republicans, with a membership at a country club, where blond women, who have blond progeny wear tiny white tennis dresses and use the phrase "meant to be" to describe their own good fortune and other people's misfortune (Egan 115). And yet, Bennie is plagued by "shame memories."

### **Belated address and the unclaimed experience**

As stated earlier, Caruth points out that the experience of trauma happens so suddenly that it is not readily available to the consciousness until it imposes itself again as a repetition for it to become available. La Capra calls it a belated effect. The belated address of the unclaimed experience appears as a repetition of the previous trauma. Both these novels see the events of 9/11, not as an ordinary trauma, but as a repetition of previous traumas. Hence the events trigger (re)collections of previous traumas. Personal traumas that are repressed surface

and are narrated in the common space of the novels. The unsettled commons find themselves implicated in these traumas through the empathic unsettlement that the novels achieve.

Cole intersperses narratives of public trauma with Julius's personal traumas and his shock at discovering that he has raped someone and has no memory of it whatsoever. While Julius has presented stories of victims, he is now presented to us as a perpetrator. In effect, this becomes traumatic for the readers in the common space that Cole has attempted to create in the novel as it repeats the traumas that have been witnessed throughout the novel. It changes the reading of and understanding of the novel as it does the readers' understanding of Julius. Julius (re)collects his personal history – his parents, his schooling, and his eventual decision to come to the United States for his post-Secondary education. Julius briefly describes the process of his admission into the Nigerian Military School at age ten and some of his experiences there before his trip to Brussels. He talks about his increasing estrangement from his mother and the death of his father. Following the death of his father, his already estranged mother recalls the details of her own childhood in post World War II Germany. Julius narrates:

Mother spoke about Magdeburg, about her girlhood there, things I had had only the shadowiest idea about, things that she now moved hesitantly into lighter shadow. [...] There was a mention of harvesting blueberries, another of an upright piano that refused to stay tuned. But, the idylls done with, it became a story of suffering: the suffering of her childhood years, when there had been little money and no father. Her father wasn't to return home from his elongated war until the fifties, when the Soviets

finally released him, a broken and withdrawn man. He lived less than a decade after that. But Mother's story was about a deeper hurt [...]. She had been born in Berlin, only a few days after the Russians had taken over the city, in early May 1945. She had no memory, of course of the months that followed. She couldn't have known the absolute destitution, the begging and the wandering with her mother through the rubble of Brandenburg and Saxony. But she had retained the memory of having been aware of this hard beginning; not the memory of the suffering itself but the memory of knowing that it was what she had been born into. The poverty of life in Magdeburg, when they had finally returned there, had been intensified by the horrors each relative, neighbor, and friend had encountered during the war. The rule was to refrain from speaking; nothing of the bombings, nothing of the murders and countless betrayals, nothing of those who had enthusiastically participated in all of it. It was only years later, when I became interested in these things for my own sake, that I surmised that my oma, heavily pregnant, had likely been raped by the men of the Red Army that year in Berlin, that so extensive and thorough was that particular atrocity, she could hardly have escaped it. (Cole, 79-80)

The first thing to note is that mother is capitalized as if it were a formal title rather than a relationship, perhaps to emphasize the distance between mother and son. It can also be seen as his regressing to his first language, German, which he has indicated was at one point as "the private language between my mother and myself until I was five" (Cole 142). The possessive is never used as in "my mother" as it is for his grandmother, "my oma." His forgetting of the German

language, their private language, deepens the estrangement between mother and son. The silence that trauma engenders leaves both Julius and his mother with gaps in the narratives of their lives, or as Julius says, stories move from shadow to lighter shadow. The stories of his mother and grandmother add the trauma of ordinary Germans, particularly the women, to Cole's narrative of layers of trauma and networks of trauma – missing partners, friends, and families; rape; poverty and destitution; German soldiers suffering as prisoners of war; and the shame associated with all of the suffering. While some of the suffering is immediate, some of it is memory, or for his mother, "the memory of having been aware of this hard beginning; not the memory of the suffering itself but the memory of knowing that it was what she had been born into." It is this memory of awareness, the memory of knowing that haunts future generations like Julius, his mother, V. and others as well. Julius observes that his mother carries the burden of having been born into a "world without sanctity." Hence, he feels that, "It is natural, decades later, losing a husband, for her to displace the grief of widowhood onto that primal grief, and make of the two pains a continuity" (Cole 80). The continuity is the repetitive nature of trauma and how the repetitions form layers or palimpsest as we have seen throughout the novel. The displacement that Julius observes is the previous wounds trying to break through and seek witness, a belated address of the unclaimed experience.

Julius's obsession with identifying and categorizing that he displays at the start of the novel stems from a crisis in identity that follows him all his life. In Nigeria, being a mixed-race child set him apart along with a name that is unusual. He explains:

The name Julius linked me to another place and was, with my passport and my skin color, one of the intensifiers of my sense of being different, of being set apart in Nigeria. I had a Yoruba middle name, Olatobosun, which I never used. That name surprised me a little each time I saw it on my passport or birth certificate, like something that belonged to someone else but had been long held in my keeping. Being Julius in everyday life thus confirmed me in my not being fully Nigerian. (Cole 78).

Along with his skin color, being of mixed race, the name Julius sets him apart, always emphasizing his difference in Nigeria. He cannot identify with his Yoruba middle name and makes him feel like an impostor. Much like his mother, he is always the other in Nigeria. And yet, in America, as has been noted earlier, he is identified as African, "a brother," an appellation that makes him equally uncomfortable as his name Julius had always denied him the African identity. Named for his mother Julianna, Julian inherits her memories of trauma and violence.

Cole uses Julius's trip to Brussels in search of his maternal grandmother to discuss the various layers, categories, and forgotten traumas that constitute the history of Europe. That King Leopold II perpetrated unspeakable atrocities against the people of the Congo and that Brussels is the seat of the European Union today makes it particularly relevant to his narrative of trauma and the shaping of histories and memories thereof. Julius encounters an elderly, Belgian woman on the plane who was witness to the Second World War with the inept Leopold III at the helm and its impact on the Belgian people. A surgeon by profession, Dr. Annette Maillotte, in a vein similar to Julius's descriptions at the start of the book freely comments on characteristics of people of different



nationalities describing Nigerians as “arrogant” (Cole 88); Ghanaians as “calmer and easier to work with” (Cole 88); and Africans, Indians and Filipinos as having “outstanding diagnostic skills” compared to their American counterparts (Cole 89). She opines that Belgium is “color-blind in a way that the U.S. is not” (Cole 89), calling America “this terrible, hypocritical country, this sanctimonious country” (Cole 92). Julius describes Dr. Maillotte’s comments as expressed with “unapologetic directness.” Yet, contrary to her description of Belgium as color-blind, what he catalogs are the many instances of racially instigated violence and the racially charged rhetoric of the right-wing Vlaams Belang party in Belgium. Anti-European Union, anti-immigration sentiments run high. He runs into Farouq, a Moroccan, Internet and telephone shop manager who espouses Malcolm X and Edward Said who sought to draw attention to the intrinsic value of difference and not just a recognition of difference as a foil to the dominant culture to foist its discontents upon (Cole 104-105). While the Congolese inherit the very real trauma perpetrated upon them by the Belgians, what people like Farouq and Julius encounter are “suspicious glances,” “a simmering barely contained fear” (Cole 106). In other words, Farouq and Julius symbolize the potential for violence by virtue of their race, even if the expectation remains unfulfilled. This fear engenders mutual rage in Farouq and those defending racial and cultural purity in Europe.

Julius finds that rage is the defining characteristic of the age on both ends of the political spectrum. He finds that the inchoate rage of the defenders of Vlaanderen is cheap. He observes,

But the bearers of the rage could never know how cheap it was. They were insensitive to how common and futile, was their violence in the name of a

monolithic identity. This ignorance was a trait angry young men, as well as their old, politically powerful rhetorical champions, shared the world over. (Cole 106).

Sentiments similar to those described here—the rage, the yearning for a monolithic identity, the nostalgia for the 1950s, and the attempts to distinguish real Americans—are common in post-9/11 America. As Julius notes, they are sentiments common to reactionary times. And as Julius notes here, it is a gendered narrative that hinges on idealized notions of masculinity. The rage is cheap because it hinges on very narrow, inflexible categorizations. It is futile because categorizations necessarily breakdown. But the resulting violence of this rage only ends in destroying lives and perpetrating trauma. Rage is a defining emotion and organizing principle for Farouq’s end of the political spectrum. Julius ponders,

A cancerous violence had eaten into every political idea, had taken over the ideas themselves, and for so many, all that mattered was the willingness to do something. Action led to action, free of any moorings, and the way to be someone, the way to catch the attention of the young and recruit them to one’s cause was to be enraged. (Cole 107).

Rage and violence appear to be the unifying elements across the political spectrum, from reactionary zeal to radicalization. But what bothers Julius is that it appears to be unmoored, as does the action stemming from this rage and violence. The experiences of inherited traumas remain unclaimed and the unsettlements manifest as rage. There does not appear to be any ideology other than a never-ending sense of threat or terror as played out to disastrous consequences in the War on Terror. A closer look at American discourse post-

9/11 shows a smattering of various other wars – culture wars, war on Christmas, war on women and so forth. Part of the problem is lack of a clear or definable identity or parameters of identification, which are tenuous to begin with. Julius ponders on the solution: “It seemed as if the only way this lure of violence could be avoided was by having no causes, by being magnificently isolated from all loyalties” (Cole 107). Would that mean that the anger had to be ignored? Repressed? Is being apolitical even an option considering we are already implicated in the violence? Julius sees this attempt at being apolitical as impossible, even dangerous. He says, “But was that not an ethical lapse graver than rage itself?” An isolationist stance seems almost mercenary-like.

Cole devotes an entire chapter to a conversation between Julius and Farouq, sometimes joined by Farouq’s friend Khalil. Invoking ideas and theories of Malcolm X, Walter Benjamin, Edward Said, Norman Finkelstein, Gaston Bachelard, Benedict Anderson, Noam Chomsky, Gilles Deleuze, Paul de Man, and Francis Fukuyama as code for the various lines of intellectual thought, interspersed by rudimentary explications of Islam, he presents what is meant to be an intellectual discussion of the Middle East conflict and the problems Muslims/Arabs face around the world. Even with the veneer of a philosophy and theory driven discussion, what emerges is really familiar, common, and tired arguments about the issues. There is mention of Deleuze’s concept of the spaces in between that define waves and dunes (Cole 112); the invisible cultural line that Farouq is unable to cross with the principal at the American school where he works (Cole 113); how foreign rule is never a solution even if it is one Muslim nation ruling another (Cole 114); American politics defined along party lines and the support for Israel across party lines (Cole 118); media-driven portrayals of

people—blacks in America as hip-hop loving and Arabs as extremely conservative—and the misconceptions that stem thereof (Cole 119); a profusion of dictators in the middle east, Muslim support for Hamas and Hezbollah and the attack on the World Trade Centers even when they abhor violence (Cole 120); the Palestinian cause aborted at every turn by the number six million; the privileging of the Nazi genocide over other genocides such as the Armenian and Cambodian genocides (Cole 122); Farouq’s deeply religious, hypocritical, anti-intellectual brother (Cole125); Paul de Man’s theory of insight and blindness and how insight can obscure things and engender parallel instances of blindness (Cole 127); and how Islam can fill the gap that the emphasis on rational thought instituted by Enlightenment (Cole 126-128). This is a conversation between two almost strangers in a coffee shop in Brussels and as such does not go in depth either into the theoretical/philosophical or the political aspects of the conversation. Yet, it seems contrived, to present the readers a Muslim/European counterfoil to the Nigerian American. Farouq contrives a self-image that is similar to Julius’s—an erudite, cultured, hardworking self. Julius remarks that he felt as if he were entering a Cézannesque tableau when he goes into the café to meet Farouq, as if to call attention to the artifice of the encounter, like they are merely reenacting a late nineteenth century French painting.

Part one of the novel ends with Julius having dinner with Dr. Maillotte. As if to balance out the arguments or to round things off, Julius challenges her notion of Belgium’s color-blindness as witnessed in Farouq’s experience and his trouble with maintaining his uniqueness and his difference. The counter argument from Dr. Maillotte seems like a collection of platitudes: “For people to feel that they alone have suffered, it is very dangerous;” “Why would you want

to move somewhere only to prove how different you are;" "It's difficult for everybody;" and "If you are too loyal to your own suffering, you forget that others suffer too" (Cole 143). This rather dismissive response to genuine hurt and trauma and struggles with keeping memories of "lesser" traumas alive seems to speak to maintaining the status quo. Cole's narrative strategy of having Julius (re)collect and give voice to these stories serves to counter the dismissal and to challenge the status quo.

Part two of the novel shifts from the peripatetic focus on various public traumas to a focus on personal memory rather than communal memory. It details a failure to remember/recognize Moji Kasali, an acquaintance from the past and a failure to remember something as banal as his ATM code. There are discussions of wars and memories of wars, the environmental impact of human endeavors, the dying off of bee populations, never-ending and ever indulging in wars, histories of madness in families, and institutionalized racism in America. The novel recounts other encounters with people. He mentions the burial site of African slaves in lower Manhattan now marked with a nondescript monument. He describes his father's funeral at length and what he remembers and what he cannot remember. But the story builds up to a more significant loss of memory for Julius—his rape of Moji when they were both teenagers and judging by the timeline soon after his father's funeral. Moji reveals this to him at a party hosted at her boyfriend's home.

Julius begins the chapter with a detailed description of the party, the apartment, and the conversations and his departure from the party the following morning. Before he eventually details Moji's revelation to the readers, he presents his assessment of himself. He states:

Each person must, on some level, take himself as the calibration point for normalcy, must assume that the room of his own mind is not, cannot be entirely opaque to him. Perhaps this is what we mean by sanity: that, whatever our self-admitted eccentricities might be, we are not the villains of our own stories, insofar as those stories concern us at all, we are never less than heroic ... We have the ability to do both good and evil, and more often than not, we choose the good. When we don't, neither we nor our imagined audience is troubled, because we are able to articulate ourselves to ourselves, and because we have, through our other decisions, merited their sympathy. They are ready to believe the best about us, and not without good reason. From my point of view, thinking about the story of my life, even without claiming any special heightened sense of ethics, I am satisfied that I have hewed close to the good. (Cole 243).

After all the lofty attempts at theorization of trauma and memory earlier in the novel, this lengthy self-defense reverts to fundamentals of good and evil with no room for nuance. Additionally, his defense rests entirely on his own definition of normalcy, without defining what might be construed as normal by this standard. It also hinges on self-awareness, "his own mind is not, cannot be entirely opaque to him." And he claims that in a personal narrative one always only sees oneself, or casts oneself as heroic, "never less than heroic." The defense hinges on platitudes like, "We have the ability to do both good and evil, and more often than not, we choose the good." Trite generalizations render his defense hollow particularly in the context of the magnitude of the accusation that follows. What makes it even worse is his claim that even in the choice of evil, if one is able to justify one's actions to oneself or one's audience, in this case the readers, then

one can garner sympathy based on other good decisions that one has made. He closes his defense by declaring that he is satisfied that he has “hewed to the good.” He casts his innocence as a foregone conclusion and not worth further exploration, analysis, or discussion.

Julius expresses consternation that he can be a villain in someone else’s story of him. He asks, “And so what does it mean when, in someone else’s version, I am the villain?” (Cole 243). Not only does he rely on his opinion of himself as “good” he sets a great deal of stock in his more than two hundred pages of his self-presentation as erudite, cultured, hardworking and therefore incapable of “evil.” He has engendered empathic unsettlement in his readers by (re)collecting stories of trauma. In tucking this story of rape toward the end of the novel, it appears that the novel is one long attempt at self-defense and identifying himself as good. Furthermore, in classic instance of victim doubting, he states that, “She had said it as if, with all of her being, she were certain of its accuracy” (Cole 244). We cannot believe Moji just because she is certain of the rape. Worse still, he implies that she may be clueless about her accusations, “as if she were certain of its accuracy.” And yet, we have to believe that Julius is innocent because he believes it is so with his being and his calibration of his normalcy and has purportedly presented enough evidence to that effect throughout this narrative. Julius has led his readers to an unsettled commons through his empathetic narratives. Moji, on the contrary, cannot present her construction of herself here, because Julius, in presenting an autobiographical narrative drowns out all other voices, or reports other voices to his readers. The only parameter of self-construction that is presented is that the rape has been a significant part of her identity as an adult. The pain, the bitterness, the scarring,

the extended agonies, have haunted her all her life (Cole 244-245). The most significant of Moji's testimony is the resulting silence that inevitably surrounds rape. She repeatedly states that Julius will say nothing, because he will not need to. She elaborates,

I'm just another woman whose story of sexual abuse will not be believed. I know that. Look, bitterness has been eating away at me all this time, because this was so long ago, and it's my word against yours, and you'll say it was consensual, or that it never happened at all. I have anticipated all your answers. That is why I've told no one, not even my boyfriend. (Cole 245).

Moji describes this as a familiar tale, she is "just another woman" with such a tale, and that it will not be believed. She also understands that just like many other women in her situation, she has no recourse and will be confronted with familiar responses of consent to the act or denial of the incident. It has taken her years to talk about it and it is courageous of her to confront her abuser even if it is futile and she will get no reprieve. Moji's trauma is central to her identity, much like his grandmother's or V.'s. While he appears sensitive to those traumas and his own and the ways in which they engender identity, he is particularly unsympathetic to Moji. She gets just two pages to tell her story, a story edited for the readers by Julius, and then disappears entirely from the narrative. Her final questions, "But will you say something now? Will you say something?" remain unanswered (Cole 245). Julius continues to describe his experiences on his walks, the end of his residency, the beginning of his private practice, and so forth. In this sense, Julius refuses to take responsibility, much like many other abusers before him. That he is the narrator means that he is in charge of the story that he



will narrate and silences out the victim much like the Arabs, the Africans and the Native Americans he has been sympathizing with throughout the novel. Julius has entirely suppressed this rape and is unsettled as it repeats the rape of his grandmother. His earlier admission acquires new meaning in light of this rape.

It was only years later, when I became interested in these things for my own sake, that I surmised that my oma, heavily pregnant, had likely been raped by the men of the Red Army that year in Berlin, that so extensive and thorough was that particular atrocity, she could hardly have escaped it. (Cole, 79-80)

He never specifies when he becomes “interested in these things.” Is it perhaps after Moji’s revelation of rape? He “surmises” that his grandmother had been raped, describing the Red Army’s occupation of Berlin as and “extensive and thorough” atrocity. In reaching this conclusion, Julian sees his rape of Moji as an echo of his grandmother’s rape. In (re)collecting and retelling of these various traumas in the novel, Cole sees 9/11 as one in a series of traumas functioning to echo and traumatize inasmuch as it repeats earlier traumas

Egan uses narrative strategies to unsettle the commons in order to give voice to the belated address. She not only introduces temporal shifts but also narrative shifts from third person to first to second. She alternates between third person narration of major or significant characters and first person accounts of lesser characters of their experiences with the major characters. The first two chapters dealing with Sasha and Bennie are told in third person while Rhea narrates the third chapter informing the readers of Bennie’s beginnings in the music industry. Similarly, Lou’s story with an African safari as the backdrop, before he meets Bennie is narrated in third person, while Jocelyn, Lou’s one time

lover narrates his last days and the mini-reunion of some of the members of Flaming Dildo. This emphasizes the fluidity of narration while simultaneously emphasizing that found “narratives” engender maps when examined in proximity engendering points of contact that might otherwise be missed. In other words, narratives are interconnected with or embedded in systems or structures that they stem from. As structures or systems shift so do narratives morph, or, as narratives morph, so do systems and structures. The points at which such shifts occur are also periods of anxiety, both individual and collective. Mindy, Lou’s much younger lover at the time of the Safari and eventually his third wife, a PhD student in anthropology, has some insights into the link between social structure and emotional response, insights that are admittedly a refinement or contemporary application of Lévi-Strauss. She labels these variously as Structural Hatred, Structural Resentment, Structural Affection, Structural Incompatibility, Structural Desire, Structural Fixation and so forth (Egan 63-66). Such categorizations require classifying humans into identifiable groups that are socially engendered and distinctly recognizable such as middle-aged female, a powerful twice-divorced male, his adolescent daughter and so forth. Such categorizations are context-specific and fall apart when the context is no longer true. They also fall apart when individuals defy these categories, or are unable to identify with any of the categories.

Giving voice to the unclaimed experiences is central to both narratives. Cole’s narrative, narrated by a psychiatrist witnesses wounds, public and private of his patients, friends, and acquaintances. The narrative voice finds that it is forced to confront an unclaimed experience of rape that the narrator himself has perpetrated. The revelation of the rape comes as surprise at the end of the novel

forcing readers to reread the narrative thus far and to reassess their understanding of the narrator, in effect becoming another imposition of trauma. That a reliable narrator repeats one of the various traumas that he has been describing denies any possibility of a harmonizing experience through the narrative. Similarly, Bennie and Sasha are able to work through their trauma once their unclaimed experiences have been given a voice – Alex looking at Sasha’s table of found objects, Sasha reading Bennie’s list back to him, or Scottie’s realization that experiences are just that and the problem is the privileging that renders some experiences as shameful.

## CONCLUSION POTENTIAL FOR (AN) UNSETTLED COMMONS

The Women's March on Washington on January 21, 2017, a day after Trump's inauguration, was a manifestation of an unsettled common on a grand scale<sup>1</sup>. While the cause of this unsettledness was not trauma but anxiety regarding the future of women's rights, immigration rights, racial issues and so much more, the march showed how an unsettled common is engendered. What started as Facebook events shared among friends anxious and frustrated with the election of Trump, it quickly snowballed into a global movement with the crowds at the march far exceeding those at the inauguration<sup>2</sup>. The march was significant in the ways in which various cross-sections of people and issues were brought together in common. More importantly, the march spawned sister marches across the United States and the globe that defied geographic specificity to the marches. Considering the number of men who either participated in or supported them, the marches countered notions of gender specific support for women's rights. Issues being protested included women's right to choose, funding for Planned Parenthood, immigrant rights, LGBTQ rights, rights of the disabled, healthcare rights, and so forth. The marches were peaceful with no violent disruptions or arrests. But the overwhelming call was to stay angry and to continue to resist, in other words, it was a call to stay unsettled. What was also significant was the call to be vocal about the resistance, in other words, to give voice to the settlements. Slogans riffing off of Trump's campaign slogan read "Make America Kind Again" reflect an empathetic, unsettled common.

<sup>1</sup> This website is a comprehensive look at the aims and goals of the Women's March <https://www.womensmarch.com>

<sup>2</sup> Here's an example of a Facebook event page <https://www.facebook.com/thewomensmarch/>

The Women's March has been a complete contrast to right wing movements in response to the election of Barack Obama as president in 2008 when the Tea Party movement took root. Those movements were an extension of the Bush administration's post-9/11 rhetoric of American exceptionalism and a precursor to Trump's America First doctrine. The Women's March and the marches that have followed, like the "Day Without Immigrants," are manifestations of the deterritorial and extraterritorial citizenships that Gray and Rothberg emphasize. The Indivisible Movement offers a practical guide to resistance that relies on the unsettledness of the common to participate in the political process at the local level to achieve change<sup>3</sup>. While the texts that I have explored in my dissertation examine the unsettledness stemming from trauma and the potential futures for a common that emerges from those settlements, it will be interesting to see how fiction responds to an unsettled common that appears to be coming together in response to nativist tendencies. Again, I have to emphasize that the call to stay unsettled is important because, as the texts in this dissertation have shown, it displaces any attempts at harmonizing or spiritualizing.

The global and networked coming together of the Women's March displayed networked organization and plurality of elements that Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri have observed in guerilla models of resistance. They insist that, "Network organization is based on the *continuing* plurality of its elements and its networks of communication" and that "creativity, communication, and

---

<sup>3</sup> The website offers guides of the practical ways in which an unsettled common can achieve their political objectives. <https://www.indivisibleguide.com/web>

self-organized cooperation are its primary values” (Hardt and Negri 82 – 83)<sup>4</sup>. The Women’s March was indeed a network of ideas, desires, and anxieties that were displayed in creative ways, relying primarily on communication and cooperation. There were innumerable stories of strangers coming together with the shared goal of expressing their discontent in common. From signs to costumes, participants expressed their resistance in a multitude of creative ways. Hardt and Negri emphasize this when they define the multitude as a “life in common,” where “all differences can be expressed freely and equally, a network that provides the means of encounter so that we can work and live in common” (Hardt and Negri xiv). Similarly, Paolo Virno maintains that, “Multitude is the form of social and political existence for the many, seen as being many: a permanent form, not an episodic or interstitial form” (Virno 21)<sup>5</sup>. The multiplicity of issues, forms, and locales of the Women’s March and similar protests that have followed indicate that the unsettled commons will be a permanent form of social and political existence. Furthermore, Virno posits that the emotional situation/tonalities of the multitude are “ways of being so pervasive that they end up being common to the most diverse contexts of experience” (Virno 84). The Women’s March demonstrated the pervasive emotional tonalities in the multitude and the ways in which they can be politically leveraged.

Narration of the settlements, as we have seen in my dissertation, is crucial in order to make them sharable. Disparaging remarks used against women have been co-opted into the resistance movement. “Nasty woman,”

---

<sup>4</sup> Hardt, Michael and Antonio Negri. *Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire*. New York: Penguin Books, 2005.

<sup>5</sup> Virno, Paolo. *A Grammar of the Multitude*. Los Angeles and New York: Semiotext(e), 2004.

Trump's put down of Hillary Clinton has been claimed as a badge of honor. Mitch McConnell prevented Elizabeth Warren from reading Coretta Scott King's letter about Attorney General Jeff Sessions on the senate floor. His language has been appropriated as a summary of women's history and the phrase "Nevertheless she persisted" has become a call to action. Slogans such as "The future is female" have been deployed to empower women to take action. The ubiquitous pink knit "pussy" hats have offered visual codes of resistance. What all of these moments indicate is that an unsettled common will continue to be unsettled, or stay woke as the Black Lives Matter movement has urged. What is of greater importance, as the texts explored in this dissertation have shown, is that commons that are coming together continue to think in rhizomatic, relational terms, focusing on the intersections and networks of issues and solutions to those issues.

In his talk at the Foreign Affairs Symposium at Johns Hopkins University in February 2017, Junot Díaz observes "a saturation of fear" in American culture and the corresponding impulse to build walls<sup>6</sup>. (An) unsettled common appears to be an effective response and resistance to this impulse. To use Díaz's words from *Oscar Wao*, (an) unsettled commons is the zafa to the fukú of walls. While acknowledging that people of color "never fully decolonize," Díaz insists, "there is no process "more joyous," than finding a way "to liberate one corner of ourselves." This consciousness of never being fully decolonized is akin to being at home in the state of unsettledness. The festive atmosphere of the resistance movements and the conviviality and camaraderie that they display, all hint at

<sup>6</sup> <http://hub.jhu.edu/2017/02/23/junot-diaz-new-book-walls-neoliberalism/>

empathy and the joyousness of giving voice to the unsettlements. Díaz and the various movements that have come together in resistance seem to concur that the goal should be to “liberate one corner of ourselves.” And that appears to be a potential of (an) unsettled commons.



## REFERENCES

- Appadurai, Arjun. "Playing with Modernity: The Decolonization of Indian Cricket." *Modernity At Large: Cultural Dimensions Of Globalization*. Minnesota: The U of Minnesota Press, 1996. 89-113. Print.
- Berlant, Lauren. "Intuitionists: History and the Affective Event." *American Literary History* 20.4 (2008): 845-60. Web.
- Bhabha, Homi K. "Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse." *Location of Culture*. London and New York: Routledge, 2004. 121-32. Print.
- Bush, George W. "Address to the Nation on the Terrorist Attacks. September 11, 2001." Web.
- Caruth, Cathy. *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*. Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins UP, 1996. Print.
- Cole, Teju. *Open City*. New York: Random House, 2011. Print
- Derby, Lauren. *The Dictator's Seduction: Politics and the Popular Imagination in the Era of Trujillo*. Durham: Duke UP, 2009. Print.
- Díaz, Junot. *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*. New York: Riverhead Books, 2007. Print.
- Edwards, Brent Hayes. "Diaspora." *Keywords for American Cultural Studies*, 81-84. Bruce Burgett and Glenn Hendler, Eds. Web.
- Egan, Jennifer. *A Visit From the Goon Squad*. New York: Anchor Books, 2011. Print.
- Galindo, Alberto S. "Less 9/11 Is More 9/11: The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao and A Day a Night and a Day." *Cultural Studies Journal Of Universitat Jaume I*, VOL IX, 2011, pp. 81-97. Web.

Geertz, Clifford. *The Interpretation of Cultures*. 1973. New York: Basic Books, 2000. Print.

Glissant, Edward. *The Poetics of Relation*. Betsy Wing, Tr. Anna Arbor: U of Michigan P, 1997. Print.

Gray, Richard. "Open Doors, Closed Minds: American Prose Writing at a Time of Crisis." *American Literary History* 21.1 2009 pp. 128-148. Web.

Hall Stuart. "On Postmodernism and Articulation." *Stuart Hall: Critical Dialogs in Cultural Studies*. London and New York. Routledge, 1996. Print.

Hanna, Monica. "'Reassembling the Fragments': Battling Historiographies, Caribbean Discourse, and Nerd Genres in Junot Díaz's *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*." *Callaloo*, 33.2, Spring 2010, pp. 498-520. Web.

Hardt, Michael and Antonio Negri. *Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire*. New York: Penguin Books, 2005. Print.

"Hate Map." Southern Poverty Law Center. Web.

James, C. L. R. *Beyond a Boundary*. 1963. London: Yellow Jersey Press, 2005. Print.

Keeble, Arin. *The 9/11 Novel: Trauma, Politics and Identity*. Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2014. Print.

Knapp, Kathy. *American Unexceptionalism: The Everyman and the Suburban Novel after 9/11*. U of Iowa P, 2014. Print.

La Capra, Dominick. *Writing History, Writing Trauma*. Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins UP, 2001. Print.

Laplanche, Jean and Jean- Bertrand Pontalis. *Language of Psychoanalysis*. London: Karnac Books, 1988. E-book.

- Marcuse, Herbert. "The Affirmative Character of Culture." 1937. *The Essential Marcuse*. Eds. Andrew Feenberg and William Leiss. Boston: Beacon Press, 2007. 202 – 230. Print.
- McClanahan, Annie. "Future's Shock: Plausibility, Preemption, and the Fiction of 9/11." *symplokē*, Vol. 17, No. 1-2 (2009), pp. 41-62. Web.
- Meek, Allan. "Benjamin, Trauma and the Virtual." *Transformations*, Issue No. 15 November 2007. Web.
- O'Neill, Joseph. *Netherland*. New York: Pantheon Books, 2008. Print.
- . "Bowling Alone". Rev. of *Beyond a Boundary* by C. L. R. James. *The Atlantic Monthly*, 11 September, 2007. Web.
- Ramón Saldívar. "Historical Fantasy, Speculative Realism, and Postrace Aesthetics in Contemporary American Fiction." *American Literary History*, 23.3, Fall 2011, pp. 574-599. Web.
- Roman, Rafael Pi. "Interview with Junot Díaz." 2008. [Part 1](#) & [Part 2](#). Web.
- Rothberg, Michael. "A Failure of the Imagination: Diagnosing the Post-9/11 Novel: A Response to Richard Gray." *American Literary History* 21.1 2009 pp. 152-158. Web.
- Saez, Machado. "Dictating Desire, Dictating Diaspora: Junot Díaz's *A Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* as Foundational Romance." *Contemporary Literature*, June 2011, 52: 522-555. Web.
- Virno, Paolo. *A Grammar of the Multitude*. Los Angeles and New York: Semiotext(e), 2004.
- Warren, Craig A. "It Reads like a Novel": The "9/11 Commission Report" and the American Reading Public." *Journal of American Studies*, Vol. 41, No. 3, Law and Politics, December 2007, pp. 533- 556. Web.

Weiner, Annette B. Rev. of *Trobriand Cricket: An Ingenious Response to Colonialism*,  
dir. Jerry W. Leach. 1977. *American Anthropologist* 79:506-507. Web.

## ABSTRACT

(AN) UNSETTLED COMMONS: NARRATIVE AND TRAUMA AFTER 9/11

by

CHINMAYI KATTEMALAVADI

August 2017

**Advisor:** Dr. Jonathan Flatley**Major:** English**Degree:** Doctor of Philosophy

This dissertation examines fictional responses to the events of September 11, 2001. It argues for the importance of one kind of fictional response, one which focuses on representing the feeling of "unsettledness" that can be one effect of trauma, with the aim of making that unsettledness itself a locus of a shared common experience. I posit that in articulating the events of 9/11 in the context of, in relation to, and as one in a series of traumas, violences, and histories, these narratives make the unsettlements shareable. Focusing on four works of fiction that were published after 9/11 – Joseph O'Neill's *Netherland*, Junot Díaz's *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* (*Oscar Wao*), Teju Cole's *Open City*, and Jennifer Egan's *A Visit From the Goon Squad* (*Goon Squad*) – I explore representations of the effects of and the attempts to cope with traumatic experiences including 9/11 itself.

**AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL STATEMENT**

Needless to say, I love reading. I also love cooking, knitting, and cuddling with Juno, my 150-pound bullmastiff. Without her Zen-like attitude to life, this dissertation would never have been finished.