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Narrative at Risk: Accident and Teleology in American Culture, 1963-2013

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Narrative at Risk: Accident and Teleology in American Culture, 1963-2013

by

Dustin R. Iler

A dissertation presented to the Graduate School of Arts and Sciences of Washington University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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All the while only in the process of learning life’s single lesson: that there is more accident to it
than a man can ever admit to in a lifetime and stay sane.

–Thomas Pynchon, *V.* (1963)
Introduction

Reading Accident and the Accidents of Reading

The key question is: what is meant by “chance” in fiction? Without chance all narration is dead and abstract. No writer can portray life if he eliminates the fortuitous. On the other hand, in his representation of life he must go beyond crass accident and elevate chance to the inevitable.

–Georg Lukács, “Narrate or Describe”

I. Accident Now

If, in 1983, you happened to read in Rolling Stone magazine Don DeLillo’s essay “American Blood: A Journey Through the Labyrinth of Dallas and JFK,” you may have experienced an accident of reading upon reaching its conclusion. You may have been haunted by the essay’s first sentence, “Once the business in Dealey Plaza was settled—a matter of 5.6 seconds, we are told—the process of unraveling could safely begin,” when, in order to reach the essay’s conclusion, you flipped to page seventy-four, where, in the first column of that page, the essay ends (21). Maybe memory of the first sentence, as you flipped the pages, would lead you to consider that first section’s title: “Mysteries of Time & Space” (21). And perhaps, when recalling this line, you, by chance, glanced at the adjacent column on page seventy-three titled “Films.” If so, you would have read this advertisement: “Zapruder Assassination Footage. Kennedy exhibits: videocassettes, photographs, literature. Catalog: $2.00. Collector’s Archives. Box 42, Winnipeg, Manitoba R3K 1Z9” (Rolling Stone 73). A little mystery of time and space emerges from the accidental placement of DeLillo’s essay in the back matter of this issue, wherein someone attempted to sell copies of the home video of the event you had just read DeLillo discuss. Such an accident of reading would, possibly, draw you back to DeLillo’s conclusion pondering Malcolm X’s assassination, which occurred shortly after Kennedy’s: “Red shined shoes in a
dance hall in Boston when Jack was a student at Harvard. Beyond this, and a scathing comment Malcolm made when Kennedy was shot, we don’t know where to look for a connection not made in a moment of sudden blood” (74). We don’t know where to look for connections, but here we are, in the back pages of *Rolling Stone*, making connections. All the coincidence, all the time: DeLillo could not have authored the chance juxtaposition of his essay on assassination and conspiracy theory beside an advertisement for the Zapruder film and other Americana depicting the events of November 22\textsuperscript{nd} 1963 and the days that followed. The meaning ascribed to such an accident of reading belongs solely to the reader and the culture in which he reads. To read such an accident in any other way means to find meaning where none exists. There’s a danger in such reading, for once you read meaning into one accident, one meaningless event, what’s to stop you from finding meanings and messages in any accident, any sign, anywhere?

Accident happens, despite one’s intentions, without expectation or known cause. At first, the first word of the last sentence embodies what it fails to say: accident. The author misspelled. However, once I admit that the misspelling is intentional, the accident almost disappears. Almost, because while I can deem the misspelling intentional, once printed, the missing ‘i’ cannot be replaced; the already-written sentence creates a teleology that leads to the meaning of the current sentence, the explanation of the misspelling that turns out to be no accident. As Lukács writes in the epigraph to this introduction, chance is a vital element of narrative fiction, but accident in fiction is always inevitable. When a character in a novel suffers a car accident, for example, the accident is the effect of the author’s intentions, and therefore, like the misspelling above, it is not accidental. The words and images that constitute the meanings and events of the text do not change. The accidents in the narrative always happen the same way, reading after rereading. Drawing from this observation, the question that I attempt to answer in this
dissertation is, in its simplest iteration: how can narrative accurately represent accident when its
textual representation is not subject to the effects of accident? In the pages that follow, I ask this
of a number of American cultural objects that were produced over the last fifty years, from the
assassination of President John F. Kennedy to the present. *Narrative at Risk* interrogates
representations of accident primarily in novels and films—but also television, roleplaying games,
comic strips, and videogames—in order to provide an understanding of how contemporary
American culture has made meaning from the accidental.

A number of recent critical studies have taken accident as their subject. Ross Hamilton’s
*Accident: A Philosophical and Literary History* appeared in 2009, the same year that Catherine
Malabou’s philosophical essay *Ontology of the Accident* was published in French. *Crash: Cinema and the Politics of Speed and Stasis*, Karen Beckman’s historical-theoretical study of
filmic and literary representations of car accidents from the late-nineteenth to the twenty-first
century, was published in 2010. Two years later, Malabou’s essay was translated into English,
the same year that saw the publication of Jason Puskar’s *Accident Society* and Steven Belletto’s
*No Accident, Comrade*, each a study of accident in American literature, the former treating
novels from the 1890s to the mid-1940s, and the latter treating novels from the mid 1940s to the
late 1990s. Below I discuss each of these important studies in greater detail, contextualizing my
project among them and explaining how *Narrative at Risk* provides, through drawing on a range
of cultural objects, a broad cultural study of how accident and artistic representations of accident
have shaped American history and politics from the 1960s into the present. I proceed to read
critical and historical understandings of the Kennedy assassination and its coverage and
depiction in mass media in relation to the crises of the American 1960s, particularly in
conceptions of the Kennedy assassination as the moment that the story of the American century
took an unforeseen turn as well as when television crystallized into its present form. I conclude with a reading of two novels written in the midst of these crises, *The Crying of Lot 49* (1966) by Thomas Pynchon and *Play It As It Lays* (1970) by Joan Didion, arguing that both novels depict the epistemological and ontological crises of the 60s, especially in response to the Kennedy assassination and mass media. Throughout the three parts of this introduction, I contend that in the 1960s Americans’ understanding of accident began to change. An awareness of accident began to rise, invading everyday life and shaping both cultural production and American society’s understanding of itself and its place in the world.

The concurrent publication of the above texts raises a question: why was so much published on the accident over the past five years? Surely one should not take this for pure coincidence. Before I answer this question, it is first necessary to explore the origins of the word accident and define how this term has been deployed in the above works and will be used in the chapters that follow. The Greek word for accident, *συμβεβηκός*, which Aristotle discusses in his *Metaphysics*, is the noun form of the verb *συμβαίνω*, to stand with two feet together, to come together, to coincide, or fall to one’s lot. The Latin *casus*—accident—with its origins in *cadere*, means to fall or cut into. Accident, in its earliest sense, means a fall, an event that cuts; in Aristotle’s conception, the accident cuts through the surface of an object and reveals its substance. Ross Hamilton’s study explores the development of accident in literature and philosophy from Aristotle to the late twentieth century. Focusing on the development of Aristotle’s conception of *συμβεβηκός*, Hamilton writes that Aristotle used accident to “distinguish the mutable or inessential qualities of a thing from its defining essence or substance. He used the same term to refer to accidental events, so a link between the unexpected events and the defining qualities of a person or thing appears at the beginning of the history of accident” (1).
Hamilton draws from the works of Paul Virilio, for whom “the innovations of the twentieth century have taken accidental events to extremes, mass-producing them in preparation for what he calls the ‘integral accident,’ a continental, multicontinental, or even planetary event that will involve the serial production of catastrophes” (Hamilton 3). The accident exemplifies modernity against itself, which transforms, according to Hamilton, “Aristotle’s accident of substance into what [Virilio] calls an accident of knowledge” (3). The accident, for Virilio, complicates epistemology; every perceived progress comes with its own unforeseen means of destruction, its own series of setbacks. As he writes in The Original Accident (2005), “To invent the sailing ship or steamer is to invent the shipwreck. To invent the train is to invent the rail accident of derailment. To invent the family automobile is to produce the pile-up on the highway” (10). Technological progress necessarily produces disastrous accidental consequences. “As Virilio reminds us,” notes Hamilton at his study’s close, “technology hides its potential for damage within the promise of scientific progress—the automobile preparing for car crashes or nuclear power preparing for atomic and hydrogen bombs—but the power to detonate what he regards as the impending cataclysm resides in ‘thought technology’—film, television, and digital media” (Hamilton 299). These media alter one’s experience of time while replicating and disseminating accidents, “further[ing] the sense that all acts are equally accidental” (Hamilton 300). In Virilio’s own words, “Lately, as though an accident was now an option, a privilege granted to chance to the detriment of error or the desire to do harm, the accident argument has become one of the mass media’s pet themes, flagging, by this very fact, the confusion now creeping in between sabotage and breakdown, on the one hand, and between the suicide bombing mission and the industrial or other accident, on the other” (15). Mass media has depicted the accident as an option—as a choice—for at least half a century. Nonetheless, Virilio’s imperative, that we must
distinguish between the intended destructive acts of individuals and groups and unintentional disasters, which are accidents, is epistemological. The mass media blurs what we know to be accident and intention. For both Hamilton and Virilio, the problem with the mass media rests in its conflation of intentional events with accidental events, and with the reduction, to the same level, of all accidents. Every misfortune quickly becomes one of innumerable tragedies, which blinds one to the range of risks and their varying degrees of danger. This provides one reason why, in the following pages, I read novels alongside film, television, and videogames: to provide a coherent reading of how accident has been represented in multiple media over the past fifty years while scrutinizing how each media provides different representations of the accident.

However, Virilio’s theory of the accident has its flaws. The above conception—that the invention of a technology always results in a new accident—creates a teleological understanding of accident. Karen Beckman challenges this aspect of Virilio’s theories of the accident; “Resisting Virilio’s misogynist vision of technology, which emerges in opposition to subjectivity, sexual desire, and femininity, while recognizing the imminent threat of the accident to which his work draws attention” she “explore[s] how film, through the recurrent trope of the car crash, stages, excites, and disciplines the unconscious drives that pull us toward speed, risk, and the vulnerability of the self that is forged by these drives” (13). Beckman accuses Virilio of misogyny not only in his equating the car with “‘the woman of burden’ who provides man with ‘the potential for movement,’” but also in his pedantic and conservative attitudes of “the moralistic safe-driving discourse of the late 1950s” (12). Virilio wishes to suppress the unconscious facets of human subjects in order to prevent accidents, which leads him to his teleological understanding of accident (11). Miriam Hansen, whom Beckman also cites, likewise resists this teleological understanding of technology:
As my excursion into Benjamin’s speculations on first and second technology should have made clear, these speculations cannot be easily assimilated to contemporary media theory, certainly not the teleological variant (for example, in Paul Virilio, Friedrich Kittler, or Norbert Bolz) that marshals a vast number of sources to demonstrate—celebrate or decry—the subject’s inevitable abdication to the a priori regime of the apparatus. (325)

Filmic and photographic forms of technology—and thus technology at large—does not limit the subject to a foregone conclusion, namely their own demise due to incomprehension of both their own desires due to one’s ignorance in regard to how technological apparatuses marshal these desires and thus shape how they exist and enter the world; instead they cultivate “an imagination that plays games [. . .] to invoke Kracuer—gambles with technology’s otherness” (Hansen 324).

In other words, with technology we take chances that do not always lead to cataclysmic accidents and predetermined ontological and subjective states; sometimes one makes a fortuitous discovery. Yet in other instances, as we will see, cataclysmic accident and fortuitous discovery coincide. While mass media can level all accidents so that they carry the same import and have the same affect—a wildfire reported after news of a traffic jam, followed by the melting of the polar icecaps, all seen on the six o’clock news—it also allows for chance encounters, like the advertisement for the Zaquote film that appeared beside DeLillo’s conclusion, which provide insights into an historical moment.

While for the above critics, and Virilio in particular, the accident is, to greater or lesser degrees, an object in the world, Jason Puskar argues from the premise that “Chance is made out of words. No mystical force, no scientific property, no real thing, chance is a conceptual category crafted through language and put to use in a wide range of institutional and political contexts”
For Puskar, accidents lack meaning because those who witness them—and especially those who write about them—lack an understanding of their causes, a history in which to place them. Puskar contends: “In writing the accident” novelists of the late nineteenth to mid-twentieth centuries “purported to detect and describe a radical instability at the heart of modern life, but in fact they were producing that instability by modeling it in narratives of causeless and blameless catastrophe” (1). Puskar argues that events depicted to have happened “for no reason at all” are deemed accidents, which removes blame from individuals and organizations in the face of numerous man-made disasters (1). Because of this denial of complicity, he insists that accident instead can only be understood within its historical context: “Definitions of chance [. . .] must be historical definitions, particularized to a time and place, and always attentive to the term’s inner tensions, residual meanings, and constantly shifting boundaries” (5). Thus one should question Aristotle’s definition of the accident as Virilio does, and question Virilio’s definition of accident, like Hansen and Beckman, for doing so allows one to recognize that what is meant by accident has changed over time and continues to do so in our present moment. It is necessary to understand accident as no longer neatly fitting into Aristotle’s definition; the car accident does not so much reveal the substance of the car, nor is it necessarily helpful to understand the invention of the car as the invention of the car accident. Rather, the accident, from at least the early 1960s forward, points to crises of agency and individuals’ and organizations’ culpability in events that seem to be beyond one’s control, a subject that Ralph Nader famously treated in Unsafe at Any Speed (1965). Moreover, the accident should be taken as its own event—studied on its own terms—not as revealing the substance of an object, but as an object itself. In doing so, one can see how, in the instance of this study, recent American society has understood itself in relation to the accident and has applied meaning to the accident in light of its history.
Steven Belletto further illustrates historical developments of the notion of accident. He writes that the Cold War “put pressure on the idea of narrative itself—the designed nature of which seems fundamentally at odds with chance—and especially on the work of so-called literary fiction” (5). In ideological opposition to Soviet conceptions of historical determinism, American writers incorporated chance into their narratives in order to emphasize the role that absolute chance plays in history (21). Belletto helpfully conceptualizes “narrative chance” as distinct from “absolute chance.” While the latter exists in the world, Belletto shows that it does not exist in narratives: “Whenever an accident or other chance event occurs in a fictional narrative, it is always an example of ‘narrative chance’—that is, chance which is tied to planning, intention, and purpose” (23). While accidents occur in history—events that have causes beyond comprehension—and while absolute chance exists in quantum theory, neither exists in narrative (14). Belletto maintains that, in American narratives composed during the Cold War, accident served to undermine and subvert Soviet teleology. Yet the Cold War lineage of narrative chance continues to operate in a similar manner, undermining other forms of teleological thinking, such as religious fundamentalist understandings of history, progressive biological determinism, and psychoanalytic conceptions of the subject.

While the third and fourth chapters of Narrative at Risk respectively treat accident’s role in upsetting the former two types of teleological thinking, biological determinism and evangelical mythology, this entire study engages the third, reading representations of subjectivity, primarily characters’ responses to accident, and the relationship between how narrative representations of accident affect characters, readers, and viewers. Catherine Malabou’s challenges to the psychoanalytic subject, which she makes through confronting psychoanalysis with the reality of the accident, proposes a development in understanding accident within
contemporary history, as well as how this questions earlier understandings of subjectivity. In “Post Trauma,” Malabou challenges the “always-already” of the Freudian-Lacanian subject and its relationship with primordial trauma. Malabou, in response to Slavoj Žižek’s essay “Descartes and the Post-Traumatic Subject,” constructs, from the vantage of neuroscience, an argument against the always-already in a reading of “Father I am Burning” from both the seventh chapter of *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1904) and Lacan’s seminar on Freud in *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis* (1973):

> If there is a beyond the pleasure principle, can we still understand it as a beyond chance, beyond the accident or beyond contingency? This is precisely what is no longer possible. When the victims of traumas are “burning,” we certainly don’t have a right to ask: where is the reality in these accidents? We certainly don’t have a right to suspect contingency for hiding a more profound kind of event, for being the veiled face of the compulsion to repeat. To split reality from the Real, contingency from necessity, the transcendental from the empirical, good or bad fortune (*tuché*), from necessity (*automaton*). Reading this Lacanian interpretation [sic], we cannot help but visualize the psychoanalyst as a fireman looking at the catastrophe and saying: “there must be something more urgent, I am due to take care of a more originary emergency.” (233)

The ethical imperative, for Malabou, is to confront and treat the accident before moving on to search for the substance it reveals—if it reveals anything. For me, the importance of understanding narrative representations of the accident resides in historically understanding how American culture’s conceptions of the accident changed over the past fifty years—how, as a society, we have come to be more aware than ever of the risks of everyday life, and how through narrative representations of accident, works of art and entertainment have attempted to both
normalize and raise one’s awareness of accident. In other words, many continue to address accidents as if they are merely the symptom of an underlying threat rather than their own unique danger, while those most sensitive to the risk accidents pose insist that we address the accident as its own substance, not a surface element that reveals the substance of another object. While Lacan’s deployment of tuché and automaton return us to Aristotelian conceptions of accident, Malabou takes us beyond them in *Ontology of the Accident: An Essay on Destructive Plasticity*. 

“No one thinks spontaneously about a plastic art of destruction,” writes Malabou, “Yet destruction too is formative. A smashed-up face is still a face, a stump a limb, a traumatized psyche remains a psyche. Destruction has its own sculpting tools” (4). Malabou’s conception of the accident cuts beyond Aristotelian metaphysics to the substance of the accident, identifying accident as the substance of subject formation, and thus at the center of one’s understanding of history:

> The individual’s history is cut definitively, breached by the meaningless accident, an accident that it is impossible to re-appropriate through either speech or recollection. In principle, a brain injury, a natural catastrophe, a brutal, sudden, blind event cannot be re-integrated retrospectively into experience. These types of events are pure hits, tearing and piercing subjective continuity and allowing no justification or recall in the psyche. How do you internalize a cerebral lesion? How do you speak about emotional deficit since words must be carried by the affects whose very absence is precisely what is in question here? (29)

For Malabou, the accident does not reveal the primordial components of subject formation but instead forms new subjects. The accident molds plastic subjectivity—it doesn’t so much cut through as it shapes, sculpts a new subject from the old.
In *The Echo Maker* (2006), Richard Powers provides a lucid example of this meeting of accident and neuroscience. In this post 9/11 novel Mark Schulter, after a car accident, develops Capgras Syndrome: he perceives that those closest to him—his sister, his dog—are doubles, imposters perpetrating a conspiracy against him. Mark’s sister contacts Gerald Weber—a cognitive neurologist and writer of Oliver Sacks-like popular science books—and asks him to examine her brother. In Weber’s reflection upon his most recent book, *Country of Surprises*, Powers articulates the shifting conceptions of narrative, subject, and accident that each of the above authors, Malabou in particular, take as their object of study:

*The Country of Surprises* was the richest thing he’d ever written. It consisted of a dozen re-created case studies of patients who’d suffered what Weber studiously refused to call brain damage. Each of his twelve subjects had been changed so profoundly by illness or accident that each called into question the solidity of the self. We were not one, continuous, indivisible whole, but instead hundreds of separate subsystems, with changes in any one sufficient to disperse the provisional confederation into unrecognizable new countries. (170-171)

This passage reflects upon what Malabou calls destruction’s sculpting tools, and alongside this meditation on the creative capacity of destruction rests an historicizing of the year in which the novel is set, 2002. The language mirrors the rather schizophrenic condition of the United States. Like the attack that destroyed the World Trade Center, September 11 happens twice, with the exact phrase repeated, in *The Echo Maker*: “September came, and then the attacks” and “September came, that bleak first anniversary” (212, 271). September 11th 2001 comes to mean through the events of Schulter’s car accident and the subsequent changes to his brain, which raises the awareness of American society’s perception of itself as vulnerable to the accidents and
acts of those who wish to author history and to the fact that these acts have changed the way the society perceives others and itself. The purposes of the aforementioned studies, whether the historical development of the accident in Hamilton, the understanding of mediated crashes as fulfilling “the drives” in Beckman, the responsibility of individuals in the perpetration of what are officially designated accidents in Puskar, the deployment of narrative chance as supporting American ideology and hegemony in Belletto, as well as human subjectivity as being not whole but wholly contingent, are all manifest in this one passage from Powers’s novel.

From Hamilton and Malabou to Beckman, Puskar, and Belletto, the accident, in the last few years, become an event to scrutinize and synthesize with other theories of subjectivity and history in works of art. At the beginning of this introduction I said that I would provide an answer to why, in the last four years, so much has been published on the accident. Taking into account that these works were composed from the beginning of the 21st century into its second decade, one may want to answer that the events of September 11th 2001 were a cause, and while certainly those attacks have contributed to an extension of Western desires for control, as well as revitalized how we understand accident and the trauma it inflicts, there are causes beyond that historical event that are nonetheless closely related to it: primarily the preventive war waged against Iraq. The unilateralism of the administration of George W. Bush and the deployment of pre-emptive strikes were a response to an invisible threat—weapons of mass destruction—that turned out to be a fiction. However, the Bush administration’s use of unilateralism began before September 11, 2001 when the administration withdrew from the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty. Cold War nostalgia for military dominance rekindled before the terrorist attacks of September 11; the attacks merely tempered the administration and the society’s resolve to prevent any future attacks, even if that meant the United States would attack first. Such foreign policy demonstrates
American society’s desire to go to any length to manage risk. The culture’s rising awareness of risk, due to the events of September 11, 2001 and the ensuing wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, were furthered by the devastation of natural disasters—particularly for Americans, the devastation of Hurricane Katrina and the federal, state, and local governments’ inadequate management of that disaster. Meanwhile, concurrent discoveries in genetics, biology, and neuroscience also profoundly contributed to a pervasive attention to accident’s role in natural events; the more we learned about our bodies, about our environment, our planet, our solar system, and our universe, the more contingency we came to see. The economic disaster of 2008 has also surely contributed to the feeling that our lives are contingent upon factors beyond our control, but not beyond anyone’s control—the federal government, banks, Wall Street brokers, of whom, nevertheless, we realize (and hope) do not and cannot exert total control over any system, no matter their claims. In other words, in America, the first decade of the twenty-first century saw a rising sense of everyday life put at risk from a number of factors at the level of the individual’s body, and its components, as well as on a global scale. These are but some of the reasons that critical attention has turned to accident, and I imagine, as more risks accumulate, more scholars will begin to study that for which Aristotle said there was no science: the accident.

Therefore, rather than look any further at our recent history, in the next section of this introduction I will turn to a reading of the 1960s, wherein the conditions of the mass media traumatic spectacle were established. The mass media coverage of accident—that which Virilio fears numbs us to the reality and import of accident—has become part of the everyday life of most Americans. The twenty-four hour news cycle thrives on recycling images of disaster. Such mediation, many have remarked, made the events of September 11, 2001 so familiar that it seemed we had seen this all before on television and cinema screens. Reality looked all too much
like bad fiction. In reading an event that, rather than replaying that fiction—the always-already—instead opened new wounds that have yet to heal, I turn to a moment in our history that many critics and historians claim saw the crystallization of the mass media that brought many horrible events, September 11 among them, into our homes again and again. I refer to what Abraham Zapruder filmed on November 22, 1963: the assassination of President John F. Kennedy and the epistemological and ontological crises the event, the media coverage of it, and that strip of film, initiated.

II. Assassination, Mass Media, Postmodernism

Yet it is clear that the entire outlook has changed for both parties, and the unexpected death of President Kennedy has forced Washington to meditate a little more on the wild element of chance in our national life.


Artists, historians, critics, and theorists have come to perceive the Kennedy assassination as the first of a series of post-war traumas that shaped and continue to shape American society—and every image of the event was captured by accident. When Abraham Zapruder began filming the procession, he intended to record his beloved President at the height of his life, not the moment of his death. When the news cameras rolled filming Oswald and his police escort, they intended to record answers, a glimpse of the assassin, not his death. J. G. Ballard has gone so far as to portray the Kennedy assassination as “a special kind of car crash”—and this reading, upon scrutiny, describes both metaphorically and literally how the event was and continues to be perceived (Crash 130). The Kennedy assassination, while not necessarily the moment “everything changed,” is nonetheless the moment that generations have understood as when
everything changed. “John Kennedy’s death may not be the most significant aspect of his assassination,” writes Art Simon in *Dangerous Knowledge: The JFK Assassination in Art and Film* (1996): “What was of crucial importance was the struggle over its framing” (5). The difficulty with this framing was that, as Christopher Lasch wrote in “The Life of Kennedy’s Death,” which appeared in *Harper’s* in 1983, “His murder plunged the country into a time of troubles, or at least coincided more or less, with the beginnings of a turbulent era” (32). While there were the political assassinations in the nation’s past, the Kennedy assassination contributed to Americans’ sense of cultural decline (Lasch 32). Yet the Kennedy assassination happened to transpire as the nation was facing a series of crises, amongst them: the Civil Rights movement’s struggle against institutionalized racism; the blight of American cities that Jane Jacobs wrote of in *Death and Life of Great American Cities* (1961); and the rising awareness of environmental threats, which Rachel Carson brought to the nation’s attention in *Silent Spring* (1962). The nation, prior to the Kennedy assassination, was already in the midst of several coinciding crises at home and abroad—the failure at the Bay of Pigs and the terror of the Cuban Missile Crisis were still fresh in Americans minds, the latter tempered by the popularization of Herman Kahn’s *On Thermonuclear War* (1960) and the publication of the popular novel *Fail-Safe* (1962), which was originally published in installments in *The Saturday Evening Post* during the missile crisis. As Simon writes, “What made the assassination political, then, beyond the subtle change in power and its possible ideological motives and execution, was its textual encoding, its telling and retelling, the very struggle over its transformation into history” (5). Kennedy’s death is that which all of these other crises came to orbit. The events in Dallas on November 22, 1963 came to be understood as the moment everything changed primarily because it is a moment that almost the entire nation witnessed simultaneously.
The assassination and its repercussions were experienced for years after the fact due to media coverage that released stills of the Zapruder film piece by piece, calling Americans to continually witness and interpret those events. The act of reading and rereading the Zapruder film greatly contributed to the assassination’s pervasive influence upon American culture, leading to the film’s transformation from an historical to an aesthetic object. In *Shooting Kennedy* (2003), Michael Lubin describes the Zapruder film: “It’s a home movie but also a micro version of a Hollywood film; a private artifact of one man’s affection for a leader he never met but also an eyewitness account of a public political event; material evidence of a crime scrutinized by investigators but also an endlessly chewed-over bone of contention between warring sides in the ongoing debate about government conspiracy and cover-up” (163). Lubin continues, “we might call it a nihilist film. Or existentialist. Or dada,” and reads the Zapruder film “as a crucial cinematic text of the twentieth century, one that intersects in myriad ways with myriad other cinematic texts before and after” (1, 37). The crises of the United States in the early 1960s would proliferate throughout the decade, as other texts that shaped the anxieties of the early 1960s show. Among these other texts are Michael Harrington’s demand for government action against poverty in *The Other America* (1962), the warning of violent protest from African Americans in James Baldwin’s *The Fire Next Time* (1963), and Betty Friedan’s *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), which reinvigorated feminism. While each of these texts point to a series of domestic problems, of particular interest to this study of accident and narrative is what Karen Beckman writes of the early sixties. She points out that from Ralph Nader’s 1959 article, “The Safe Car You Can’t Buy” to the success of his *Unsafe at Any Speed*, published in 1965, the decade was marked by Americans’ rising awareness of “auto-vulnerability” (Beckman 138). For Beckman:
The assassination of Kennedy in his Lincoln Continental on 22 November 1963 marked a turning point in the way automobiles appeared in art and film, unleashing not only the largely repressed figure of the accident, but also, perhaps surprisingly, the comic tone that had been associated with the accident at an earlier cinematic moment. Kennedy’s assassination disrupted the dream machine’s promise of unrestrained forward mobility, physical invulnerability, and access to a better life, and replaced this image with one of vulnerability, stasis, and death-as-media-spectacle. Nineteen sixty-three, the first year in which vehicular suicide was the subject of psychiatric research, perhaps as a result of despairing people hoping at least to die in a presidential style, was the year of the car accident. (146)

The assassination of Kennedy correlates with a cultural shift in representations of the car accident, and the car accident, this dissertation contends, is one of many symbols of American culture’s rising awareness of the risk accident presents for the individual and nation. Kennedy’s death in a car, presidential, at the very least, because of its cause—assassination—and its coverage in the media, was also populist in that it had become the most common cause of death for American citizens.

Over the next fifty years narrative representations of the accident attempted to provide a sense of control to a history that was seemingly out of control; however, it is important to focus on American culture’s reading and reception of the Kennedy assassination—an event that, like the texts this dissertation examines, seemed to happen again and again. In fact, the Zapruder film would not be displayed to a mass audience until twelve years after the assassination, while Life magazine would run several articles, along with stills from the film, presenting various, often conflicting, theories and conspiracies about what happened that day in Dallas. Fredric Jameson
diagnoses the impact of the assassination as a mass mediated spectacle, identifying it, like Beckman, as a formative moment in post-war American culture. The coverage of the Kennedy assassination provided “a unique event, not least because it was a unique collective (and media, communicational) experience which trained people to read such events in new ways” (Postmodernism 355). In marking the Kennedy assassination as the moment televisual media came into its own, Jameson resists the standard reading of the Kennedy assassination as the moment when America lost its innocence. This new way of reading was one of synchronous experience shared among an entire national community, which provided a glimpse, through grief, into utopia (355).

However, the utopian quality of this method of reading was fraught from the start: immediately the events of that day were read as having different meanings, different resonances, which, almost wholly, affected citizens in the same way. Moreover, ways of reading the assassination—New Critical close reading to Derridean deconstruction and beyond—would only instill a way of reading that takes a text, such as the Zapruder film, as a single entity from which meaning can be read. However, the film, as many have noted, does not and cannot, hold such answers. Jameson claims that the media event itself would later be “recontained through sheer mechanical technique (as with the instant playbacks of the Reagan shooting or the Challenger disaster, which borrowed from commercial sports, expertly emptied these events of their content)” (355). The Kennedy assassination “can no longer be separated from its media coverage” (95), which has heightened the culture’s fantasies and anxieties about conspiracy through mass media and has resulted in media conflating fiction and reality, much in the manner that Virilio warns against. If every film and video provides a secret message, how does one read
for meaning, and if one could discern a meaning, what one meaning would mean more than another?

Such a crisis of epistemology was but one consequence of the media event that the Kennedy assassination catalyzed. For Jameson, Kennedy’s assassination also provided something originary, something different. That day in Dallas, “television showed what it could really do and what it really meant—a prodigious new display of synchronicity and a communicational situation that amounted to a dialectical leap over anything hitherto suspected” (355). Although Marshall McLuhan had recently announced the coming of the global village in *The Gutenberg Galaxy* (1962), for many critics and historians it formed on November 22, 1963. When the cameras captured what no one intended—Ruby shooting Oswald—and broadcast this murder, the power of television was further revealed to American viewers and took its place as the dominant communicational form, which only recently the World Wide Web has begun to supplant.\(^\text{11}\) The same happened when *Life*, no less than a week after the assassination, published stills from Zapruder’s film.

*Life* rushed to purchase the rights to the film from Zapruder and then refused to show the film, instead printing frames from the event—out of order, creating a different, more grotesque narrative of the assassination.\(^\text{12}\) From chance frames, *Life* made an order, a story, that would capture the attention of its readers, at once claiming to show the truth of what happened in Dallas while attempting to mystify, entertain, keeping their readers coming back for more frames, which would be published in later issues. While this can be read as print media responding to the usurpation of its role as the dominant mode of mass communication in American culture, taken as a televisual and print media event—a multimedia event—the coverage of the Kennedy assassination, from Walter Cronkite’s tearful yet composed announcement of the President’s
death on NBC, to Jack Ruby’s execution of Lee Harvey Oswald, to the publication of the assassination in *Life* magazine, Americans began to read in new ways, and much of what they read was about the Kennedy assassination.¹³ This reading practice would be refined from the sixties forward, and it involved looking at multimedia closely, scrutinizing and deconstructing pieces of information much in the manner that Governor Connally did in a 1966 issue of *Life*, studying, with a magnifying glass, the Zapruder film strip one frame at a time, and concluding that the findings of the Warren Commission were incorrect.¹⁴ Analysis of the assassination was also depicted on television: “national television networks returned to the subject throughout the thirty years following the assassination, CBS being the most interested. The CBS coverage included at least one program each year from 1963-1965, a four-part series in June 1967, a two-part inquiry broadcast in 1975, and a two-hour report marking the thirtieth anniversary in November 1993” (Simon 7). The representation of the Kennedy assassination in the mass media contributed to rising doubts about what happened that day in Dallas, as well as to skepticism regarding the United States government’s involvement in domestic and international affairs, such as race at home and the war in Vietnam abroad, which would become a driving force of the New Left’s politics (Simon 8). On the other side of the political aisle, the Kennedy assassination fueled what Richard Hofstader famously termed “The Paranoid Style in American Politics” in a series of lectures delivered at Oxford in 1963 and published in *Harper’s Magazine* in November 1964. The Cold War, in the words of Adam Piette, demonstrated itself to be “the most spectacular breeding ground” for this style and manner of thinking (Piette 177). Over the course of the 1960s and the decades that followed, a narrative began to cohere regarding the assassination, namely that it was the moment when everything fell apart; yet it was also the moment that, when represented, garnered high ratings.¹⁵
The Zapruder film and the scrutiny with which it was read provides the reading practices that Jameson identifies with the Kennedy assassination as the “inaugural event” that “gave what we call a Utopian glimpse into some collective communicational ‘festival’ whose ultimate logic and promise is incompatible with our mode of production” (355). The instantaneity of the news of Kennedy’s death resulted, for Jameson, in “the shock of a communicational explosion” that could not be understood because it had never happened before (355). The experience of learning of Kennedy’s assassination from television was unprecedented. Øyvind Vågnes notes that “The mass media began to shape the cultural memory of the assassination almost as soon as it happened; the news of Kennedy’s death spread to most Americans within half an hour” (25). For Jameson the sixties begin here, and perhaps, so too does the postmodern, with an unreachable Utopia seen through a corporatized mass-mediated convergence that deprives its viewers of sensation while producing the sensational.16

The epistemological crisis that the Zapruder film in particular, and the Kennedy assassination in general, produced was that all interpretations of the film raised more questions than answers. “Indeed,” Art Simon observes, “to theorize the epistemological status of such imagery is not just to insist on its instability but to register its shifting movement, its negotiation between legibility and ambiguity” (31). The ontological crisis of simultaneously seeming insignificant in the frame of national and global history and residing at the center of such an epistemological crisis developed from the seemingly infinite barrage of questions and conspiracy theories that attempted to answer the questions surrounding the Kennedy assassination. As Peter Knight claims in Conspiracy Culture (2000), “Far from the assassination leading steadily and inexorably to a consensus of conspiracy theorists, then, it has produced a hermeneutic of suspicion that begins to doubt everything—even the fundamental ground rules of proof and
evidence” (96). The inability to read epistemologically produced fears about state control and
authorship over domestic life. Such fears bled into the culture, intermingling with already
prevalent problems, particularly those of the Civil Rights Movement and the simultaneous
escalation of military actions in Vietnam.

Marianne Dekoven, in *Utopia Limited: The Sixties and the Emergence of the Postmodern*
(2004) reads the sixties along lines similar to Jameson, arguing that they “represented the final,
full flowering of modernism/modernity, particularly of its utopian master narratives” (8). The
Kennedy assassination, and the numerous epistemological crises that it inspired, contributed to
the new reading practices that Jameson identifies, and to the collapse of the Enlightenment belief
in master narratives. DeKoven continues, “In the full realization and extension of the popular,
egalitarian, subjectivist trajectories of the modern, but in rejection or curtailment of the
totalizing, utopian master narratives associated with those trajectories in modernity, the sixties
political and countercultural movements were transformed into something in continuity with, but
radically different from, those modern master narratives; transformed into the ‘utopia limited’ of
the postmodern” (8-9). The Kennedy assassination saw the beginning of the end of that cultural
construct and piece of political public relations, Camelot, which, would ultimately end with the
assassination of Robert F. Kennedy on June 6, 1968. As well, the Great Society of Lyndon
Johnson would begin to crumble as his administration’s attentions turned from domestic projects
to the orchestration of the Vietnam War, which found many of the bodies of its soldiers by
chance, through the lottery of the draft. The reality of and resistance to chance fueled the
countercultural movements of which DeKoven writes, proliferating and accumulating throughout
the decade; from the death of a president, accident invaded the everyday life of every citizen.
The Zapruder film provided the document that should have answered all of the questions that the
assassination raised, but instead, each reading resulted in more questions, and each viewing further undermined epistemology.\textsuperscript{18}

For Don DeLillo, the novelist who has most substantially represented the assassination and the events surrounding it, Kennedy’s death and televisual media’s potential to disseminate truth began to teach viewers how to read not for coherent truth, but for fragments. He claims, “What has become unraveled since that afternoon in Dallas is not the plot, of course, not the dense mass of characters and events, but the sense of a coherent reality most of us shared” (“American Blood” 22). In 1983 DeLillo was so compelled to write of the assassination that he set aside composing \textit{White Noise} (1985) to write “American Blood” for \textit{Rolling Stone Magazine} (Arensberg 42). Before this, he had never interrupted one project to begin writing another. His reflection continues, “We seem from that moment to have entered a world of randomness and ambiguity, a world totally modern in the way it shades into the century's ‘emptiest’ literature, the study of what is uncertain and unresolved in our lives, the literature of estrangement and silence” (22). A world of randomness. The century’s “emptiest” literature. The Kennedy assassination, which DeLillo describes in \textit{Libra} (1988) as “the seven seconds that broke the back of the American century,” immediately cast, as the epigraph to this section indicates, the shadow of chance over American life (181). The literature, films, videogames, and other texts read in the following chapters attempt to represent just such a world of randomness and ambiguity.

Of the authors who represented the Kennedy assassination and its cultural impact, J. G. Ballard provided the most immediate response in his collection of condensed novels, \textit{The Atrocity Exhibition} (1970). Ballard, who according to the initial reviewers of \textit{Crash} (1973) authored some of the emptiest of post-60s literature, reflected on the period in the 1990s, with a
Jamesonian echo, identifying “an affectless world” that emerged from the 1960s and specifically Kennedy’s assassination:

I saw this event not as the annihilation of Kennedy, but as the way electronic media was born and spawned itself and formed the landscape of our lives. I saw November 1963 as the catalyst for the explosion of energies, good and bad, that created the Sixties: the space programme, the drug scene, the youth explosion, the Vietnam war which was another TV anatomising of violence and pain. I saw Kennedy’s assassination as a key event. [. . .] It is a key event, there is no doubt about it. Now it’s almost a visual cliche [sic], which itself is a sad comment. The Zapuda [sic] film is almost the Sistine Chapel of our era.

(Ballard)

Ballard marks the Zapruder film as the apex of mid-century American art. Likewise, in “Lee Harvey Oswald and the Postmodern Subject” Thomas Carmichael describes the assassination as “the first postmodern historical event” (207). For both critics and artists, the Kennedy assassination confronted American culture with a crisis of reading through reframing mediation. An historical event was captured on film, but instead of providing answers to what happened in Dealey Plaza, the media raised far more questions than it answered. Hayden White has written that the assassination destroyed our sense of historical events, which inspired “new genres of postmodernist parahistorical representation” (Figural Realism 67). The history of the event became personal, and in Ballard’s language and that of many others, nearly religious. White writes:

Any attempt to provide an objective account of the event [the assassination], either by breaking it up into a mass of its details or by setting it within its context, must conjure with two circumstances: one is that the number of details identifiable in any singular
event is potentially infinite; and the other is that the context of any single event is infinitely extensive, or at least is not objectively determinable. (71)

The assassination cannot be broken into parts, nor can it be read as a whole; it cannot be contextualized and it cannot be decontextualized. Objectivity yields no truth as to what transpired in Dallas. Instead, one is left with more questions, not only about Kennedy’s death, but also about the nature of epistemology itself. The ways in which the Zapruder film has been and continues to be scrutinized resulted in its transformation into an aesthetic object, as Øyvind Vågnes discusses in his monograph, *Zapruder: The Kennedy Assassination Film in Visual Culture* (2011). For Vågnes, the film reveals that, “the technological realities of the period in question are bound not only to shape any cultural study of the Zapruder film, but also to transform how we think and write about images and about the material conditions in which they appear” (16). Whether or not the Kennedy assassination was the zero hour of postmodernism, the artists and critics who significantly shaped our sense of the post-60s, postmodern period have read it in just such a manner. Moreover, the assassination accrued meaning throughout the decade, reaching another level of significance for American culture with the Watergate scandal. “Linking Dallas and Watergate,” writes Andreas Killen in *1973 Nervous Breakdown*, “held out the possibility of finding a master key to the traumatic decade framed by the two events” (243). However, reading these two events beside one another leads to truth just as much as reading the conclusion of DeLillo’s “American Blood” beside the facing page’s advertisement for the Zapruder film; the period inspired conspiratorial thinking, which creates meaning through reading accidents and through accidents of reading.

By 1966, the Zapruder film was described in the pages of *Life* as simultaneously an “unimpeachable” piece of evidence for the Warren Commission’s findings—that Oswald acted
alone—and as “highly suspect” in terms of evidence. *Life* characterized the film as unreadable and open to multiple interpretations, raising doubts in regard to Oswald’s role in the assassination and the film as a piece of evidence that can yield epistemological proof of the events of November 22, 1963 (Vågnes 41-42).\(^{19}\) The Kennedy assassination and the Zapruder film’s representation of it have been read as the moment that mass media cohered as the barrage of information and misinformation that we know today. While many have read cultural representations of the Kennedy assassination and the Zapruder film, critics have primarily focused upon its depiction in texts that appeared after the sixties, such as DeLillo’s *Libra* and Oliver Stone’s *JFK* (1991). However, in order to demonstrate how thoroughly and immediately the assassination and its depiction in media permeated Americans’ understanding of mass media penetrating their everyday lives, I will now turn to a reading of two novels—Thomas Pynchon’s *The Crying of Lot 49* and Joan Didion’s *Play It As It Lays*. Both novels are the authors’ second, both are set in the American southwest, primarily the Los Angeles area, and neither explicitly represent the Kennedy assassination. Yet the novels nonetheless depict accident and mass media in a paranoid style that, upon scrutiny, shows that at the center of their female protagonists’ epistemological and ontological crises lies the death of President Kennedy.

**III. Cracking Up and Breaking Down: 1960s California in Pynchon and Didion**

I am talking here about a time when I began to doubt the premises of all the stories I had ever told myself, a common condition, but one I found troubling. I suppose this period began around 1966 and continued until 1971.

Few critics have read the writings of Thomas Pynchon and Joan Didion together, despite the parallel trajectories of their careers. Their first novels were published in 1963, and they are both authors whose styles, no matter how distinct, mark for perpetuity the crises of the American 1960s. While their first novels have instances in which mass media—film and television—are mentioned as minor details in the lives of their characters, their second novels are saturated with mass media. *The Crying of Lot 49* and *Play It As It Lays*, set, respectively, in the years 1964 and from October 1967 to June 1968, tell the stories of two women who may be going insane, or who may be in the process of discovering secret truths about themselves and America. Oedipa Maas, protagonist of *The Crying of Lot 49*, is married to Mucho Maas, a radio DJ, and has a tryst with Metzger, a child actor turned lawyer. Her last name, Maas, can be understood as a pun on mass media—more media—all of which gravitates around her, especially in the form of her deceased former boyfriend, Pierce Inverarity, who has chosen Oedipa to execute his estate. Maria Wyeth of *Play It As It Lays* is a former model and a quickly falling film star who is married to film director Carter Lang. In the apocalyptic southern California setting of Santa Ana winds and burning Hills, Didion portrays Maria as both subject and object of the mass media, particularly Hollywood cinema. For Oedipa, mass media permeates her life from the novel’s beginning. Immediately after she has learned of Inverarity’s death “she stood in the living room, stared at by the greenish dead eye of the TV tube” (1). The television watches her, and this reversal of roles signals Oedipa as both the object of our entertainment and also as the prevailing awareness of mass media in American society after the Kennedy assassination. While the pervasive presence of mass media in both novels signals the coalescence of television as the dominant medium from Kennedy’s assassination forward, both of these novels also signal, in
their Southern California setting, the rise of the political figure who used the tools of mass media best, Ronald Reagan, a subject I will turn to in the first chapter.24

When Oedipa first meets Metzger, he asks if she wants to know what Inverarity told him about her. She declines “And snapped on the television set” (18). On the screen a young Metzger appears, playing the role of Baby Igor. Oedipa denies that Metzger’s appearance on the television could be an accident: “Either he made up the whole thing, Oedipa thought suddenly, or he bribed the engineer over at the local station to run this, it’s all part of a plot, an elaborate, seduction, plot” (20). The plot, of course, is Pynchon’s own—that of The Crying of Lot 49—which makes much of what is possibly nothing. Yet television serves the role of the media that traps and fixates the characters’ attentions and continually introduces accident, rather than plots, into their lives. Oedipa, having lost Pierce, stares at the TV or turns on the TV when confronted with his death, watching Metzger’s film, which breaks for a variety of commercials that advertise Pierce’s business ventures. Rather than face reality, she would rather be given a representation of reality, be told what constitutes the fabric of her life.

So it goes for Maria Wyeth. For her, there is nothing, only accident, a series of events that have no meaning. At the novel’s beginning, she reflects upon her doctor’s psychiatric evaluations of her: “They will misread the facts, invent connections, will extrapolate reasons where none exist, but I told you, that is their business here” (2). But her life means nothing, is simply a series of events that she plays as they lay and watches as if her life were a movie. When she tells Carter of her pregnancy, “She paused. It came to her that in the scenario of her life this would be what was called an obligatory scene, and she wondered with distant interest just how long the scene would play” (49).25 Like the plot in Lot 49, this obligatory scene, while important to Maria, signals to the reader that the narration of life as film is also necessary for the plot of
The abortion of her child is one of the causes of her mental breakdown. While undergoing the abortion she begins to distinguish her life as not being plotted, not part of a film:

“No moment more or less important than any other moment, all the same: the pain as the doctor scraped signified nothing beyond itself, no more constituted the pattern of her life than did the movie on television in the living room of this house in Encino” (81). The abortion that Carter coerces her to undergo traumatizes her and opens the earlier trauma of her mother’s death in a car crash, which may have been a suicide or an accident—neither Maria nor the reader know.

While Maria terminates her pregnancy, Oedipa, either pregnant or driven to extreme mental anguish and paranoia due to the possible existence of the Trystero—or both—experiences “headaches, nightmares, menstrual pains. One day she drove into L.A., picked a doctor at random from the phone book, went to her, told her she thought she was pregnant. They arranged tests. Oedipa gave her name as Grace Bortz and didn’t show up for her next appointment” (142). While this moment could create a fork in the novel’s plot—who’s the father? what will Oedipa do with the child?—the narrator quickly dispels the possibility of her pregnancy: “The toothaches got worse, she dreamed of disembodied voices from whose malignance there was no appeal, the soft dusk of mirrors out of which something was about to walk, the empty rooms that waited for her. Your gynecologist has no test for what she was pregnant with” (144). Oedipa and Maria have become pregnant with paranoid plots, a fear that everything connects in a conspiratorial web—or that their lives, the world, are comprised of a series of accidents connected only through their experiences of mass mediated events. Media itself weaves the fabric of their lives; beyond it lies nothing.26

Both characters, due to the men in their lives, have lost everything while discovering their inheritance. In Oedipa’s case this is primarily due to the deceased Pierce Inverarity; in *Play It As It Lays.*
It Lays Maria struggles to repress the lack of inheritance she has received from her father, namely the Nevada town of Silver Wells, to which she moved when she was nine years old “because my father lost the Reno house in a private game and happened to remember that he owned this town, Silver Wells. He had bought it or won it or maybe his father left it to him, I’m not sure which and it doesn’t matter to you” (3). Just as we do not know how her father came to own Silver Wells, we do not know how he lost it; what we do know is that it has become a missile range (4). Inverarity’s fortune, Oedipa discovers, was built upon a similar use of real estate speculation, primarily his drawing the business of the aerospace contractor Yoyodyne to the southern California city of San Narciso. The military-industrial complex stalks both novels, the threat of nuclear annihilation looming over these protagonists’ quests for self-discovery and an understanding of the missing men in their lives. Daniel Grausam has demonstrated that Pynchon’s second novel explicitly deals with the horrors of nuclear apocalypse: “The 1964 setting of The Crying of Lot 49 places us in the immediate aftermath of arguably the most dangerous period of the conflict prior to the Reagan years”; this is why Pynchon addresses “the paradigm-changing nature of nuclear weapons” in a text “that might be said to inaugurate a definitively ‘postmodern’ fiction” (57). Didion provides a similar representation of the risks of nuclear war when, toward the end of Play It As It Lays, Maria goes on location with Carter in the high desert of Nevada. We are told: “The heat stuck. The air shimmered. An underground nuclear device was detonated where Silver Wells had once been, and Maria got up before dawn to feel the blast. She felt nothing” (206-207). The pervasive sense of feeling nothing echoes through the inner lives of both Oedipa and Maria. However, both often feel this way when feeling too much, when overwhelmed. Adam Piette, in The Literary Cold War (2009), writes of the cultural conditions that shaped such an affective state as emerging from the state itself, “The
launching of the second war in Indochina meant that the State Department’s paranoia-as-history spilled over into the body politic, even into the minds and members of the peace movement” (178). Oedipa’s experience at Sproul Plaza on Berkeley’s campus and Maria’s total apathy regarding anything having to do with a movement points to their alienation from the politics of the peace movement. They are the conservative paranoids—Oedipa herself a young Republican—who proliferate fears and anxieties until their meaning either connects in a web of conspiracy, or means nothing at all. Piette continues, “It was not only that there was something in the air that favoured the toxic extension of the paranoid style to all forms of politics in the United States—the Cuban missile crisis and the assassination of Kennedy could be said to have triggered this. It was also that the very nature of fiction-making during the 1960s Cold War had undergone a cynical sea-change” (178). Both novels bear the marks of this change in their representations of nuclear war and as responses to the Kennedy assassination, though the ostensible cynicism of Pynchon’s novel is less sincere than the overwhelming air of hopelessness that Didion delivers.

At the end of *Play It As It Lays* Maria tells us, in the terms of craps, “One thing in my defense, not that it matters: I know something Carter never knew, or Helene, or maybe you. I know what ‘nothing’ means, and keep on playing” (216). Maria’s understanding of nothing is based upon her conception of life consisting of a series of chance events. In the face of this existential crisis, she chooses to keep playing, much as Camus’s Sisyphus chooses his rock. Oedipa also associates “nothing” with chance and accident. Towards the end of *The Crying of Lot 49* she ponders whether the Trystero, an underground postal service, is an elaborate hoax that Inverarity authored or if it actually exists:
Yet she knew, head down, stumbling along over the cinderbed and its old sleepers, there was still that other chance. That it was all true. That Inverarity had only died, nothing else. Suppose, God, there really was a Tristero then and that she had come on it by accident. If San Narciso and the estate were really no different from any other town, any other estate, then by that continuity she might have found The Tristero anywhere in her Republic, through any of a hundred lightly-concealed entranceways, a hundred alienations, if only she’d looked. (148)

Both characters consider that they may have stumbled, by chance, upon a truth that they can never wholly discern as true, while also considering that the events that have guided and influenced their lives mean nothing. While Carter Lang can find meaning in the films he directs—has gone so far as to cast Maria in these films and continues to try and direct her in their personal lives—and Pierce Inverarity, in death, directs Oedipa’s pursuit of the truth behind Trystero, both Oedipa and Maria awaken to the horror that they lack agency, are merely objects of the men who have abandoned them. Their lives are either a series of plots that men have written, or a series of accidents that mean nothing.

Yet the dilemma these characters face is also one that faces the reader. The choice a reader is given, at the end of both *The Crying of Lot 49* and *Play It As It Lays* is whether or not to continue interpreting the words and events of these novels. “Pynchon’s novel anticipates,” writes Peter Knight, “in a stylized form how the assassination has become submerged into an abyss of infinite interpretation and suspicion over the ensuing decades” (102). For Timothy Melley, “Kennedy’s murder epitomizes the condition of knowledge and history in postmodernity because it turns on an unbridgeable gap between historical events and historical narrative,” which *The Crying of Lot 49* represents in Oedipa’s inability to read reality and fiction so as to understand
her situation in the present (43). Both primarily search for understanding through means of the car; in this manner, the novels place them in the same role of—were one to read the Zapruder film as telling a story—as Jacqueline Kennedy. Dressed in the style of Jackie, large dark sunglasses and similar clothes, both women mourn in cars, in search of a meaning that they cannot find. However, their endurance, if read as similar to the first lady, makes them heroic. As the first lady famously stood beside Lyndon Johnson, witness to his inheritance of presidential power, both Oedipa and Maria inherit a similar legacy—whether it is as Oedipa ponders America itself, or in the case of Maria, the meaning of “nothing.” The choice of depicting woman’s struggle for meaning, for understanding amidst accidents that may be authored, garners both sympathy from readers in insisting that they are trapped within the same vehicle, attempting to hold the president together, and with him, the future of the nation. This task does not demand that they actually mend the horrors of the past, but that they endure those that may come. Their breakdown under the pressure is only incidental; what matters is their struggle, their attempt to solve the puzzle. In this way, both Oedipa and Maria gain independence from the men in their lives—while the men abandon them or die on them, they continue to understand theirs and their nation’s present and past, their heritage.

Their acts of driving epitomize the aimlessness of their quests for self-discovery and the manner in which readers navigate the traffic of these novels’ plots. Maria wanders the highways of southern California, “In the first hot month of the fall after the summer she left Carter (the summer Carter left her, the summer Carter stopped living in the house in Beverly Hills), Maria drove the freeway” (13). Unlike Kerouac’s On the Road (1957), which portrays a journey of discovery by means of car, and Nabokov’s Lolita (1955), which depicts Humbert Humbert’s exerting control of Dolores Haze through the freedom the automobile and the entire interstate
system provides him, the car leads Oedipa and Maria on a series of endless bypasses and exits. *The Crying of Lot 49* explicitly represents the car as an object that cannot provide Oedipa with the freedom that it provides men:

She drove more or less automatically until a swift boy in a Mustang, perhaps unable to contain the new sense of virility his auto gave him, nearly killed her and she realized that she was on the freeway, heading irreversibly for the Bay Bridge. It was the middle of rush hour. Oedipa was appalled at the spectacle, having thought such traffic only possible in Los Angeles, places like that. (87)

For Oedipa, this is the first of two car accidents that do not happen. While the boy’s Mustang gives him power—that which Karen Beckman identified, above, as at least the means to a presidential death—Oedipa only gets locked in traffic. Yet this traffic also allows her a moment of meditation:

Amid the exhaust, sweat, glare and ill-humor of a summer evening on an American freeway, Oedipa Maas pondered her Trystero problem. All the silence of San Narciso—the calm surface of the motel pool, the contemplative contours of residential streets like rakings in the sand of a Japanese garden—had not allowed her to think as leisurely as this freeway madness. (87)

The realization that she nearly had an accident allows her to consider the meaning of the Trystero. It is only when she becomes aware of accident that Oedipa can consider the possible plots that have been authored for her. Similarly, Maria finds tranquility when, recklessly driving, she willfully avoids a car accident: “Again and again she returned to an intricate stretch just south of the interchange where successful passage from the Hollywood onto the Harbor required a diagonal move across four lanes of traffic. On the afternoon she finally did it without once
braking or losing the beat on the radio she was exhilarated, and that night slept dreamlessly” (14). Driving to the music blaring from her car radio, Maria finds a moment of harmony merging in traffic. These two instances of driving provide both characters a sense of peace while denying them the freedom that the car provides men. While the car provides men with a linear plot that resolves by the narrative’s end, it provides Oedipa and Maria with a series of loops, near misses that, like the plots of their novels, force the reader to meditate on meaning without ever reaching a satisfying conclusion. In these novels the highway to narrative resolution is jammed with an overwhelming number of interpretations.

When Oedipa nearly crashes for the second time she is contemplating suicide. After learning that there is a mysterious bidder for lot 49, “Oedipa went back to Echo Courts to drink bourbon until the sun went down and it was as dark as it would ever get. Then she went out and drove on the freeway for a while with her lights out, to see what would happen. But angels were watching” (146). Robbed of her agency, Oedipa drunk-drives the freeways, passively hoping that an accident will find her. Having not experienced a car accident, Oedipa calls a man she met in San Francisco. She demands to know whether she is part of a plot or if her life’s recent events are all accident, pleading: “I don’t know your name, don’t want to. But I have to know whether they arranged it with you. To run into me by accident, and tell me your story about the post horn. Because it may be a practical joke for you, but it stopped being one for me a few hours ago. I got drunk and went driving on these freeways. Next time I may be more deliberate” (146). Oedipa perceives even accidents as possibly being part of a plot—which points to the fact that the accident in The Crying of Lot 49, like those of any novel, are the plots of the author. Maria, in a state of such intoxication that she cannot drive, still relies on the fantasy of the open road: “she imagined herself driving, conceived audacious lane changes, strategic shifts of gear, the
Hollywood to the San Bernardino and straight on out, past Barstow, past Baker, driving straight on into the hard white empty core of the world. She slept and did not dream” (163). Part of other men’s plots, Oedipa and Maria find no freedom in the car, only the opportunity to meditate on their role: being driven in other’s plots. They reflexively imagine themselves as simultaneously at the center of a plot and at the convergence of a series of accidents.

In their form and content both novels replicate for the reader the problems of interpretation that face both Oedipa and Maria. For both protagonists the world takes shape as a text that they are asked to interpret, to read for plot and meaning; nevertheless, in a realistic manner, they cannot read the world, because it turns out that actual events present no underlying meaning or accurate means of interpretation. In *The Program Era* (2009) Mark McGurl writes, “Strictly regulating the commerce between the reader and the third person narrator who might (in theory) have solved the mystery of the Tristero rather than letting it ride, Pynchon aligned the experience of untold thousands of college students who have tried to understand *The Crying of Lot 49* with an English major protagonist who is doing much the same thing” (191). Both Maria Wyeth and Oedipa Maas attempt to understand their world through New Critical reading practices, but only find themselves alienated by a culture that they no longer understand; their own alienation is that which fuels the mystery and provides their quests with a simultaneous overabundance and total lack of meaning.  

Both novels thus capture the sense of epistemological and ontological crisis that proliferated throughout American culture in the years after the Kennedy assassination. While neither text explicitly mentions Kennedy’s death, both take as their subject women of the same age who have lost authoritative male partners and struggle with their perception of society’s deterioration—a society that, nevertheless, takes them as objects to be possessed in order to be
dispossessed. Even if they could discern that everything in their lives was plotted by a male other
or was the result of a series of accidents, they would still not be any closer to possessing
knowledge or making meaning of such plots or events. Like the numerous interpretations that the
Zapruder film opened, their lives simultaneously mean too much and mean nothing. Throughout
her early career, Didion avoided writing explicitly about the Kennedy assassination. Writing of
the attack on Pearl Harbor in “Letter from Paradise, 21º 19’N., 157º 52’ W.,” collected in
_Slouching Towards Bethlehem_ (1968), Didion distances herself from the impact of the
assassination: “A few days ago someone just four years younger than I am told me that he did
not see why a sunken ship should affect me so, that John Kennedy’s assassination, not Pearl
Harbor, was the single most indelible event of what he kept calling ‘our generation.’ I could tell
him only that we belonged to different generations” (145-146). By Didion’s own account, she
and Pynchon—born in 1937—may be part of a separate generation. Nevertheless, their writings,
though disparate in style—Didion’s direct, minimalist, new journalistic; Pynchon’s indirect,
excessive, modernist—take as their subject the epistemological and ontological struggles that
come with historically understanding their present, the breakdown of American culture in the
years that followed Kennedy’s demise. Writing of Hawaii again in “In the Islands,” collected in
_The White Album_ (1979), Didion said of her romantic worldview:

> I have trouble reconciling salvation with those ignorant armies in my mind. I could
> indulge here in a little idle generalization, could lay off my own state of profound
> emotional shock on the larger cultural breakdown, could talk fast about convulsions in
> the society and alienation and anomie and maybe even assassination, but that would be
> just one more stylish shell game. (278)
Didion desires to understand American culture through looking beyond the apparent symptoms of its crises. She reads like Oedipa Maas—a character who finds herself out of sync with mid-sixties youth culture and the counter culture. Both were English majors, Oedipa at Cornell, Didion at Berkeley, and both approach American society’s ruptures with conservative skepticism through the tools of close reading.

While Didion did not explicitly write of the Kennedy assassination until *Miami* (1987), Pynchon—whose exploits were very much the indulgent decadences of the sixties that Didion depicts in *Play It As It Lays*, would explicitly meditate upon the death of Kennedy in his next novel. In *Gravity’s Rainbow* (1973) Pynchon identified Kennedy as the figure who could have prevented the crises that faced American society in the 1960s—primarily by not dying. When, in a state induced by sodium amytal, Tyrone Slothrop recalls/hallucinates dropping and following his mouth harp down a toilet at the Roseland Ballroom in Boston, we are told:

> Gone away upstream, bas-relief Dumpster lost in the gray light as now Slothrop is going past the sign of Will Stonybloke, of J. Peter Pitt, of Jack Kennedy, the ambassador’s son—say, where the heck is that *Jack* tonight, anyway? If anybody could’ve saved that harp, betcha Jack could. Slothrop admires him from a distance—he’s athletic, and kind, and one of the most well-liked fellows in Slothrop’s class. Sure is daffy about that history, though. Jack . . . might Jack have kept it from falling, violated gravity somehow? Here, in this passage to the Atlantic, odors of slat, weed, decay washing to him faintly like the sound of breakers, yes it seems Jack might have. (65)

The reader knows where Jack is, but is induced to wonder how the 1960s would have unfolded had he not died. However, toward the end of *Gravity’s Rainbow* any hope for what Kennedy could have provided for the future dissipates. Pynchon has just before this passage shown Red,
who grew up to become Malcolm X, shining shoes in the Roseland (as DeLillo would ten years later in “American Blood”). But the reader knows that these figures, Jack and Red, are connected through the politics of assassination and little else. Gravity’s Rainbow evokes nostalgia for the days of Camelot, while reminding the reader “daffy about that history”—should that reader need any reminding—that the present of the novel’s publication, 1973, bears the yet-to-heal wounds of 1963. Gravity’s Rainbow, hundreds of pages later, turns back to the Roseland Ballroom: “It is nice to think that one Saturday night, one floor-shaking Lindyhopping Roseland night, Malcolm looked up from some Harvard kid’s shoes and caught the eye of Jack Kennedy (the Ambassador’s son), then a senior [. . .] Eventually Jack and Malcolm both got murdered” (688).

While Sean McCann reads this scene as evidence that “Gravity’s Rainbow never really gets beyond its ambivalent fascination with the imperial presidency and the charismatic leadership Kennedy and his supporters glamorized,” the scene actually calls attention, between the ellipses, to a third figure, Tyrone Slothrop, and thus, to a third way (266-267):

Did Red suspend his ragpopping just the shadow of a beat, just enough gap in the moiré there to let white Jack see through, not through to but through through the shine on his classmate Tyrone Slothrop’s shoes? Were the three ever lined up that way—sitting, squatting, passing through? Eventually Jack and Malcolm both got murdered. Slothrop’s fate is not so clear. It may be that They have something different in mind for Slothrop.

(688)

Slothrop is not assassinated; his fate is to fade from memory, from history—not to become a martyr in the vein of Kennedy or Malcolm X. As the fragmented figure of a fragmented history, possessing a fate that “is not so clear,” Slothrop marks an alternative to the New Frontier and to the New Left, providing an underground history akin to that found in The Crying of Lot 49. For
what is meant when the novel asks whether a young Malcolm X stopped shining Slothrop’s shoes long enough so that Kennedy could see “through through” the moiré of his shoes is first of all, whether or not Kennedy could experience an accident of reading: whether he could see through the moiré, the pattern on Slothrop’s shoes, to the substance. “Daffy about that history,” the novel questions whether or not Kennedy could see the historical relationship between the three figures and their place in a larger historical pattern, like Oedipa researching the Trystero, a possible underground postal system—for “moiré” also means the ripple pattern on a stamp. The novel suspends our knowledge of whether or not this happened, whether Kennedy saw the message, or saw through the message, through the means of delivering meaning in history to a larger pattern. In representing the reading of history as a series of moments of seeing through—of accidents of reading—and despite veiling these meanings in intricately fraught scenes and language that hold more than one interpretation, Pynchon opens possibilities for reading the past and the present as a means to authoring the future. Rather than content then, the key difference between Pynchon and Didion’s style lies in their representation of history, namely a stylistic quality common in Pynchon’s writing that I call inauthentic authenticity.

The texts discussed in the following chapters each deploy inauthentic authenticity, which, as the term suggests, is a stylistic mode prevalent in postmodernist texts. I use such unwieldy language in naming this stylistic mode because its name provides an initial insight into its purpose: to call attention to a structure of feeling—historical experience, feeling historically—through reading and viewing fictions. One unexpectedly becomes grounded in reality through seeing it represented in a hyperbolic, hysterical manner. Raymond Williams most clearly defines structure of feeling in The Long Revolution as being:
as firm and definite as ‘structure’ suggests, yet it operates in the most delicate and least tangible parts of our activity. In one sense, this structure of feeling is the culture of a period: it is the particular living result of all the elements in the general organization. And it is in this respect that the arts of a period, taking these to include characteristic approaches and tones in argument, are of major importance. For here, if anywhere, this characteristic is likely to be expressed; often not consciously, but by the fact that here, in the only examples we have of recorded communication that outlives its bearers, the actual living sense, the deep community that makes the communication possible, is naturally drawn upon. I do not mean that the structure of feeling, any more than the social character, is possessed in the same way by the many individuals in the community. But I think it is a very deep and very wide possession, in all actual communities, precisely because it is on it that communication depends. (48)

I quote Williams at length because his concept of the structure of feeling informs what I understand to be the impulse that lead artists in the post-war period, especially after the Kennedy assassination and the ensuing traumas of that decade and those that followed, to deploy inauthentic authenticity: a style that in its distancing readers from a clear purpose—an ideology, a politics, an ethics, even a meaning—insisted that its readers and viewers engage with history in order to find coherent meaning in the work, their lives, and society. Williams’s concept of the structure of feeling emerged over the post-war period, first appearing in his and Michael Orrom’s Preface to Film (1954). It was applied explicitly to literature in Marxism and Literature (1977) as indicating a change in social, rather than personal, experience: “characteristic elements of impulse, restraint, and tone; specifically affective elements of consciousness and relationships: not feeling against thought, but thought as felt and feeling as thought: practical consciousness of
a present kind, in a living and interrelating continuity” (132).\textsuperscript{34} To attend to inauthentic authenticity is, at its minimum, to understand how fiction reveals truths about text’s historical moment, what an author was thinking and feeling, and, from these thoughts and feelings, how he/she weaves continuity from a seeming array of discontinuities—historical events that just seem to be happening by accident.

The director Sam Peckinpah eloquently touches upon the stylistic mode of inauthentic authenticity in a discussion of the use of violence in his films and the ethical basis of such hyperrealistic violence. Speaking of Vietnam and its coverage in mass media, Peckinpah says, “We watch our wars and see men die, really die, every day on television, but it doesn’t seem real. We don’t believe those are real people dying on that screen. We’ve been anesthetized by the media. What I do is show people what it’s really like—not by showing it as it is so much as by heightening it, stylizing it” (“Playboy Interview” 70). Peckinpah’s words are often cited in discussions of filmic violence, but I would like to extend them to an understanding of style in post-war American cultural objects, particularly in regard to inauthentic authenticity as a style that becomes dominant in film and literature of the 1960s and the proceeding decades. For Peckinpah, as for the critics discussed earlier in this introduction, media saturation has distanced subjects from understanding what they see on a screen—and I would argue, read in a book—as having an actual basis in reality, a grounding in history. As a stylistic mode, inauthentic authenticity is distinct—but not exclusive—from Linda Hutcheon’s conception of historiographic metafiction, which she defines as “those well-known and popular novels which are both intensely self-reflexive and yet also lay claim to historical events and personages” which through “its theoretical self-awareness of history and fiction as human constructs (historiographic metafiction) is made the grounds for its rethinking and reworking of the forms
and contents of the past” (A Poetics of Postmodernism 5). Inauthentic authenticity may be deployed in works of historiographic metafiction—and surely is the form’s dominant style—but it is also used in numerous texts that do not fit the form of historiographic metafiction. Hutcheon gives as examples of historiographic metafiction novels such as The French Lieutenant’s Woman (1969), Ragtime (1975), and Midnight’s Children (1981); yet in the chapters that follow, I find inauthentic authenticity in novels such as Blood and Guts in High School (1984), White Noise, and films such as The Deer Hunter (1978) and Crash (1996), which do not abide by Hutcheon’s above parameters.

In these more various texts, one can see that inauthentic authenticity is also deployed in texts set in their own current historical moment, acting as a form of critique, of cutting through “the waning of affect” which Fredric Jameson has called “The end of the bourgeois ego, or monad” and “the end of much more—the end, for example, of style, in the sense of the unique and personal” (Postmodernism 15). Jameson quickly draws back from announcing the end of style to say that “in the narrower context of literary criticism” the waning of affect characterizes “the waning of the great high modernist thematics of time and temporality” (16). On the contrary, I contend throughout the pages of this dissertation that inauthentic authenticity is the dominant style of art works that emerged from the historical traumas of the 1960s, which attempted to work through and understand—historically—those traumas and how they continue to trouble the present of a work’s composition.

For Jameson the cultural dominant of postmodernism limits cultural objects’ ability to understand their historical situation in their present—for “it is safest to grasp the concept of the postmodern as an attempt to think the present historically in an age that has forgotten how to think historically in the first place” (ix). What Jameson identifies in the cultural dominant of
postmodernism is a structure of feeling that fails to identify its structure of feeling. This affective breakdown of American society resulted in a turn away from understanding the present historically—all of which, as seen above, was based upon his understanding of mass media taking form in its coverage of the Kennedy assassination. Yet American culture’s breakdown and fragmentation did not stop artists from historically thinking and representing their present. Jameson’s own work cuts against his own assertion, for he identifies the aforementioned structure of feeling, as do the works of art and entertainment discussed in the following chapters. They show that their makers—novelists, poets, filmmakers, and programmers—remembered to follow Jameson’s most famous imperative to “always historicize!” even if such an act called for veiling explicit historical understanding with style in order to depict the American subject’s ongoing ontological crisis, fragmenting meaning to represent epistemological crisis—all effects that were achieved through the myriad manifestations of the accident (*The Political Unconscious* 9).

IV. After 1945, After the Cold War, After the Contemporary: Narrative at Risk

While Jameson’s theories of the postmodern greatly influenced our understanding of post-45 American culture, recent trends in the field of literary studies have begun to look at the period in terms beyond those of postmodernism. *Narrative at Risk* intervenes in current literary-historical understandings of periodization in providing a coherent cultural history of the transitions from 1960s literary traditions to those of the present, bridging the period of post-45 American literature and contemporary literature, recently understood as works composed after 1989. Amy Hungerford has referred to the period of post-45 literature as “The Period Formerly Known as Contemporary,” writing that the initial academic understanding of contemporary
literature was “a legacy of New Criticism’s investment in modernist difficulty” and “was one of the primary ways that modernist understandings of the literary stretched beyond the moment of high modernist aesthetic production” (411). More recently, Mark McGurl’s *The Program Era* has provided a highly influential understanding of post-45 American writing through studying the institution of the M. F. A. program and the place of the author in the academy. McGurl has provided a genealogy of the period which develops from the “High Modernism” of a Joyce or Faulkner, the “Professionalism” of a James or Hemingway, combining the former’s “genius” with the latter’s “craft,” within the academic institution. This has, he argues, has yielded the “High Culturalpluralism” of a Roth or Morrison, and, on the edge of genre fiction, the “Technomodernism” of a Barth or Pynchon, and the “Lower-Middle-Class Modernism” of a Carver or Oates, which is based upon the representation of work (409). In just these two examples one can see that the fields of post-45 and contemporary literature are currently undergoing a reevaluation of their periods and a renaissance in scholarship akin to that of Cold War studies. *Narrative at Risk*, in treating media such as film, television, and videogames alongside literature, broadens our understanding of how accident both developed as a danger over the past fifty years and how these various media influenced and shaped one another through borrowed reading practices. The texts that this dissertation takes as its objects of study span McGurl’s categories while also reading more recent texts that bridge these categories.

In the following chapters I read a wide array of accidents—from mechanical failures to failed suicides, understandings of biological evolution and games of chance—in order to provide a broad but nonetheless coherent understanding of how American society has, over the past fifty years, conceived of accident in relation to individuals, communities, and the species as a whole. In the first chapter, I read accidents of mechanical failure in four texts: David Cronenberg’s film
*Crash*, Don DeLillo’s novel *White Noise* (1985), Colson Whitehead’s novel *The Intuitionist* (1999), and Rockstar Game’s *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas* (2004). I locate these as influenced by what historian Sean Wilentz has called the age of Reagan, taking as my initial subject Ronald Reagan’s understanding of his most formative moment, his role as a victim of a train accident in the film *King’s Row* (1941) and his discussion of this role in his 1965 memoir *Where’s the Rest of Me?* Reagan’s influence upon J. G. Ballard, author of *Crash* (1973), informs both his novel’s and Cronenberg’s film’s deployment of inauthentic authenticity. Both texts attempt to present the viewer with a series of haptic sensations in watching the car accidents represented in the film as a means of shocking them into historical awareness of the present. In *White Noise* the presence of Reagan looms over the text and its narrator, Jack Gladney, whose experience of a toxic spill and the contaminated cloud that it forms changes his relationship with the federal government, primarily in his understanding of the government’s role in managing risk for its citizens. In *The Intuitionist* an elevator accident sends its protagonist, Lila Mae Watson, on a quest to clear herself from, what she believes, was an act of sabotage for which she was framed. Set in the midst of the Civil Rights Movement, *The Intuitionist* reads into that past struggle the consequences of Reagan and George Herbert Walker Bush’s attempts to undo many Civil Rights laws, while presenting a method of resistance that imagines a future for racial and sexual equality. *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas*, set in a fictional version of early 1990s Los Angeles, leads its player through the Ramparts Scandal and the L. A. riots—an environment that is the product of President Reagan and Bush’s cuts to social programs—with a series of cars stolen, raced, and crashed. Both it and *The Intuitionist* provoke the reader to understand the accidental quality of race alongside mechanical failures, much in the same way that *Crash* and *White Noise* insist that accident shapes identity, but also reveals the politics that reside beneath identity. Each
of these texts’ protagonists struggle with control in the face of accident, and the narratives of the novels reveal authorial control over the accident as a means of calling the reader’s attention to the events depicted in the texts as fictions that uncover, via the deployment of inauthentic authenticity, history. In reading several texts that range from the late 1960s to the early 2000s I establish the scope of *Narrative at Risk*, reading representations of accident as stemming from the traumas of the 1960s and calling the characters’ and readers’ attentions back to that historical moment as one that continues to be felt in our present.

Chapter two shifts from the first’s broad historical range to texts specifically composed and published at the end of the Cold War: Paul Auster’s novel *Leviathan* (1992), Jeffrey Eugenides’s novel *The Virgin Suicides* (1993), and “Musings of a Cigarette Smoking Man” (1996) an episode of the television show *The X-Files* (1993-2002). Each of these texts represents strained attempts to imagine the future of the United States in the face of the seemingly accidental and abrupt end of the Cold War. I read failed suicide attempts in these texts as accidents that express the limits of intentionality, which bring to the fore the nation’s inability to conceive of a future beyond the ideological bounds of the conflict with the Soviet Union that provided meaning during the Cold War. The characters in these texts struggle with understanding their own futures and the accidents of intention that they have experienced. In *Leviathan*, *The Virgin Suicides*, and “Musings of a Cigarette Smoking Man” the events of the Cold War and the domestic strife of the American 1960s, 70s, and 80s, haunt characters that cannot move beyond the events of those decades to understand their own present historical moment. At the level of narrative form, each of these texts deny closure, insisting instead on a closed future either through meditating upon the inability for their narratives to wholly express the events they depict, or in undermining the veracity of these events through conflicting stories.
The third chapter continues to focus upon the final years of the Cold War, albeit from a different perspective. In it I read Richard Kenney’s poem, “A Colloquy of Ancient Men” from his collection, *The Invention of the Zero* (1993), alongside two novels: Michael Crichton’s *Jurassic Park* (1990) and *The Gold Bug Variations* (1991) by Richard Powers. These three texts represent the Cold War anxiety of thermonuclear annihilation shifting to a fear of genetic manipulation. Each of these texts depicts evolution as a series of random, accidental changes that take place in the history of a species’ development. Rather than depicting the futurelessness of the United States, these texts look to deep history on the scale of evolutionary time, using their representations of evolutionary biology as an argument against the threat that capitalism poses to Western liberalism in its becoming, after the fall of the Soviet Union, the dominant economic system and ideology. I read these texts alongside works of science—particularly Stephen J. Gould’s writings and theory of punctuated equilibrium—to show that while the future remained closed, meditations on the past, particularly deep history, revealed anxieties throughout American culture. The second and third chapters discuss texts that, respectively, depict failures of imagining the future and critique wildly counterfactual understandings of evolutionary time, both discuss symptoms of American culture’s inward turn and debates regarding its future and revisions of its past in the culture wars.

The fourth chapter, rather than moving forward in time, turns back to the 1970s in order to investigate the early years of the culture wars. I begin by reading how chance disrupts the linear narrative of Kathy Acker’s novel *Blood and Guts in High School* (which was published in 1984 but copyrighted in 1978), then shift to how games of chance disrupted the religious rights’ teleological understanding of history through reading hyperbolic and inflammatory condemnation of the role of chance in TSR’s roleplaying game *Dungeons & Dragons* (1974). I
continue to read the role of games of chance in two other texts, Michael Cimino’s film *The Deer Hunter*, and Thomas Pynchon’s novel *Gravity’s Rainbow* before concluding with a return to *Dungeons & Dragons*, this time in Sam Lipsyte’s short story “The Dungeon Master” (2010). In each of these cases chance undermines the paranoid fantasy that there are forces that author the world and control one’s actions within it. The players of *Dungeons & Dragons* and the characters in the aforementioned novels take risks in order to avoid chance—the characters in *The Deer Hunter* enlist in Vietnam in order to avoid the lottery of the draft, Tyrone Slothrop loses his identity in a Casino and takes an active role in the quest for the rocket 00000 in order not to be victim to chance. In Lipsyte’s story “The Dungeon Master” a group of teenage friends—those whom the evangelical right showed such concern for—embark on a campaign of *Dungeons & Dragons*, only to find themselves and their characters suffering horribly due to their ill-fortuned rolls of the dice and their ill-mannered Dungeon Master, the narrator-author of their campaigns. With paranoid fantasy as a means of controlling—or ignoring—chance, I read these texts as commenting on the immediate societal consequences of the 1960s’ end, particularly the Watergate Scandal and the end of the Vietnam War. These works depict characters embracing and denying chance in order to craft a teleology from a series of disparate traumas so as to assert control and order to a domestic sphere that has become overwhelmingly chaotic, authored by accident rather than intention. In this way, I return to many of the issues discussed in this introduction, but from a different vantage, arguing that while accident disrupted the narrative of the American dream in the early sixties, it became the dominant narrative, the one to be countered, in the 1970s.

I conclude with a brief discussion of the growing prevalence of the accident in the present through a discussion of episodes from two television shows—*Breaking Bad* (2008-2013) and
The Americans (2013)—alongside Steve Erickson’s 2012 novel These Dreams of You. Each of these texts imagines accidents as the fault or cause of the government. This points to American culture’s continued reliance upon teleological thinking and conspiracy theory. Such irrational thinking emerges in a time when we witness accidents and tragedies unfold, much like the Kennedy assassination, in real time, but far more frequently, and almost immediately in their wake conspiracy theories emerge in order to explain how some agent—from a shadow government to the President himself, has authored this threat. The risk to national narrative comes, in these cases, almost always from inside American society rather than from a foreign enemy.

The structure of Narrative at Risk attempts to avoid chronology in order to upset a teleological understanding of the period. Similarly, the choice of texts studied in the following chapters could be replaced with others; their inclusion often matches canonical understandings of post-war American literature and film, but also diverges into what I can only account for as my own taste. However, such a structure and such a sampling of texts support this dissertation’s claims. In resisting a teleological understanding of literary history and a strictly canonical selection of texts, I show that accident was prevalent in American society in both high and low culture. In other words, like any cultural study, Narrative at Risk could—and should—be able to support its thesis from any constellation of a wide range of texts. I only wish that personal taste had not interfered in the choice of some texts, so that the entire sampling could have been truly representative in being completely random.
Notes

1 While there are certainly earlier studies of the role accident plays in literature, they do not treat accident in the same manner as these more recent works. As well, they do not take American culture and society as their subject but instead, focus on a range of Western texts. See for instance: Ian Hacking’s *The Taming of Chance* (1990), Gerd Gigerenzer’s *The Empire of Chance: How Probability Changed Science and Everyday Life* (1990), Gerda Reith’s *The Age of Chance* (1999), Jackson Lears’s *Something for Nothing* (2003), for broad studies of chance and accident. For literary studies of chance see: R. Rawdon Wilson’s *In Palamede’s Shadow* (1990), David Bell’s *Circumstances: Chance in the Literary Text* (1993), Leland Monk’s *Standard Deviations: Chance and the Modern British Novel* (1993), Brian Richardson’s *Unlikely Stories: Causality and the Nature of Modern Narratives* (1997), Michael Witmore’s *Culture of Accidents* (2002), and William Paulson’s “Chance, Complexity, and Narrative Explanation.”

2 All Greek definitions are taken from the Lidell-Scott-Jones Lexicon of Greek.

3 Gary Saul Morson, in *Narrative and Freedom: The Shadows of Time* (1994) articulates that which Virilio believes mass media has conflated: the difference between narrative fiction and reality in regard to chance. He writes of literary texts, though his words apply to all narrative: “To those who believe that time is open, the shape of narrative fiction seems most artificial whenever it reminds us of its status as an artifice with structure and closure. If time is open our lives lack inherent structure and allow for multiple possibilities. The possibilities that were realized were not necessarily the most fitting, and we have no right to expect that the incidents of the future will make sense of all past contingencies. Unlike art, life does not subject contingencies to a pattern and thereby turn accidents into a meaningful inevitability” (38).

4 Lubin discusses at length the aestheticization of the Zapruder film in *Shooting Kennedy*, pp. 163-193, as does Karen Beckman, pp. 137-161.

5 For an extended reading of the Lincoln Continental in which Kennedy was riding when he was killed, see Pamela McElwain-Brown’s essay “SS-100-X” in Mikita Brottman’s *Car Crash Culture* (2001). For a history of managing risk in regard to the car and the use of film in doing so, see “The Accident is Uncontainable/The Accident Must be Contained: High Speed Cinematography and the Development of Scientific Crash Testing” by Greg Siegel.

6 In *Tangled Memories: The Vietnam War, the AIDS Epidemic, and the Politics of Remembering* (1997), Marita Sturken writes of the Zapruder film: “When an image coincides with traumatic events of historical rupture, it plays a central role in the construction of national meaning [. . .] It is both a still and moving image icon: because the moving image was restricted from public view, for twelve years it was seen in public only as a series of stills. The Zapruder film represents history as a succession of individual frames sliding forward in slow motion, offering only fragments of clues to what happened. It is a secret image, hidden from view, imbued with a kind of sacred status” (26).

7 In *National Trauma and Collective Memory: Major Events in the American Century* (1998), Arthur G. Neal reads the exceptional quality of the Kennedy assassination as of moment when secular politics entered the realm of the sacred: “The assassination of President Kennedy became a sacred event to Americans. Analogies were drawn between the death of Kennedy, the assassination of President Lincoln, and the crucifixion of Jesus Christ. Each constituted a human sacrifice in cementing the bonds of society as moral community. Through bloodshed, suffering, and death, the sacred character of social life became rejuvenated. For a few days following Kennedy’s assassination, the nation became totally engrossed in the news media coverage of the event and in the collective mourning process” (32).

8 For Jameson’s extended mediation on the 1960s see his article “Periodizing the 60s.” For a more recent attempt to periodize the postmodern, see Brian McHale’s “1966 Nervous Breakdown; or When Did Postmodernism Begin?” Timothy Melley, in *Empire of Conspiracy: The Culture of Paranoia in Postwar America* (2000) reads Jameson’s understanding of the assassination as a “mass-mediated experience” that was “‘collective,’” but contends that “what the mainstream media actually mounted for collective inspection was the epitome of capitalist individualism: the antisocial, ‘lone gunman’ in the tradition of the American Western—not only in the figure of Lee Oswald but also in
that of Jack Ruby” (133). For Melley, “What may seem to be at odds with capitalist individualism, however, is the widespread popular resistance to” the theory of the lone gunman (134).

9 Sturken writes, “The Trope of America’s losing its innocence at a precise moment is a well-worn one, a concept reiterated with Pearl Harbor, the Vietnam War, the Watergate scandal, the 1995 Oklahoma City bombing, and other events,” to which one must add the attacks of September 11, 2001 (29).

10 Øyvind Vågnes, in Zaprundered: The Kennedy Assassination Film in Visual Culture (2011), writes: “The definitive moving image of the assassination, the Zapruder film provides a time frame of the event that has inspired endless and contradictory theories about what happened when Kennedy was shot; bodily movements have been scrutinized in search of evidence of a second shooter. The film has been used to argue both for and against a wealth of conspiracy theories. Indeed, as the forensic gaze has continued to reveal the immense number of dots of which a photographic image ultimately consists, and as the epistemological status of the film consequently has been threatened by this removal from figularity to abstraction, artists have increasingly turned to its expressive aspects, to its allegorical potential. The epistemological crisis described by several cultural theorists thus simultaneously produces and reflects a transformation of the performative function of Zapruder’s images from the evidentiary to the aesthetic. The images hide as much as they reveal, making the spectator look hard for what they seem to conceal, for what is there but seems to be invisible” (13). For a history of the rise of French theory in the American academy during this period, see François Cusset’s French Theory, pp. 54-75.

11 Barbie Zelizer, in Covering the Body: The Kennedy Assassination, the Media, and the Shaping of Collective Memory (1992), argues extensively that the Kennedy assassination “was a turning point in the evolution of American journalistic practice not only because it called for a rapid relay of information during a time of crisis, but also because it legitimated televised journalism as a mediator of national experience” (4).

12 Erika Doss, in her introduction to Looking at Life Magazine (2001), writes, “Life paid $150,000 for Zapruder’s film. Its printed presence in the magazine gave it a ‘privileged position’ in the long and convoluted history and analysis of JFK’s murder; even today, the Zapruder film (recently released for public purchase) retains the sanctity of revelation and visual truth. Yet Life’s deliberate out-of-order printing of select frames from the film—done to maximalize its most horrific visual moments, one assumes—considerably muddied the interpretations of the specifics of the president’s death” (15).

13 Art Simon writes that “Between 1963 and 1979 over 2,300 articles and books were devoted to some aspect of the assassination or the ongoing inquiry” (7). For an extensive history of the Zapruder film, see David R. Wrone’s The Zapruder Film: Reframing JFK’s Assassination (2003).

14 Vågnes writes: “In the November 25, 1966, issue of Life, a comprehensive spread of frames supports Governor Connally’s argument that he and Kennedy were hit by two different bullets. The Zapruder film, now referred to as famous, is the center of attention. The magazine shows a single frame, 230, on its cover, against a black background. A photograph of Connally poring over single frames of the Zapruder film with a magnifying glass takes up the whole of the issue’s page 39. This suggests that Zapruder’s images can render vital information when magnified or enlarged dramatically” (40).

15 For a concise timeline of the popularization of the Kennedy assassination and debates surrounding it, especially conspiracy theories, see Art Simon’s Dangerous Knowledge, pp. 9-27.

16 For Melley, “If there is a form of utopian collectivism anywhere in this affair [the Kennedy assassination], it would seem to be here, in the conspiracy theorist’s relentless willingness to use the crime to imagine the causal power of large social systems and organizations” (134). Reading DeLillo’s Libra in A Pinnacle of Feeling: American Literature and Presidential Government (2008), Sean McCann writes, “For, while as a living president, JFK proves too small and conventional a politician to actually form a new city around himself, in his death [. . .] he nevertheless serves to articulate an alternative collective story that would go otherwise unreported [. . .] ‘The assassination sheds a powerful and lasting light, exposing patterns and links’ not because it illuminates the ordinary
violence and desperation of American society otherwise concealed by the falsity of political rhetoric and popular ideology” (174-175).


18 Brian McHale, in *Postmodernist Fiction* (1987), emphasizes the ontological status of postmodernist writing, “one of the features of this ontological landscape is its permeation by secondary realities, especially mass-media fictions, and one of the most typical experiences of members of this culture is that of the transition from one of these fictional worlds to the paramount reality of everyday life, or from paramount reality to fiction,” articulating this transition in terms of an airplane accident: “‘The flight decks of exploding 747s’: if our culture’s ontological landscape is unprecedented in human history— at least in the degree of its pluralism—it also incorporates one feature common to all cultures, all ontological landscapes, namely the ontological boundary between life and death. Yet even here our culture is innovative, for it alone has had to make room in its ontological landscape for mass technological death—‘exploding 747s’—even, ultimately global nuclear death” (38-39). McHale’s own terms for the postmodern rely upon the experience of technological accident.

19 For an extended discussion of interpretations and methods of reading the Zapruder film, see Simon, pp. 35-54.

20 While there is no evidence that I know of that Pynchon and Didion met, they did move in the same circles. Didion published her piece, “Just Folks at a School For Nonviolence,” on Joan Baez in *The New York Times* in 1966, and Pynchon, after the death, also in 1966, of his good friend Richard Fariña (to whom *Gravity’s Rainbow* is dedicated), became very close to Fariña’s wife, Mimi Baez, Joan’s little sister. In *Positively 4th Street* David Hadju writes: “In 1968 Joan married antiwar activist David Harris, with whom she had her only child, a son, Gabriel, the following year. Mimi moved to an apartment on Telegraph Hill in San Francisco. She and Pynchon became close friends, visiting briefly” (296).


22 Samuel Coale describes in “Didion’s Disorder: An American Romancer’s Art” Didion’s style as filmic: “For Didion as in films montage becomes metaphor; the arrangement of episodes reveals the state of mind of her heroines, of her modern world. The abstract and concrete meet head-on in her ordering of images, her expert cutting from scene to scene, the discontinuous juxtapositions of a shattered world” (162). For a discussion of paranoia in Didion’s oeuvre, including a discussion of *Play it As It Lays* see his *Paradigms of Paranoia: The Culture of Conspiracy in Contemporary American Fiction* (2004). In his study he treats, among others, the writing of both Didion and Pynchon, though the most he claims regarding the similarities of their writing is: “The postmodern victim, like Thomas Pynchon’s caricatures, Don DeLillo’s diffuse and anxious characters, Joan Didion’s troubled and drifting women, and Paul Auster’s self-eviscerating men, is loose in a world that has become so mediated, dispersed, intricate, and coded that one cannot possibly fathom it and feels only that bitter sense of absence, loss, and impotence” (11).

23 Charles Hollander, in “Pynchon, JFK, and CIA: Magic Eye Views of *The Crying of Lot 49*” provides a thorough, though often forced, reading of the novel’s coded representation of the Kennedy assassination. In what follows I write of the impact that the Kennedy assassination had upon the form and content of *Lot 49* and *Play It As It Lays* and hope to avoid the conspiratorial, paranoid style of reading that one finds in Hollander.

24 For a thorough examination of neo-conservatism and *The Crying of Lot 49*, see Casey Shoop’s “Thomas Pynchon, Postmodernism, and the Rise of the New Right,” in which Shoop writes sardonically of the 1966 election that would result in Reagan becoming California’s governor: “The election, it would seem, was not simply a matter of political preference but also a referendum on the capacity of the California electorate to distinguish the ‘real’ activity of governance from the illusory, televisual spectacle of the same: voters could surely tell the difference between a
career politician with a substantial record and a former Hollywood actor performing in the role of a politician” (51). Needless to say, both Maria and Oedipa have a hard time distinguishing mass media spectacle—television and film—from their political and historical reality.

25 Coale writes, “Maria is well versed in cinematic terms and devices. She speaks of scenarios, cuts, images in freeze frame, set-ups, almost in the matter of Carter […] On the one hand these film techniques constantly distance her from her own life by conscious choice; on the other they suggest an unreal realm of theatre and Hollywood dialogues that disconnect her from herself all too completely, all too habitually” (165).

26 See Kristin L. Matthews “Reading America Reading in The Crying of Lot 49” for an interpretation of Oedipa’s pregnancy as signaling a new form of reading that moves beyond “the object of interpretation in New Critical inquiry” to a more Derridean form of reading.

27 Sean McCann, in “‘Down to the People’: Pynchon and Schlesinger ‘after the imperial presidency’” writes of Oedipa’s experience walking through Sproul Plaza: “Like the activists of the New Left, Oedipa now sees in electoral politics not agents but structures and pathologies. In the suggestion that only death had the power to cure those illnesses, moreover, Pynchon underscores the point by implying that the caution of the fifties extended well past the 1960 election, ending only with the assassination of Kennedy and, possibly, the bloodshed of the Vietnam War” (257).

28 Shoop writes: the “complementary anxiety on the right is vital to an understanding of paranoia in Pynchon’s California novels, which span the period of Reagan’s ascendance. Paranoia is not merely the occasion for an allegorical exercise in hermeneutic uncertainty but also an exploration of a precise cultural-historical situation: the 1960s California of The Crying of Lot 49 is the state of representational breakdown, the place where the linear metanarrative of national destiny might be said to end in a welter of competing postmodern projections” (65).

29 In “Joan Didion’s Play It As It Lays: Alienation and Games of Chance” Lynn Howard Goodhart argues that the role chance plays in the novel “amounts to an injunction against independent judgment and action. It leads to the feeling that something unseen controls our destinies” (66).

30 Emily Apter’s “On One-worldedness: Or Paranoia as a World System” treats, at length, primarily through readings of Pynchon and DeLillo, the development of such problems of reading in the proliferation of paranoia from the 1960s to the 21st century, particularly in instances of “overinterpretation” (376).

31 In “After the Post(al)” Daniel Grausam writes that “while it is certainly the case that Pynchon’s novel plays with the ontological questions so common to our understanding of the postmodern, the novel is also engaged in an ethical project of re-understanding America as fundamentally pluralist rather than hopelessly fractured” (639), based upon reading Oedipa’s quest as her discovering alternate histories and ways of life than those she would have found had Inverarity not left her to execute his estate. In this redemptive reading, the epistemological and ontological crises that the novel depicts speak to difference and a nuanced understanding of both history and the present.

32 In “Reading America Reading in The Crying of Lot 49” Matthews contends that Oedipa Maas’s development as a reader reflects a broader historical shift away from the belief in literal, transparent, and rationally ordered language typical of 1950s reading discourses and toward a method of reading grounded in possibility and metaphor” (93).

33 For a reading of Didion’s style and the influence of Hemingway’s American modernism upon it, as well as the novel’s representation of patriarchy and Hollywood cinema, see Chip Rhodes’s “The Hollywood Novel: Gender and Lacanian Tragedy in Joan Didion’s Play It As It Lays.”

34 In Preface to Film Williams wrote: “In principle, it seems clear that the dramatic conventions of any given period are fundamentally related to the structure of feeling in that period. I use the phrase structure of feeling because it seems to me more accurate, in this context, than ideas or general life. All the products of a community in any given period are, we now commonly believe, essentially related, although in practice, and in detail, this is not always easy
to see. In the study of a period, we may be able to reconstruct, with more or less accuracy, the material life, the
general social organization, and, to a large extent, the dominant ideas. It is not necessary to discuss here which, if
any, of these aspects is, in the whole complex, determining; an important institution like the drama will, in all
probability, take its colour in varying degrees from them all. But while we may, in the study of a past period,
separate out particular aspects of life, and treat them as if they were self-contained, it is obvious that this is only how
they may be studied, not how they were experienced. We examine each element as a precipitate, but in the living
experience of the time every element was in solution, an inseparable part of a complex whole. And it seems to be
true, from the nature of art, that it is from such a totality that the artist draws; it is in art, primarily, that the effect of
the totality, the dominant structure of feeling, is expressed and embodied. To relate a work of art to any part of that
observed totality may, in varying degrees, be useful; but it is a common experience, in analysis, to realize that when
one has measured the work against the separable parts, there yet remains some element for which there is no
external counterpart. This element, I believe, is what I have named the *structure of feeling* of a period, and it is only
realizable through experience of the work of art itself, as a whole” (21-22).

Gordon Hutner, in “Historicizing the Contemporary: A Response to Amy Hungerford” largely agrees, though he
argues for a return to teaching realism, arguing that students are more likely to read and engage with these texts
rather than texts suffused with modernist difficulty, and that “Scrutinizing the writing of our day, we might come to
know the contemporary so well that we even have something to say to the populace—not to mention our students—
about the books of their time instead of leaving it to Oprah, for then we would be producing readers, not just
consumers” (424).

In his review of three monographs—David Castronovo’s *Beyond the Grey Flannel Suit: Books from the 1950s
That Made American Culture* (2004), Andrew Hoberek’s *The Twilight of the Middle-Class: Post-World War Two
American Fiction and White-Collar Work* (2005), and Leerom Medovoi’s *Rebels: Youth and the Cold War Origins
of Identity* (2005)— Steven Belletto examines how each of these texts “invite us to reconsider how the period is
most profitably conceptualized” and “suggest the richness and complexity of the period” (150-151). Belletto
identifies how, in the twenty-first century, Cold War studies has moved beyond investigating only the impact that
domestic and foreign policy had upon American culture. New works like these reveal how the study of the Cold War
has developed different nuances and cultural registers as time has distanced us from the years of red scares and
containment policy, while these very anxieties have continued to shape the nation’s culture and politics into our
present moment. The Cold War has ended, but nostalgia for the Cold War and the period’s logic continues to haunt
American culture. *Narrative at Risk* also participates in current scholarship on the Cold War, attempting to further
the way that accident is understood as shaping and being shaped by anxieties that arose from the conflict while
demonstrating how texts written after the end of the conflict continue to make meaning in reference to the conflict
while complicating our understanding of it.
Chapter 1

Chance Characters: The Politics of Accident and Authorial Control

There are no accidents in politics.

–Joseph Kennedy, 1960

I. Acting the Accident

Ronald Reagan opens Where’s the Rest of Me, his 1965 memoir written to bolster his bid for the governorship of California, with a description of what he purports to be his most formative moment: his role in the film King’s Row (1941). The moment transpired in one pivotal scene in which he performed the consequences of surviving a railroad accident: he must awaken in bed horrified at the realization that both of his legs have been amputated. Upon this recognition the script called for his delivery of the line “Where’s the rest of me?” Reagan writes, “it was the portrayal of this moment of total shock which made the scene rough to play. Coming from unconsciousness to full realization of what had happened in a few seconds, it presented me with the most challenging acting problem in my career” (4). It was in acting this scene that Reagan claims he realized that “part of his existence was missing” (3). The missing part, according to Brian Massumi, was his role in conservative politics (55). Performing the realization of the accident’s consequences shocked Reagan into perceiving a return to the past as a viable path to the future. Reagan enacted this nostalgia through engaging in conservative politics. While such politics arose from acting out an accident, they disavowed the role accident had played in the nation’s past while promising to erase the accident from its future.²

If, as Enda Duffy has argued in The Speed Handbook, the experience of speed should be thought of as political, then the consequences of mechanical accident—losing control at speed or of speed—should also be thought of as political (1, 3). While Ronald Reagan’s role as accident
victim begins to indicate the importance of reading the accident’s political consequences, this chapter extends this initial reading of Reagan’s experience to the ways in which his politics are framed in terms of mechanical accidents—automobile crashes and railroad accident—in J. G. Ballard’s novel *The Atrocity Exhibition* (1969) and *Crash* (1973), David Cronenberg’s 1996 adaptation of the latter, and Don DeLillo’s *White Noise* (1985).³ *White Noise*, set during the Reagan administration, explores the liberal subject’s disillusionment with conservative politics in its depiction of Jack Gladney’s conflicting desire for personal and governmental protection from accident. As a member of the white middle class, Jack believes that disasters only happen to the poor and minorities. When he cannot manage risk as an individual he finds himself fantasizing, to no avail, for a government that can manage risk for him.

Such cultural fantasies of Reaganism are based upon historical revisionism. In portraying his presidency as the dawn of a new political era, Reagan insisted upon undoing the turmoil of the 1960s and 1970s, going so far as to say, in 1980, that the Vietnam War, “was a noble cause. A small country newly free from colonial rule sought our help in establishing self-rule and the means of self-defense against a totalitarian neighbor bent on conquest” (qtd. in Nadel 197). Alan Nadel, in “The Empire Strikes Out” and *Flatlining on the Field of Dreams* (1997) has demonstrated that Reagan’s presidency relied upon American subjects looking up—as they would at a movie screen—for external proof of their own and their society’s improvement, “based less on logic than on narrative, less on criteria than display” (3). Reagan poached from popular culture, especially film, in order to validate “his form of display, and his success accrued from embodying narratives that had cultural currency” (3). The texts discussed in this chapter show how narrative embodied Reagan, and the historical revisions his presidency relied upon, to restore history and reality to the revisionism and fictions that his presidency promoted.
Following this engagement with Reagan era novels, their representation of Reagan’s body and his administration in the events of mechanical failure, the chapter turns to an examination of the continued influence of such politics in more recent texts, particularly Colson Whitehead’s *The Intuitionist* (1999) and Rockstar Games’ *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas* (2006). In each of these texts, both speed and the accident expose the nuances of a varied politics meant to achieve total control over events, especially accidental events. Both *The Intuitionist* and *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas* represent a continuation of these politics, providing a transition from the Reagan era while interrogating its politics—conservative nostalgia for the past, the effects of cuts to social programs, and the role of race.

In *The Reagan Presidency and the Politics of Race* (1998) Nicholas Laham writes, “a major focus of the Reagan Presidency was to curtail federal enforcement of the landmark civil rights laws passed during the 1960s and 1970s” (1). While Laham proceeds to argue that Reagan’s policies concerning race were based upon his investment in a “colorblind” America, texts such as *The Intuitionist* and *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas* represent moments in American history, respectively the 1960s and 1990s, in which conservative politics attempted to limit racial equality. From the beginning of his political career Reagan, at best, provided a two-faced policy on race. For instance, while campaigning for the governorship of California Reagan insisted that the Civil Rights act must be enforced, “at gunpoint if necessary”, while “remaining opposed to Civil Rights legislation and [arguing] for a voluntary solution to the problem of racism” (Dallek 199-200). *The Intuitionist*, in its representation of race and history investigates just such a two-faced approach, while *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas* explores the voluntary, personal solution that Reagan “argued throughout his career [. . .] [that] government efforts to ameliorate racial prejudice were at best inferior to personal efforts to change hearts” (Longley
In placing the player in the role of a young African American male, *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas* gives the player a virtual experience of racial discrimination that culminates in the Los Angeles riots of 1992. In both of these texts race itself becomes an accident that the player experiences through other accidents—the elevator, the car. They emphasize the importance of Civil Rights laws and problematize the “personal solution” through distancing the reader/player from the text through their self-reflexive meditations on their own mediums. *The Intuitionist* and *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas*, while representing speed, insist that there are no fast and easy solutions to the problems they depict.

Of the early days of the automobile, Duffy writes that speed came to comprise “the single new pleasure invented by modernity,” and that the experience of speed could “be felt: it did not need to represent itself. Still, it could be represented” (3). In other words, one can depict speed in writing, film, or digital media, while the accident, by definition, cannot be represented intentionally; one can only represent accidents in texts as events that the author controls in order to remove any control from the text’s characters. Thus the accident itself always emerges, within traditional narrative, as the intention of the author/narrator. While an accident can be captured on film—think of the numerous found footage shows that proliferated in the mid-1990s and continue airing to this day, many with titles such as, *When Buildings Collapse*—it is an accident only because the subject filming intended to record something else. In approaching representations of the accident as the products and assertions of various politics, this chapter extends the introduction’s discussion of the consequences of the assassinations and accidents of the 1960s to the politics and political ramifications of controlling accidents so as to author the politics of the present. These accidents transpire across several decades and various media—from memoir and novels to film and video games—expressing an anxiety over authority, both
political and textual, proliferating throughout American culture. While each of these texts express differing politics in regard to the accident, they share the same desire for control over that which, by definition, cannot be controlled: the accident.

Such politics as I’ve begun to demonstrate in the above reading of Reagan’s memoir depict historical events and draw upon the history of the 1960s in order to fulfill a desire for teleology and conspiracy in their audiences. These texts, like both the film and novel Crash, are aware of how they use the past to critique the desires of their audiences through depicting what I named, at the end of the introduction, inauthentic authenticity. Inauthentic authenticity is a product of the cultural circumstances of postmodernism, late capitalism’s cultural manifestations. The inauthentic in the above scene—Reagan, awakening and realizing that he has become an amputee—provides authenticity through the haptic. The scene is intended to touch the viewer. Watching this, reading that, we know that we are experiencing fiction, yet the images on the screen and the words on the page earnestly reach out to us—and, often, we reach back. The viewer/reader’s response, the touch back, provides the inauthentic with authenticity. These images, these words, are not real, but they could be, and that “could be” opens one to the possibility that not only could they be real, they will be real, or were real.

The haptic in Crash, White Noise, The Intuitionist, and Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas shapes what Jameson described in Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism as the waning of affect: the loss of historicity and reality, existence in a world without difference that instills in one anxieties and desires for such mundane moments to be punctuated with extreme experiences, among them this dissertation’s subject: the accident (Jameson 10, 28-29). While haptic sensations can begin to explain the desire for inauthentic authenticity, these four texts attempt to create authentic historical experience from fictions. They touch the reader in
rewriting historical events, whether from the past or from a present moment, attempting to bring one into direct contact with the present. In this way they combat the waning of affect through providing a reality effect—often written off as postmodern reflexivity or metafiction—by calling attention to fictional narrative’s inability to represent actual accident. This reality effect draws the reader into a direct engagement with the present and the history that, like so many cars in a traffic jam, have blocked one’s road to the future.

II. Ballad and Reagan: Writing, Acting, and Accident in the late 1960s

In King’s Row, when Reagan awakens in his bed, legs hidden through stagecraft, and enacts the realization of the railroad accident, the viewer is meant to sympathize with this horrific experience. “The movie” in the words of a character from DeLillo’s White Noise—discussing other filmic representations of accidents—“breaks away from complicated human passions to show us something elemental, something fiery and loud and head-on” (218). This head-on collision with Reagan’s passion—terror at the current state of his body—immediately registers a desire for how things were. “Where’s the rest of me?” becomes “I want to live in a future where once again I feel whole.” What Reagan portrays, again, in the words of Murray Jay Siskind in DeLillo’s Reagan Era novel, is “a conservative wish-fulfillment, a yearning for naïveté. We want to be artless again. We want to reverse the flow of experience, of worldliness and responsibilities” (218). The consequences of the accident are first expressed as a loss of one’s self, one’s control: “Where’s the rest of me?” From this emerges blame, which is placed upon the event itself, rather than upon one’s own actions. After Reagan screams his famous line he adds, “it was that accident.” This imagined accident, part of a role, a mere act, became the moment to which Reagan said he owed the events of the rest of his life. The imagined loss of
control instilled a desire to strive for total control—the means of which were not to be found upon the screen, but in politics. Control could not be found on the screen because there the director, or editor, or studio was always in control. As noted in Reagan’s biographies, his roles as President of the Screen Actors Guild and as FBI informant placed him, politically, on the periphery of Hollywood politics (Rogin 31). In *Parables for the Virtual* Brian Massumi theorizes how Reagan created an affective event through acting the accident in order to assert control over his life:

Reagan invents a technology of the event that is also a technology of the self. He starts from the need to portray a scene culminating in an event that can be taken as exemplary. The accident, in the suddenness of its inclusive disjunctive transformation not only of the shape of a body but of an entire life, can be seen as a figure of the event in general. The generic or exemplary event is short of actual. It need only be acted. But its acting yields a reality of its own. (Massumi 56)

Massumi, in reading Reagan, has described a cognitive event that, in the words of Douglas Hofstadter, “gives rise to the strange loop of selfhood, a trap into which we humans all fall” (205). Reagan’s “self-perception inevitably ends up positing an emergent entity that exerts an upside down causality on the world, leading to the intense reinforcement of and the final, invincible, immutable locking-in of this belief” (Hofstadter 205). Reagan’s imagined mark upon the body leaves a mark upon his imagination—an imagined mark that becomes an idea allowing him to author and extend himself. In describing the experience of speaking that line, of acting that role, as formative to his political career, Reagan uses intertextual references to author himself. Effectively, he embodies waning affect, transparent intertextuality through alluding to his body in various filmic and political roles. His acting out of the accident allowed him to
realize that his future was in conservative politics, so that, in some way, the imagined accident opened the reality that made him whole. The promise in his memoir is that a vote for him is a vote for completeness, for a return from the California of the 1960s to one of the 1950s. He will correct the accidents of history and restore a past devoid of political upheaval. Yet while Reagan promises that in voting for him the citizen will ward off the accidents of the future and the past, it is in the accident that he found his political identity.

Reagan finds himself complete only through enacting incompleteness: he must erase and rewrite his self through affective experience in order to enact and embody conservative politics. Massumi describes this affective authoring of Reagan as a moment of inauthenticity: “the feeling of the event washes through him (or that in-between of space and time), a wave or vibration that crests in spoken lines. This time the repetition of the lines effectively produces the event. But the event, as produced, is different. It has the reality of an acted event, a performance: short of actual” (57). Reagan takes the lines that author him, feels them, and through feeling them, authors himself. The idea of acting out the accident leads to the idea of a future Reagan, one engaged in conservative politics. He forges control out of the accident, “the feeling of the event,” and makes it a deliberate moment in which he can author himself and his role as politician through rewriting, retelling. This is the “short of actual” become actuality. Writing of this experience and how it felt to portray a character missing part of himself, Reagan expresses how it felt to realize that he, too, was missing something, that he was incomplete. Massumi continues:

The “short of actual” is expressed as a prolonging of the intensive in-betweenness of the event in the empirical world. It is a subsidence of the emotion, a flattening of the wave as it spreads out to fill a wider area. Reagan will now be extensively what he was intensively. He will be an ambulant blend of the ordinary everyday and the exemplary
event: he will be a walking amputee. His flesh will carry the mark of the artifice that jolted him into the event, endowing it with a kind of half-life: he will be a semiautomaton. He will find a method that will take this new self, semitechnologized through acting, through a similar transformation, after which he will feel it to be complete. (Massumi 57)

Reagan, like the characters discussed in this chapter, will become a being who feels the affective wear and the affective pleasure of conservative politics, of the Cold War as an authoring force. As well, like the characters that have suffered accidents, he will celebrate rebirth through imagined wounds that leave real scars. When Reagan shouts his line, he looks at the absence of his legs. In medium close-up the viewer can register the dismay on his face, the pain at realizing part of him is missing, but we can also see his arms move, his body respond along with his face to this realization (Figure 1). Of course, this is if we read Reagan as the character. If we read this merely as Reagan playing Reagan, he looks confused. Both pained and confused, a disoriented

Figure 1. Ronald Reagan awakens to find his legs amputated in King’s Row.
Reagan fully realizes who he actually is based upon a confrontation with what he has lost and what he has never had—fictional legs, a desire to enter politics outside of Hollywood.

While in the above shot we see Reagan’s affective event, this shot and the event it captures can also be read, in the words of J. G. Ballard, as “a unique ontology of violence and disaster” (The Atrocity Exhibition 168). Although Ballard is not writing of King’s Row or Reagan’s memoir, he is writing of Reagan. Composed in 1967, the first year of Reagan’s governorship of California, Ballard’s “Why I Want to Fuck Ronald Reagan” provides a fictionalized case study of the population’s response to scenarios in which Ronald Reagan engages in sex acts and is involved in “the conceptual auto-disaster” (Ballard 165). Collected in The Atrocity Exhibition, “Why I Want to Fuck Ronald Reagan” endured an obscenity trial in England and ultimately was the reason Doubleday pulped the first American edition of Ballard’s montage novel. At the 1980 Republican National Convention in Detroit, former Situationists from Berkeley, California passed out to delegates a pamphlet version of “Why I Want to Fuck Ronald Reagan,” the title of the piece replaced with “Official Republican 1980 Survey.” According to Ballard the pamphlet “was accepted for what it resembled, a psychological position paper on the candidate’s subliminal appeal, commissioned from some maverick think-tank” (Ballard 170). Mixing reality with fiction, Ballard casts Reagan in a pornographic role—the fictional piece itself entering the political arena, taken by delegates as a real study. The inauthentic becomes authentic when “Why I Want to Fuck Ronald Reagan” is read in such a way, just as the fictional event, when acted, can lead to the desire for a “real” politics. One knows this desire when it is felt, just as one knows pornography when it is seen.

“Pornography,” Ballard stated, “is the most political form of fiction, dealing with how we use and exploit each other in the most urgent and ruthless ways” (qtd. in Kauffman 167). In
casting Reagan in a pornographic role, Ballard theorizes the effect that the political body has upon the body politic. Linda Kauffman asserts that, “if Ronald Reagan had not existed, Ballard would have invented him. The Great Communicator’s true genius was to empty himself so the public could project fantasies onto him. To Ballard, the former Hollywood actor saved his best role for last: he played benevolent father to a nation longing for Daddy” (Kauffman 167). Reagan’s political body allowed for Americans to project their desire for control onto him, gaining in return a sense that history had come under control, naïveté returned to many, conservative wishes fulfilled. The body of the screen actor became itself a screen upon which American desires and dread could be projected and fulfilled, the past overwritten and overcome. For Ballard, Reagan’s body expresses pure politics rather than words: “Verbal material was found to have minimal effect, as demonstrated by substitution of an edited tape giving diametrically opposed opinions” (Ballard 166). While Reagan’s words come to mean little or nothing, the opening of “Why I Want to Fuck Ronald Reagan” expresses an American public that desires to reconstitute the nation’s political body.

Ronald Reagan and the conceptual auto-disaster. Numerous studies have been conducted upon patients in terminal paresis (G. P. I.), placing Reagan in a series of simulated auto-crashes, e.g. multiple pile-ups, head-on collisions, motorcade attacks (fantasies of Presidential assassinations remained a continuing preoccupation, subjects showing a marked polymorphic fixation on wind-shields and rear trunk assemblies). Powerful erotic fantasies of an anal-sadistic character surrounded the image of the Presidential contender. (Ballard 165)

Ballard invokes the politics of assassination that governed the 1960s, at once providing scenarios of Reagan’s body in car accidents while also describing the American public’s desires as
projected upon that body. Placing this study of Reagan into the fictional history of studies of other political leaders, Ballard writes, “the continuing tension of buccal sphincters and the recessive tongue role tally with earlier studies of facial rigidity (cf., Adolf Hitler, Nixon)” (166). When “the edited tape giving diametrically opposed opinions” is played with “parallel films of rectal images [. . .] a sharp upsurge in anti-Semitic and concentration camp fantasies” are revealed (Ballard 166). According to Ballard, the words have no effect; the fascist body itself excites the masses.

Reagan’s face, in the above scene, says more than his exclaimed question, “where’s the rest of me?” It, in fact, answers his question: mouth agape, eyes gazing at his absent legs, but in that absence seeing something, the specter of the future in which he will emerge as a reconstituted political body. His body becomes a whole as it emerges from the simulated accident. “A walking amputee,” Reagan strides upon the prosthetics of an accident-laden past into a totally controlled future—reconstituted from absence, his political body says whatever one wants to hear, and in finding the rest of himself, reveals a fantasy of the nation’s future as scripted, sanitized, under control.

III. When an Accident is not an Accident: The Direction of Control in Cronenberg’s Crash

Reagan celebrated his political rebirth in his wounds; so too do the characters of Ballard’s Crash (1973). In the following deceleration and declaration we are told that no accident belongs solely in the past but awaits as a future crash: “In our wounds we celebrated the re-birth of the traffic-slain dead, the deaths and injuries of those we had seen dying by the roadside and the imaginary wounds and postures of the millions yet to die” (203). James Ballard, the narrator of
Crash, describes the affective impact of touching the scars and engaging in sexual intercourse with the scholar and artist of crashes, Vaughan. Reading their scarred bodies as memento mori, Vaughn and Ballard celebrate the survival of their accidents—actual and intended, reenacted—while fantasizing the future accident that will end their lives. The novel itself, as the textual body that carries the details of these scars, prepares the reader for the future crash with which it began, that of Vaughan’s death. The description above provides the narrative suture that makes the novel’s beginning inevitable, formally beyond accident. The future of which it speaks is past for the reader. We know that Vaughan has died in his last car crash: at the novel’s beginning he is merely one of millions who have died. Yet in the body of the novel, with Ballard inside of Vaughan’s car, penetrating Vaughan himself in an act of anal sex, they are one body capable of seeing the future of all bodies mangled in the shells of smashed vehicles.7

Crash (1996), David Cronenberg’s film adaptation, displays, as one would expect, many images of car accidents: two head-on collisions, a traffic jam of already-wrecked cars arranged on the highways of Toronto, a chase scene as foreplay that culminates in a car flipped on an island off an expressway, cars passing the stranded couple in the distance. The film, shot over the course of 10 weeks, closed highways, congested traffic, making out of fictional representation wholly real results—shooting the traffic jam at the film’s center caused actual traffic jams in Toronto. Film, according to Shohini Chaudhuri, depicts crashes better than literature, for it is “the movement of movements”; she writes, “in figuring the chance encounter, film has a stark hyperreality, to which literature can only gesture” (69). Cronenberg’s film layers the accidental and the directed upon one another in extending the doubling that the novel plays with in the name of its author and its narrator. Ballard, in both the film and the novel, directs car commercials. In the film he acts as a stand-in for both the author Ballard and the director,
Cronenberg. However, in the film Vaughan often acts as the lens through which we view the fictional world. While we sympathize most with Ballard, Vaughan frames the world of crash culture for both him and us. Cronenberg, then, also has a stand-in in Vaughan. This double doubling becomes most pertinent in the film’s depiction of a scene of a traffic accident—already a set within a set—which reveals that this accident was always and will always be a set. The traffic accident’s *mise en abyme* stems from Cronenberg using and arranging already crashed cars on the freeway, an extension of Ballard’s own atrocity exhibition. The viewer’s discovery that the film’s set has, in the diegesis, come about due to Vaughan’s accomplice, Seagrave, going through with a reenactment of Jayne Mansfield’s fatal car accident without Vaughan’s knowledge, furthers the effect of this *mise en abyme*. As a viewer, one watches a simulation in which characters discover that they inhabit a set, an accident that was planned, written. In this way, the accident that Vaughan, Ballard, and Ballard’s wife Catherine come upon is no accident, but an extension of Vaughan’s direction of accidents. Likewise, there are no accidents in Cronenberg’s direction, only intentions. In this way Cronenberg bests both Vaughan and Ballard at their own game: controlling the accident.

Ballard (James Spader), driving Catherine (Deborah Kara Unger) and Vaughan (Elias Koteas) in Vaughan’s car, happens upon a highway accident. Immediately Vaughan tells him to slow and from nowhere produces a camera that the viewer must accept has, like Cronenberg’s camera, always been present, merely invisible. The flash of Vaughan’s camera illuminates a smashed station wagon. The subject of the photo that the flash illuminates comes into focus, while Vaughan and Ballard are blurred. In the background the lights of rescue workers illuminate the wreckage. But these lights also provide lighting for the film set (Figure 2). The key light in the image below is the flash of Vaughan’s camera. Cronenberg’s camera, mounted toward the
tail of the car peers over Vaughan, just as he leans over Ballard’s shoulder to get the shot. In focus for Vaughan is the wreckage, and the same is true for Cronenberg: throughout the scene his camera will predominantly focus on the subject of Vaughan’s camera.⁸

Cronenberg’s doubling—Ballard as director of car commercials driving the car, Vaughan as director of crashes shooting the accident that he authored—provides a similar reflexive authoring of the affective event that Massumi describes as Reagan’s awakening into conservative politics. The fantasy that Cronenberg critiques and that both Ballard and Vaughan project—first upon the accident, then upon Catherine’s body—is that of total control, a totalitarian politics that both feeds into and is produced by Vaughan’s total work of art, which emerges from the simulation of a total lack of control: the traffic accident. Both Cronenberg and Vaughan’s cameras follow not just Ballard’s Crash, but also his collection of condensed novels, The Atrocity Exhibition (1969). Earlier in the film, while riding in his Lincoln Continental, Vaughan states his desire to drive “a famous crash car,” Camus’s, or Jayne Mansfield’s, and Ballard asks if that is why he drives a car similar to the one in which Kennedy was assassinated. Vaughan replies with almost exactly these words from The Atrocity Exhibition: “It is clear that the car crash is seen as a fertilizing rather than a destructive experience, a liberation of sexual and machine libido, mediating the sexuality of those who have died with an erotic intensity impossible in any other form” (Ballard 157). Duffy reads Crash and the sex it depicts as allegorical for what he claims is the lack of vocabulary “for the various pleasures of speed” (Duffy 257). In the notes to “Crash,” the story from which these words are taken, Ballard writes, “the ultimate concept car will move so fast, even at rest, as to be invisible” (Ballard 158). The car then, can only be seen in the marks it leaves, the wrecked shapes of other vehicles and bodies that comprise the aftermath of its accident. In Duffy’s terms, the traffic jam of Ballard’s novel
represents “immense energy contorted into a pause” (Duffy 259). In the film Cronenberg creates this pause through doubling the cameras in the scene—his own filming Vaughan’s—and

reminds the viewer that he watches a movie: the cars stop, but the camera continues rolling. The conceptual art of the car accident, the atrocity exhibition that Cronenberg curates and directs (Ballard, in the mid-sixties, was curator of a museum show of crashed cars), layers accident with intention. The accident cuts through to the substance of reality while remaining invisible. In this scene, we do not witness the accident that caused the pileup. Cronenberg has said that audiences want to see Crash in the same way that they see accidents (qtd. in Chaudhuri 63). We want to watch events overcome and surprise others.⁹ We want to feel what others feel through seeing. In this scene we experience only the aftermath, the fact that each car contains the potential to become the car crash.

The crash site is the set, the flash of the actor’s camera the key light in some shots; in others, the key light is that of the rescue workers, who are also actors (Figure 3). The concept of the crash site is one of static layers, of speed at twenty-four frames per second casting the

Figure 2. Shooting the accident in Crash.
illusion that accident is intention, directed chaos. Vaughan makes the crash site the subject of his shots, just as he and the crash site are the subject of Cronenberg’s shots. Vaughan takes Ballard’s

Figure 3. From Crash.

wife’s hand and leads her to a car’s wreckage. He poses her, the light of his camera’s flash illuminates her, and Cronenberg uses it as the light that lights his scene. As Kauffman writes, “in a world of chance encounters, forensics has become a new form of performance art” (191).

Vaughan gets a close-up, a head shot, while Cronenberg gets this two-shot, the car door framing Catherine’s torso, just as Vaughan’s camera frames her head. While Vaughan’s camera fixes on her face, Cronenberg’s is far more interested in the actors’ bodies (Figure 4). The way that Vaughan leans forward, and that Catherine, arms crossed, looks stoically at Vaughan, providing him with a casual, straight-on stare similar to that of Ballard in early scenes in the film, after he suffered his car accident, in which he sits on his and Catherine’s balcony, leg mutilated, staring at traffic. Cronenberg creates suspense not just through making one wait for the accident to
happen, the collision to occur, but also in promising such accidents, forcing the audience to wonder whose desire for the accident will first wane: their own, or that of the film’s characters.

Figure 4. From Crash.

Although Vaughan moves through the crash site like a director, he and the viewer do not initially realize that it is his own crash set. Moments earlier in the film, Vaughan showed Ballard images of his next project—story boards of a sort, notes for an historical recreation. In an insert shot, we see from Ballard’s point of view an image of Jayne Mansfield’s fatal accident, her scalp circled in red pen, a note stating: “JM SCALP” (Figure 5). We know that Seagrave (Peter MacNeill), the stunt driver and actor in Vaughan’s shows, was to play Jayne Mansfield. The two had just accomplished the performance of James Dean’s fatal accident and were moving on to a larger production. “I want big tits, so the audience can see them all cut up,” Seagrave tells Vaughan. Illuminated in the flash of Vaughan’s camera and from Vaughan’s point of view we see Seagrave, throat slit, head almost decapitated in a near perfect imitation of Mansfield’s death,
his prosthetic breasts big, though not cut. At this moment in the scene the viewer sees exactly what Vaughan sees, and immediately becomes distanced from Vaughan as he realizes that the accident he came upon is, for him, no accident; he authored it, Seagrave just started acting before he yelled action. The camera pans as we continue to see what Vaughan sees. Cronenberg’s camera replaces his eye, and it is the camera’s move that severs Seagrave’s head, removing it from the frame. At this moment, we see what Vaughan sees, and what Vaughan sees is what Cronenberg sees: an actor’s slit throat, body lying three-quarters prone in shards of glass, a posed imitation of Jayne Mansfield, virtually real (Figure 6). We see the Chihuahua, dead in this set just as it happened in Mansfield’s fatal accident. The camera continues to pan through the debris, deliberately, as Vaughan sees that this accident has gone according to plan. The light of Vaughan’s flash leaves the scene tinted blue, the debris in close up, like the photo Ballard held earlier. The audience watches from Vaughan’s vantage, one that now replicates the photographer of the original Mansfield crash and we see that the wig is a perfect replication of Mansfield’s
own wig (not her decapitated head—here the film corrects myth), nearly embedded in the windshield.  

Figure 6. Seagrave plays Mansfield. 

Cronenberg’s film replicates the accidents that are described in Ballard’s 1973 novel and the “condensed novels” that comprise *The Atrocity Exhibition*. The conspiratorial history of planned accidents became real for ten weeks on the highways of Toronto. These planned accidents had the same effects upon the city as real accidents. Real men dressed as Jayne Mansfield really pretended to be dead in real wreckage. For the two head-on collisions in the film, Cronenberg actually crashed two cars, head-on. Cronenberg made the film for his and Ballard’s characters, which is to say that *Crash*, both film and novel, strove to provide spectacular authenticity and to provide “imaginary wounds and postures of the millions yet to die.” Yet such authenticity, as depicted in *Crash*, is nonetheless inauthentic. The film relies upon the direction of the accidental to shock and dismay its viewers and to titillate its characters. In *Crash* Cronenberg depicts the inability for the human to fuse with machine, while, as in the
scene above, he depicts the human through machines, crashing machines, melding together his
eyes, the eyes of Vaughan, and the viewer’s eyes through the technology of the camera and the
screen.

The accident in Crash projects a politics of control that relies upon a confusion of accident and intention. Speed may provide a new pleasure and a new politics, but the accident, insofar as Crash is concerned, provides a politics that imagines control can never be relinquished. Our relationship with technology, the pleasures we take from the camera and the car, claims that in order to maintain control, or the illusion of control, one must sympathize more with machine than with human. To see the world through a camera that films filming is to embrace inauthentic authenticity—to realize the reality of fiction—and leads to seeing authorial intention where there is only accident, control where events remains wholly out of one’s control. Yet when one sees such self-conscious references, fiction’s spell is broken, and, cast back into reality, the viewer sees how such illusions are created and begins to distinguish reality from simulation.

IV. President Reagan’s Subject, or, Jack Gladney Wants to Believe

“Where were you when James Dean died?” Alfonse Stompanato asks a table of cultural studies professors at the fictional College-on-the-Hill (DeLillo 68). White Noise alters Winthrop’s meaning of the “City on the Hill,” and the meaning Kennedy deployed in 1961 and that Reagan used in his 1984 acceptance speech for reelection, in order to denote the campus as America in miniature, a place where the “professours” speak not for “God’s sake” but in the name of spectacle. At the College-on-the-Hill all eyes are not on God, but instead rest upon popular culture: “the most photographed barn in America,” cereal boxes, car crash films, Elvis,
Hitler.\textsuperscript{12} These objects of study, like Dean’s death and Reagan’s character’s loss of his legs in \textit{King’s Row}, are treated as revelations. Michael Rogin, in \textit{Ronald Reagan the Movie} (1988), writes of Reagan’s continued fascination with \textit{King’s Row} into his Presidency: “Reagan still inhabits \textit{King’s Row}. He made it the center of his autobiography, he watched it again and again with Jane Wyman and their guests, he watches it with Nancy Reagan, and he chose its music as the fanfare for his 1980 inauguration” (23). Such fascinations with accident and death provide an alternate history of the American century, one in which shared experiences of others’ tragedies constitutes the basis upon which one’s authentic national citizenship is based.\textsuperscript{13}

In Cronenberg’s \textit{Crash}, the accident is reenacted so as to provide its audience, among whom Ballard is a member, with a semblance of authentic experience; a successful simulation of Dean’s accident leaves its drivers and passengers only injured, not dead. In \textit{White Noise}, the story of Dean’s death is converted into cultural capital, an experience that anyone of a certain generation remembers and can use to authenticate their place in the culture and legitimate their role as critics of American culture. Stompanato continues, “The silver Porsche approaches an intersection, going like a streak. No time to brake for the Ford Sedan. Glass shatters, metal screams. Jimmy Dean sits in the driver’s seat with a broken neck, multiple fractures and lacerations. It is five forty-five in the afternoon Pacific Coast Time. Where is Nicholas Grappa, the jerk-off king of the Bronx?” (DeLillo 69). Everyone at the table, in playing this game, are masturbating to pop-culture porn; they experience not the accident, but recall memories of the accident—memories denoted in terms of the haptic, nostalgia that touches and affects speaker and listeners. One’s experience of the event does not matter—Stompanato is not interested in affect. Rather, one must have experienced hearing about this event, must have been in a specific place at five forty-five on the thirtieth of September, 1955, and recall the experience of learning
the news of Dean’s death. One must bear witness to bearing witness, and Grappa must tell of this accidental experience in order to bear witness to his own existence.

In *Crash*, after Vaughan has emerged from the wreckage of the Dean crash reenactment, he testifies with similar words and rhythms as those of Stompanato: “Rolf Wütherich was thrown from the Porsche and spent a year in the hospital recovering from his injuries. Donald Turnupseed was found wandering around in a daze, basically unhurt. James Dean died of a broken neck and became immortal.” Both *White Noise* and *Crash* fixate upon the immortality that accidental death provides to celebrities. While the film offers a psychopathology of the sexualizing of car accidents, *White Noise* turns the lunchtime reminiscing into a course that, with Stompanato’s endorsement, Murray Jay Siskind teaches the following semester (DeLillo 149). Sharing one’s experience of learning about Dean’s death, or seeing Dean’s death reenacted, touches those who have the same experience of the event.

When Jack Gladney asks Siskind how his “car crash seminar is progressing?” Siskind says that he has shown numerous combinations of various vehicles colliding with one another. He claims that his students find these films prophetic, that “they mark the suicide wish of technology. The drive to suicide, the hurtling rush to suicide” (DeLillo 217-218). But Siskind offers his students an alternate reading of these accidents: “I tell my students not to look for apocalypse in such places. I see these car crashes as part of a long tradition of American optimism. They are positive events, full of the old ‘can-do’ spirit. Each car crash is meant to be better than the last” (218). Linda Kauffman notes DeLillo’s “enormous debt to Ballard” (160), so it is no surprise that like Vaughan, Siskind finds “a benevolent psychopathology” in the car crash. Siskind could easily speak these words of Vaughan’s: “the car crash is a fertilizing rather than a destructive event,” though his interpretation differs from the conclusion that Vaughan
draws, that the car crash is “a liberation of sexual energy that mediates the sexuality of those who have died with an intensity impossible in any other form.” While both want each crash to be better than the last, Vaughan’s desire drives toward suicide, each accident a little death that brings sexual gratification. Siskind tells his students what was quoted earlier in reference to Reagan: “it’s not decay they are seeing but innocence. The movie breaks away from complicated human passions to show us something elemental, something fiery and loud and head-on. It’s a conservative wish-fulfillment, a yearning for naïveté. We want to be artless again. We want to reverse the flow of experience, of worldliness and responsibilities” (DeLillo 218). For Siskind there is nothing radical about the crash film. The accident’s touch provides an insular experience, one that removes the immediacy of the world.

Reading, as Siskind would, Vaughan’s “project” of living a psychopathology that finds pleasure in the accident reveals a desire for conservatism, a sadistic yearning for control, for dominance only in theory. If we “look past the violence,” as Siskind says to Jack, then we see “a wonderful brimming spirit of innocence and fun” (219). Jack has been stripped of such innocence and fun due to his experience of the airborne toxic event, itself the result of a railway accident. Reagan, remember, found his calling in politics, he claimed, only after playing the role of a victim of a railway accident, and a railway accident is an old fashioned kind of accident: it instills and begins to fulfill nostalgia. The experience of a real accident, rather than the representation of one, is more complicated than Siskind’s or his students’ theories. The airborne toxic event, via the auspices of government agencies, is recast not as actual accident, but as practice for an accident, a promise of control—the inauthentic veiling the horror of the authentic, the accident penetrating the body, and the government covering horror with irony and bureaucracy.16
The airborne toxic event reminds DeLillo’s characters of traumatic political events, and furthermore, it shows how the novel marks some of its idiosyncratic facts through assigning them dates that correspond with other traumas. The railway accident that unleashes a toxic cloud of Nyodene D leads to a series of evacuations, the final of which is described in terms of the fall of Saigon, which transpired on April 30, 1975: “It was like the fall of a colonial capital to dedicated rebels. A great surging drama with elements of humiliation and guilt” (157). The novel emphasizes the lingering trauma of the 1960s through such allusions and direct references. For example, Jack Gladney “invented Hitler studies in North America in March of 1968,” a month in which nerve gas leaked from the U.S. Army Dugway Proving Ground near Skull Valley, Utah, and in which the My Lai Massacre occurred. “A history within history,” is one way that Siskind describes Hitler Studies, and White Noise provides a similar logic to the novel’s depiction of the historical (12). In this way the novel insists on what, in Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism, Jameson called “a crisis in historicity” (22). DeLillo, unlike Doctorow in Jameson’s reading, insists upon writing the past into the present and thus historicizing the present. For Jameson, Doctorow is “the epic poet of the disappearance of the radical American past, of the suppression of older traditions and moments of the American radical tradition: no one with left sympathies can read these splendid novels without a poignant distress which is an authentic way of confronting our own current political dilemmas in the present” (23). The novel’s ability to cause a reader to affectively register poignant distress in no way allows for the reader to confront “current political dilemmas.” DeLillo, in the character of Jack Gladney, provides the reader with a depiction of the 1960s as a history of fascism, the decade in which neoconservative backlash spawned the novel’s present.
*White Noise* confronts the traumas of the 1960s and the left’s demise in portraying it as a period that can be read as the crystallization of American conservatism. Events from the 1960s proliferate and intersect with events of the 1980s, from the My Lai Massacre occurring in the same month that Jack invented Hitler Studies—which was pitched to a chancellor who, a foreboding figure, to say the least, “went on to serve as adviser to Nixon, Ford, and Carter before his death on a ski lift in Austria” (4)—to Siskind’s remedy for the overwhelming fear of death that Jack develops after his encounter with the airborne toxic event: “what you have to do is survive an assassination attempt. That would be an instant tonic. You would feel specially favored, you would grow in charisma” (286). It worked for Reagan, so why not for Jack? DeLillo, instead of providing an affective solution to political problems, portrays the present as containing the past within it. This history in a history denies authentic feeling as a political solution because accidental associations of one’s sense of history combine with words on a page to inspire these “authentic” feelings. These feelings are the same as those that Siskind identifies in the crash films he teaches: “a conservative wish-fulfillment, a yearning for naïveté. We want to be artless again. We want to reverse the flow of experience, of worldliness and responsibilities” (218). Even disillusioned with the myths of the Reagan era, Jack continues to yearn for these myths to become reality. He wants to believe in the state’s fiction, despite having experienced its failure to control accident. In *White Noise*’s depiction of life under President Reagan, everything takes on valences of affect; history becomes a kaleidoscopic reflection of a present completely out of one’s control.17

In its portrayal of the accident, *White Noise* depicts characters that wish to control the accidental so as to not only exert authority over the past, but also to write their future. While Gladney asserts throughout the novel various iterations of the sentiment “all plots tend to move
deathward,” it is his first and fourth wife, Dana Breedlove, who “liked to plot” (DeLillo 26, 46). A CIA operative—each of his ex-wives was or is involved in the intelligence community, each a specter of the federal government’s extension into one’s everyday life—Breedlove “reviewed fiction for the CIA, mainly long serious novels with coded structures” (DeLillo 213). Yet reading these novels in an attempt to decipher “the code” and find, presumably, the political messages embedded in their structures, leads only to more reading, more decoding: “the people who sent [Dana] books to review wouldn’t leave her alone. Dana was getting big thick novels every day, writing reviews which she microfilmed and sent to a secret archive. She complained of jangled nerves, periods of deep spiritual fatigue. She told Steffie she was thinking of coming in from the cold” (275). The CIA’s reliance upon New Critical close reading is well documented, and here we see that the intentional fallacy has worn down Dana Breedlove. To find the political message in long complex novels is impossible—if one message was there it would not take rigorous decoding.

Such counterintuitive counterintelligence work proliferates in the lives of Gladney’s ex-wives. Janet Savory, a parody of Joan Didion, tells Jack of the work of her current husband, Malcolm Hunt, who, when “he goes into deep cover, it’s as though he never existed. He disappears not only here and now but retroactively. No trace of the man remains. I sometimes wonder if the man I’m married to is in fact Malcolm Hunt or a completely different person who is himself operating under deep cover. […] I don’t know which half of Malcolm’s life is real, which half is intelligence” (88-89). While Breedlove reads for plots, Malcolm actually plots, and when he does so, his existence disappears, like the Cigarette Smoking Man of the X-Files, which I discuss in the fourth chapter. He effectively becomes unreadable. Savory informs Jack that Malcolm is currently “working in deep cover, sponsoring a Communist revival” in Indonesia:
“It’s part of an elegant scheme designed to topple Castro” (86). The CIA plot in which Malcolm is involved is as convoluted as that of any long novel that Breedlove would attempt to decipher; which is to say that her attempt to read for authentic political plots in works of literature may only amount to acts of paranoid reading that result in the waning of affect.

If the waning of affect is “perhaps best initially approached by way of the human figure,” then Malcolm Hunt’s existence as a body that can be wholly erased in the present and the past suggests an inability to possess any form of authentic self or sense of history (Jameson 61). In Malcolm Hunt “depth is replaced by surface, or by multiple surfaces (what is called Intertextuality in that sense no longer a matter of depth)” (Jameson 12), which is exactly what DeLillo participates in with his allusions to Didion’s characters in *A Book of Common Prayer* (1977), and possibly *Democracy* (1984). The authentic subject, in the case of both Malcolm Hunt and Dana Breedlove, is replaced with an inauthentic character that the government authors. Breedlove reads the plots, and Hunt is erased so that he may enact the convoluted plots that Breedlove may be reading for.

After experiencing the airborne toxic event and being exposed to Nyodene D, Jack Gladney also embodies an affected subject who is a “blend of the ordinary everyday and the exemplary event,” effectively, “a walking amputee” whose body carries the traces of poison from the accident. However, the poison itself and the accident that lead to such contamination is the result of Jack’s interaction not with the experience of the accident, but the evacuation that follows, and, in its wake, the proceeding computerized bureaucracy. Jack’s experience of the airborne toxic event is not a mere encounter with an accident, but an experience of an accident as a subject of the Reagan administration.
Jack Gladney, gazing through binoculars, sees the scene of the railroad accident as a film set similar to the highway accident scene in *Crash*: “I put the glasses to my face and peered through the gathering dark. Beneath the cloud of vaporized chemicals, the scene was one of urgency and operatic chaos. Floodlights swept across the switching yard. Army helicopters hovered at various points, shining additional lights down on the scene. Colored lights from police cruisers crisscrossed these wider beams” (115). The army helicopter, agent of the federal government, lights the accident from above. The federal government literally hovers over this scene, distantly lighting the disaster but never intervening for the benefit of the victims. The conservative government thus watches the disaster from above, calling attention to it, but providing no relief. Before looking through the binoculars at the scene of the accident Jack heard distant air-raid sirens (113), and shortly after seeing the above scene “air-raid sirens sounded again, this time so close to us that we were negatively affected, shaken to the point of avoiding each other’s eyes as a way of denying that something unusual was going on” (118). The air-raid sirens, which “hadn’t been tested in a decade or more,” now sound not as warning against thermonuclear war, but as a warning against the result of the railroad accident: the airborne toxic event (118). Gladney and his family’s evacuation appears to them like a film they are watching rather than an actual event they are experiencing. As a traffic accident slows their escape, Jack explains, “a helicopter sat just above us, shining a white beam down on the mass of collapsed metal” (122). The evacuation becomes spectacle, the airborne toxic event the main attraction:

The whole thing was amazing. They seemed to be spotlighting the cloud for us as if it were part of a sound-and-light show, a bit of mood-setting mist drifting across a high battlement where a king had been slain. But this was not history we were witnessing. It was some secret festering thing, some dreamed emotion that accompanies the dreamer
out of sleep. Flares came swooning from the helicopters, creamy bursts of red and white light. Drivers sounded their horns and children crowded all the windows, faces tilted, pink hands pressed against the glass. (128).

The airborne toxic event takes on the image of a fourth of July fireworks display, not an historical event, but a commemoration of history. The army helicopter, representative of the federal government, continues to light this display, which rather than appearing deadly, amazes Jack and all who attempt to flee from it. With the intervention of the federal government, the deathly real takes the shape of a film. The actor President, Ronald Reagan, governs through spectacle, through making everything take on the innocence of an act. “There never was a politician less interested in the past,” writes Edmund Morris in Dutch (1999), and this facet of life under Reagan appears in the above passage (394). The federal government intervenes in order to cast disaster in a patriotic glow. In not recognizing history, Jack and the other evacuees believe in fiction. Yet Jack’s experience of the airborne toxic event is just the beginning of the show.

Upon reaching shelter, Jack approaches a government official to report his exposure to Nyodene-D. The government official works for SIMUVAC, which he informs Jack is “short for simulated evacuation. A new state program they’re still battling over funds for” (DeLillo 139). SIMUVAC, a product of Reagan’s deregulation—hence its battling for funds—deals with disasters through acting them out. While Jack is astonished that SIMUVAC “saw a chance to use the real event in order to rehearse the simulation,” in the aftermath of the airborne toxic event, private industry, in a perfect instance of Reaganism, begins to replace government, though not SIMUVAC’s philosophy (139). The “private consulting firm” Advanced Disaster Management continues the rehearsal of accidents because “the more we rehearse disaster, the safer we’ll be
from the real thing,” and as Jack learns from his son Heinrich, who, along with his daughter Steffie, rehearse the disaster, “the more you practice something, the less likely it is to happen” (205, 207). The retreat of government and the continued creation of staged spectacles meant to prevent disaster are marked with the signature of Reagan, of whose 1966 election to the office of governor, Sean Wilentz writes: “when asked after the election what he would do, he replied with a quip that was both amusing and revelatory: ‘I don’t know. I’ve never played a governor’” (133). What better way to survive an accident than to play its victim? In the wake of the airborne toxic event the government, and eventually its citizens, become products of corporate America. Molded in the image of the actor-President, these citizen actors are devoted to magical thinking. They author and rehearse accidents in total denial and ignorance of the fact that an accident, by definition, is that which transpires despite one’s intentions. Yet acting the accident provides them with a sense of control over the accidents of their past and the illusion of immunity to those of their future.

Ronald Reagan is mentioned by name only once in the entirety of White Noise. While Babette reads supermarket tabloids to a crowd of evacuees during the airborne toxic event she recites, among many, this passage: “From beyond the grave, dead living legend John Wayne will communicate telepathically with President Reagan to help frame U.S. foreign policy. Mellowed by death, the strapping actor will advocate a hopeful policy of peace and love” (146). While the first sentence states the impossible fiction “dead living legend,” the syntax of the last sentence blurs which actor is being discussed. While Wayne is literally dead, the sentence suggest also that death from various conflicts and disasters will “mellow” Reagan. John Wayne, the staunch Cold Warrior whose star power allowed him to remain active in both Hollywood and
conservative politics, played the role of cowboy on the screen that Reagan could play only in politics—his own Hollywood acting career long dead.

When Wayne died in 1979, Reagan wrote a “biography” of him for the October issue of *Reader’s Digest*. Reagan concluded with these sentences: “Duke Wayne symbolized just this, the force of the American will to do what is right in the world. He could have left no greater legacy” (115). The tabloid in *White Noise* creates an instance in which Wayne communicates with Reagan telepathically—but Wayne does more: he tells Reagan how to act through his performance on the screen. Stagecraft translates to statecraft. “We’d become part of the public stuff of media disaster. The small audience of the old and blind recognized the predictions of the psychics as events so near to happening that they had to be shaped in advance to our needs and wishes. Out of some persistent sense of large-scale ruin, we kept inventing hope” (DeLillo 146-147). Reality as film, life as an act, the accident as a script one only need follow in order to survive: conservative teleological fantasy. While Reagan asked, following a railroad accident, “where is the rest of me?” Jack Gladney, also following a railroad accident, wonders if reality will ever again feel authentic, or if life will continue to pass before him, each event registered as a projection upon a screen, a thin film always separating experience from reality, affect from history.

The novel bears affection for a Reagan-era view of the 1950s in sending up Gladney’s desire for belief. Towards the novel’s end, after he has shot Mink—the man with whom his wife had an affair—Gladney takes Mink to a clinic run by nuns. While being treated, Gladney sees, hanging upon the wall, “a picture of Jack Kennedy holding hands with Pope John XXIII in heaven. Heaven was a partly cloudy place” (316). An image of an older order, Kennedy holding hands with the pope corresponds to John Wayne speaking to Reagan. Both Wayne and Pope
John XXIII died of stomach cancer, Pope John XXIII succumbing five months before Kennedy was assassinated. Reagan, of course, survived an assassination attempt. Like the army helicopter earlier, representation of governmental (and religious authority) hover above the scene, there only to be seen, not to intervene. Other than being the catalyst that leads the reader on a conspiratorial, paranoid reading of the scene, this image critiques just such reading, just such tabloid thinking. The tragedies of the 1960s can only be understood through careful historical analysis, not through conspiracy theory. Such coincidences easily lead to magical thinking, provoke a belief in the unseen, a faith in an overarching plan behind which lurks a talented author.

These nuns, however, do not believe in Catholicism or any kind of theology. After Gladney discovers that they play a role—are actors—because “the nonbelievers need believers”, he asks: “Why are you a nun anyway? Why do you have that picture on the wall?” the nun responds that they do this for others, not them:

All the others. The others who spend their lives believing that we still believe. It is our task in the world to believe things no one else takes seriously. To abandon such beliefs completely, the human race would die. This is why we are here. A tiny minority. To embody old things, old beliefs. The devil, the angels, heaven, hell. If we did not pretend to believe these things, the world would collapse. (318)

The nuns, agents of actor Pope John Paul II, feign belief so as to make others’ non-belief possible, and Gladney finds this unbelievable (DeLillo 319). The picture of Kennedy and Pope John XXIII hangs on the wall so that others can read the nuns as believing that accidents of history occur for a reason, that a great plan exists, that the past holds meaning and that the future contains the potential of narrative closure, revelation, meaning made from the meaningless.
What Gladney discovers, however, is that the picture hangs on the wall as the symptom of the waning of affect, the disavowal of history, the belief in meaninglessness in the face of the accident. The politics of control derived from the accident here comes close to nihilism—appear to believe so that others need not believe; believe in nothing so history does not hurt, does not even register; believe that others need the illusion of your belief so that the future will appear as if it is something that just simply happens. Nevertheless, they believe that others need to believe, and Gladney’s horror at their lack of belief reveals that, at least in this case, they are absolutely right.

V. Accidents in the Dark: Setting The Intuitionist

Like Jack Gladney, Lila Mae Watson, the protagonist of Colson Whitehead’s The Intuitionist, sees conspiracy where there is only accident. Her desire to reside at the center of a conspiracy compensates for her lack of control: Lila Mae is the first African American female elevator inspector, and an elevator accident will allow her to better understand history, rather than alienate her from it. Yet unlike Gladney or the characters of Crash, Lila Mae will author control from accident; she does not want to believe, she wants to create.

Early in The Intuitionist, the mayor of the large northern city in which the novel is set—New York City in all but name—addresses the press regarding an elevator accident that took place at the Fanny Briggs building. A reporter asks, “Do you think that a party or parties resistant to colored progress may be responsible?” and, before the mayor can answer, we are told that “Everyone thinks, as they must, of last summer’s riots, of how strange it was to live in a metropolis such as this (magnificent elevated trains, five daily newspapers, two baseball stadiums) and yet be too afraid to leave the house. How quickly things can fall into medieval
disorder” (23). The race riots referred to are those of 1964, which raged in cities such as Rochester, New York City, Philadelphia, Jersey City, Paterson, Elizabeth, and Chicago from July to August. The last race riots that took place in New York City prior to 1964 were those of 1943, a decade too early for the setting of this novel since both the film *Guys and Dolls* (1955) and the music of Buddy Holly (who died in 1959) are referenced (150, 145). As well, towards the end of the novel Lila Mae Watson notices, hanging on a wall, “a head shot of the famous reverend. The man so loud down south” (Whitehead 248). Martin Luther King Jr. goes unnamed, the headshot hanging on the wall a stark reminder of the assassin’s bullet that will kill him early in April 1968.

*The Intuitionist* obfuscates its chronological setting in order to emphasize the ways in which African American history and other struggles for equality are covered up, ignored, or forgotten but nevertheless shape our present. While the writings of Ballard and DeLillo, and Cronenberg’s film *Crash*, attempted to historicize their present through depicting it, *The Intuitionist* shows how the past must always be unearthed—especially in the face of historical revisions such as those constructed during Reagan’s presidency. History veiled nevertheless touches us. The novel depicts such events’ absence in the historical record: inside of the Fanny Briggs building, where the elevator accident transpired—an elevator that Lila Mae was the last to inspect—we see the interior of the building, everything in its place except, “the mural, however, [which] was not complete:”

It started out jauntily enough to Lila Mae’s left. Cheerless Indians holding up a deerskin in front of a fire. The original tenants, sure. A galleon negotiating the tricky channels around the island. Two beaming Indians trading beads to a gang of white men—the infamous sale of the Island. Big moment, have to include that, the first of many dubious
transactions in the city’s history. [. . .] The mural jumped to the Revolution then, she noticed, skipped over a lot of stuff. The painter seemed to be making it up as he went along, like the men who shaped the city. The Revolution scene was a nice setpiece—the colonist pulling down the statue of King George III. They melted it down for ammunition, if she remembers correctly. It’s always nice when a good mob comes together. The painting ended there. [. . .] Judging from the amount of wall space that remained to Lila Mae’s right, the mural would have to get even more brief in its chronicle of the city’s greatest hits. Either the painter had misjudged how much space he had or the intervening years weren’t that compelling to him. Just the broad strokes, please. (47-48)

Among the ironies of this scene is the fact that this unfinished mural resides in the lobby of the Fanny Briggs building, which is named for “a slave who taught herself how to read” (12). Watson can see, painted on the wall, the exclusion of other struggles for rights (women’s rights, African American rights, etc.) in the mural. The mural excludes such history in order to deflect from events of the present. It shows founding struggles, condensing history until the recent past and present are invisible—in the mural, literally unfinished. In fact, the building itself is meant to serve the same suppressive purpose. Earlier, we are told how this building came to be named after Fanny Briggs. The mayor—yes, that same mayor—named the building for Briggs due to “an increasingly vocal colored population—who are not above staging tiresome demonstrations [. . .] or throwing tomatoes” (12). The mayor did this because he “is shrewd and understands that this city is not a Southern city, it is not an old money city or a new money city but the most famous city in the world, and the rules are different here. The new municipal building has been named the Fanny Briggs Memorial Building, and there have been fewer complaints, and fewer tomatoes” (12). The building was not named as a remembrance of the historical figure Fanny
Briggs, but as a means to appease the city’s present African American population—in order to keep them from acting upon the injustices of both their past and their present. The mural does not so much overwrite African American history as it simply excludes it. Lila Mae’s reading of the mural, within the building named for a slave who taught herself how to read, performs a method of interpretation that, when applied to Whitehead’s novel, leads to an understanding of its historical palimpsests. However, this form of reading only begins at the incomplete mural; it ends deeper in the Fanny Briggs building, in elevator Number Eleven (65).

*The Intuitionist* takes as its subject the suppression of history, and, form matching content, its narrative limits direct reference to the time and place in which it is set. The secrets of the past, in this novel, are reached only by accident. Like *White Noise*, and the Reagan era politics it depicts, the past becomes a refuge that covers up the problems of the present. The mural, like the building that houses it, whitewashes the past in order to appease political discontent in the present. Lila Mae Watson would not reflect on the mural, the Fanny Briggs Building, or discover the secret of James Fulton were it not for the elevator’s crash. Yet another nuance—the form the novel takes—depicts history as that which one must always be scrutinizing, studying, detecting. In its limiting information for the reader, *The Intuitionist* appropriately assumes characteristics of the genre of hardboiled detective fiction. *The Intuitionist*, like the detective story, as Sean McCann writes “articulates a tension basic to the classical liberal vision of society. It depicts a world in which the freedom of the individual creates an anarchic or a soulless society” (8). Lila Mae’s choice to act in the face of conspiracy leads her to be seen as an anarchic presence among Elevator Inspectors and leads her to discover many horrors of her historical moment. Setting the opening of Raymond Chandler’s story “Red Wind” (1938) alongside that of *The Intuitionist* draws out these texts’ shared features:
There was a desert wind blowing that night. It was one of those hot, dry Santa Anas that come down through the mountain passes and curl your hair and make your nerves jump and your skin itch. On nights like that every booze party ends in a fight. Meek little wives feel the edge of the carving knife and study their husbands’ necks. Anything can happen. You can even get a full glass of beer at a cocktail lounge. (368)

Now the sentences that open *The Intuitionist*:

It’s a new elevator, freshly pressed to the rails, and it’s not built to fall this fast.

***

She doesn’t know what to do with her eyes. The front door of the building is too scarred and gouged to look at, and the street behind her is improbably empty, as if the city had been evacuated and she’s the only one who didn’t hear about it. There is always the game at moments like this to distract her. She opens her leather filed binder and props it on her chest. The game gets harder the further back she goes. (Whitehead 1)

The rhythm, the deliberate denial of causation—why do the Santa Ana winds lead to violence, what does the falling elevator have to do with this woman?—obscures the relationship between the narrative’s withholding of information and its depiction of contingency. Both open with the statement of an event—the desert wind blowing, the elevator falling—followed by a description of actions that are only implicitly connected to the first event. A short declarative sentence is followed by a longer sentence that complicates the setting, providing information that informs one of little. The tone and mood are quite similar. *The Intuitionist* evokes the style of hard boiled detective fiction in order to translate to the page the “cynicism, pessimism, and darkness” of film noir which itself emerged, in large part, from adaptations of American hard boiled detective fiction (Schrader 53). The opening can also be read as a literary depiction of parallel editing, the
asterisks signifying a parallel edit, showing the reader that the elevator falls as Lila Mae stands at
the building’s front door. The Intuitionist borrows from the genre of hardboiled detective fiction
so as to adapt film noir to the page. Noir, according to Paul Schrader, “is not a genre. It is not
defined, as are the western and gangster genres, by conventions of setting and conflict, but by the
more subtle qualities of tone and mood” (53). Lila Mae fits the type of noir protagonist as
adapted from hardboiled detective fiction, which Schrader describes as possessing the “‘tough,’
cynical way of acting and thinking which separated one from the world of everyday emotions—
romanticism with a protective shell [. . . ] [these] protagonists lived out a narcissistic, defeatist
code” (56). Moreover, the folding of form into content—the content of the form—comes to the
fore with a reading of The Intuitionist as a literary adaptation of film noir in its use of setting: “A
complex chronological order is frequently used to reinforce the feelings of hopelessness and lost
time. [. . . ] a convoluted time sequence [immerses] the viewer in a time-disoriented but highly
stylized world. The manipulation of time, whether slight or complex, is often used to reinforce a
noir principle: the how is always more important than the what” (Schrader 58). The how,
intuition, a hunch, often leads the hardboiled detective to the what, the who of the who-dunnit.

In this way, The Intuitionist provides simulation as a means of understanding one’s
historical situation. Lila Mae Watson resembles a character from film noir once she perceives a
mystery, a conspiracy, for which she must discover the solution. As Robert Pippin writes of
characters in noir, Lila Mae knows that “what [she] is undertaking is profoundly ill-advised, and
[she] can admit to [herself] and others that there are no good reasons to do what [she is] doing
and many very good reasons not to act as [she] propose[s]” (15). Believing that the Empiricist
camp of the Elevator Inspectors Guild has sabotaged the elevator in order to defame both her and
the Intuitionists—both camps are embroiled in a race for the presidency of the Guild—Lila Mae
believes that she lives at the center of a conspiracy that only she can solve. Like Oedipa Maas, Lila Mae believes that she lives “a form of life shadowed, as a matter of historical fact, by a growing, shared, heightened sense of fatalism and alienation” (Pippin 12). That a character must act despite believing that they lack agency, that there are greater forces conspiring against them, authoring their lives, Pippin claims, “is the most interesting aspect of noirs” (12). Lila Mae chooses to act, despite the historical moment—and more specifically American culture—placing restriction upon both her race and gender. She sees her task as hopeless, but nevertheless acts to unveil the conspiracy.

Yet there is no conspiracy, only a “catastrophic accident” (Whitehead 227). The catastrophic accident reveals more about those who are or would be affected by it than it does about the nature of the world. In The Intuitionist the catastrophic accident always reveals the substance of the characters that confront it with both narcissism and cynicism. First deployed as a description of the elevator accident that opens the novel, the catastrophic accident provides the reader with insight into Watson’s character. Throughout the novel Lila Mae has tried to prove that the elevator accident was not an oversight of her intuition, a failure on her part as elevator inspector, but an act of sabotage. Within the Fanny Briggs building, Lila Mae reads the elevator from within the shaft, beyond the mural with its incomplete history. Thus, beneath the surface of history, Lila Mae experiences the darkness of the shaft, a darkness that evokes film noir and its fatalism. She has made the mistake of imagining conspiracy when actually there is only the darkness of accident. This act of intuitionist reading manifests as darkness that veils the shapes and colors that we first see as manifestations of Lila Mae’s trade (6).

Lila Mae reaches out into the darkness and presses the glass convexity of a button. [. . .] This is the wrong darkness. It is the darkness of this day and this time and this elevator
and Lila Mae needs that further-back darkness, the one she encountered on her first visit to Fanny Briggs. [. . .] She’s, she’s almost at that darkness now. It is a slow curtain dropping before this day’s darkness. (226)

Beyond this darkness Lila Mae reads the colors:

There. This new darkness is the old darkness of Number Eleven. She watches the sure and untroubled ascent of Number Eleven. The genies appear on cue, dragging themselves from the wings. The genie of velocity, the genie of the hoisting motor’s brute exertions, the red cone genie of the selector as it ticks off the entity’s progress through the shaft, the amber nonagon genie of the grip shoes as they skip frictionless up T-rails. All of them energetic and fastidious, describing seamless verticality to Lila Mae in her own mind’s tongue. (226)

In the darkness of Fanny Briggs, named for a blind slave who taught herself how to read, beyond the incomplete history of the city, Lila Mae, blind, sees the colored shapes of her intuition, but ultimately sees “nothing” (227). She does not see the cause of the accident. Yet when she reads that which cannot be seen, she is touched. The accident reaches out, she feels the elevator move, she begins her inspection with the touch of a button, and everything she experiences feels wrong—even though the elevator operates correctly. In trying to feel the accident, its cause, she feels everything working correctly. She realizes that “this was a catastrophic accident [. . .] the things that emerge from the black, nether reaches of space and collide here, comets that connect with this frail world after countless unavailing ellipses. Emissaries from the unknowable. [. . .] What her discipline and Empiricism have in common: they cannot account for the catastrophic accident” (227). Lila Mae Watson discovers that the catastrophic accident has no meaning. The catastrophic accident constitutes the “what” of the novel, but its meaning remains elusive,
covered in the darkness of an elevator shaft and in the darkness that marks one as African American.

James Fulton, author of *Theoretical Elevators*, the founder of Intuitionism, embodies the darkness of the catastrophic accident. Lila Mae, having discovered that James Fulton passed for white from a very young age throughout his entire adult life, realizes that “He was the perfect liar the world made him, mouthing a supreme fiction the world accepted as truth. [. . .] In constant fear of the shadow, the shadow of the catastrophic accident that would reveal him for what he was. The shadow that envelopes [sic] and makes him dark” (232). Lila Mae reads his fear of being discovered as African American as a fear of the catastrophic accident. She interprets the consequences of Fulton’s sister visiting him after many years apart as the moment of recognition: “He sits in the chair Lila Mae sat in, hands kneading the armrests. It is the moment he has feared since he left his town. When he will be revealed for who he is, the catastrophic accident. But his sister does not expose him. She did not make him crash. He was saved” (237). Passive, we do not know what saved James Fulton other than the fact that the catastrophic accident never happened: no one ever discovered his race. The secret identity of James Fulton shapes the form of *The Intuitionist*, justifies and catalyzes the secret history that the novel’s narrative withholds, and justifies its adaptation of film noir to the page. What Fulton is—an African American passing for white—causes us to comprehend his invention of Intuitionism: the realization that what is veiled in darkness can be seen, but such a glimpse happens only by accident—not through sight, but through touch, the authentic experience of history that can only be understood by living a fiction. The revelation of his substance as being African American could only be inscribed with the catastrophic meaning of those carrying the worst prejudices of the time.
Using her intuition within the darkness of an elevator shaft, behind a wall covered in an abbreviated history, within a building named for a slave who taught herself how to read, Lila Mae Watson reads for the cause of an accident, and in doing so reads nothing; yet in this nothing she sees that James Fulton invented Intuitionism as a joke no one but her has understood: “A joke has no purpose if you cannot share it with anyone. [. . .] Intuitionism is communication. That simple. Communication with what is not-you” (241). There is nothing more serious than a joke. Lila Mae, at the end of the punch line, sees history as others see it, life as those who wish to view the world empirically, for what they can see, and those who see a world beyond this one, intuit it, write it, and make it come to be: a catastrophic accident, existing for itself, a joke no one gets.

“How quickly things can fall into medieval disorder” we are told earlier in the novel (23). As the novel ends, Lila Mae prepares to thrust the profession of elevator inspection further into medieval disorder. She will write the third volume of *Theoretical Elevators*, assuming Fulton’s name. She will provide an apocryphal manuscript, a forgery that she believes will become doctrine. Most importantly, she will be mistaken for Fulton, just as St. Roland the Carpenter, the patron saint of elevator inspectors was mistaken: “The peasants had mistaken his procession for that of another holy man who had died the very same night” (197). Like the nuns in *White Noise*, Lila Mae, knowing the truth, believes that others need to believe. She will write the future, and in doing so overwrite the catastrophic accident. She will pass for Fulton, and, as Fulton, will pass along doctrine. The accident has become an event that creates the opportunity for agency, radical self-authorship, and the potential to write history that passes for elevator inspection.
VI. The Accident that Does Not Happen

The act of experiencing historical fiction via narrative differs from the experience of playing through a fictional history. The adventure game *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas* is a slightly veiled fictional history that provides the player with direct involvement in the Ramparts scandal and the Los Angeles riots of 1992. This videogame adapts historical events to the medium of the videogame, but unlike films or traditional novels, the game allows the player to make decisions as to whether or not they will follow the narrative arc to the *telos* that the authors of the game intended. The player of a videogame feels his or her way through the fictional world, inhabiting another body, responding to that which threatens it, suturing it to one’s own. In reading *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas* alongside the film *Crash* and the novels *White Noise* and *The Intuitionist*, one can see that the medium specificity of the videogame provides an experience of the accident that the other mediums cannot achieve: namely, that the simulated control of a character places a vast amount of agency upon the player, providing him with a larger sense of control, so that when accident does occur, the player confronts the depicted history and his present as the collision of past and present, fiction and reality.

*San Andreas* opens when Carl Johnson (Young Maylay)—the player’s character—returns to a Los Angeles that, in the game, is renamed Los Santos. Like Los Angeles of the early 90s, Los Santos is reeling from Reagan era cuts to welfare and other social systems. The crime-ridden city of the game is comprised of poverty-stricken minorities, criminals, and rappers. Johnson, or CJ, has returned because of his mother’s death. Upon his arrival, Officers Tenpenny (Samuel L. Jackson) and Pulaski (Chris Penn), members of a special unit of the police department, welcome him with the threat of being framed for the murder of a police officer, should he not perform jobs for them. Nick Dyer-Witherford and Greig de Peuter note, “it was suggested that allowing white
players to virtually occupy the shoes of the United States’ most feared racialized other was educative” (166).28 However, others criticized that this role reinforced stereotypes. This feedback loop—playing the other while remaining alienated—allows the player to return to reality with an experience of racial alienation. In this way, the player falls into a detective’s role—understanding one’s historical situation through working one’s way through it. CJ, like Lila Mae Watson, fits the role of hardboiled detective. Initially he tries to solve the mystery of his mother’s murder, all the while trying to fit in with the members of his neighborhood—his own brother among them—who feel that he betrayed them when he left Los Santos. 29

The gameplay allows the player to move about an open world. As Barry Atkins writes, “the player plays the game in the full knowledge that it is a game, and that life is not so conveniently organised according to the principles of narrative telling” (139). The player need not complete any of the game’s objectives in order to play the game. However, the player must meet certain objectives in order to experience plot points and thus progress the game’s narrative. The game’s player, unlike a novel’s reader or a film’s viewer, must actively move through the fictional world in order to experience narrative. Should one make a mistake—experience a car accident say, or fail to complete a task—the punishment comes as a lack of narrative progression. While many videogames are similarly structured, San Andreas depicts historical events as the consequences of the player’s actions—and moreover “[invited] players to participate in a performance of race, mobilizing a whole set of assumptions about race” (Dyer-Witherford 167). The plot point that directly pertains to my argument is that of Officer Tenpenny’s indictment for a number of crimes and his acquittal due to a lack of evidences and witnesses.
This acquittal results in public outrage that catalyzes the Los Angeles Riots. During these riots CJ and his brother drive through the streets of Los Santos, as Tenpenny attempts to flee in a fire truck. The game cuts away to the fire truck crashing from an overpass, landing directly in front of CJ’s family home (Figure 7). The game brings CJ to his home, and the player home to narrative resolution. CJ, his brother, sister, and soon to be brother-in-law approach the wreckage and an injured Officer Tenpenny. CJ pulls his gun, but his brother tells him not to shoot, that Officer Tenpenny “killed hisself in a traffic accident” (Figure 8). Tenpenny becomes the first character in the game to die that CJ does not kill; neither does the player, whose agency has here been removed, kill him in any sense. The game’s narrative denies the player any choice in Tenpenny’s fate, carrying the player toward its close. A car accident resolves the narrative of San Andreas, a game in which the player has had to build cars, race cars, chase and escape from a number of enemies—yet, this accident has transpired completely outside of the player’s control. Like the fault line that the game is named for, the game resolves with disaster outside of any individuals’ agency. In assuming a force of nature, the game’s narrative stresses the fact that the accident constitutes that which defies one’s intentions. This final car accident brings the player to
the game’s final piece of narration. Unlike the elevator accident in *The Intuitionist*, the airborne toxic event in *White Noise*, or the traffic jam in *Crash*, narrative resolution comes from control being taken away from the player, rather than from the character assuming some sense of control over his or her life and environment. In this way the accident that ends *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas* is an accident that does not happen. It is the teleology of the game. With the game taking control away from the player in depicting Tenpenny’s fatal accident, the player loses control for the sake of narrative resolution. In *Crash* each accident propels the narrative forward to the next accident. Even its final scene, in which Ballard chases his wife in a high-speed pursuit, culminates in a car accident, then an act of sex, implying that these two characters will continue to act out car crashes until their deaths—hence Catherine’s disappointment at surviving the crash without harm, and Ballard consoling, “Maybe the next one darling . . . maybe the next one.” Here the accident provides no narrative resolution. As Mikita Brottman writes, *Crash* is “an elliptical interiorized film with no final narrative release, only dissolution and disintegration” (129). Ballard and Catherine, engaging in intercourse, fantasize about how the next accident

Figure 8. *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas*. 


may be that which ends their lives. Yet one cannot call their crash an accident, their intention in
the pursuit being not to die but merely to approach death. Meaning to crash, they take pleasure in
a future loss of control.

Similarly, both *White Noise* and *The Intuitionist* end with accidents that do not happen.
Following her revelation that nullifies all meaning behind the accident, Lila Mae Watson begins
to drive aimlessly. And while her mind wanders, her attention elsewhere, a peculiar event
occurs—or more precisely, does not occur:

She does not hear the car horn, let alone the urgency of the car horn. She drifts into the
right lane and almost sideswipes the mock wood paneling of the station wagon. The kids
in the backseat scream, pink lungs heaving, father’s hands grip the steering wheel, but for
all the commotion of this few seconds there is no accident. Lila Mae’s automobile and the
family’s automobile do not crash. (231)

Given this strange detail, the description of the potential accident, the accident that does not
happen, the reader sees the author in total control (Belletto 26). Here, nothing comes from
nothing. No cause, no effect—at least no effect on Lila Mae Watson. Her body remains intact.
While a character such as Oedipa Maas at least has the awareness of the near accidents she
experiences, Lila Mae, despite all her intuition, remains oblivious many of the risks that surround
her. She still has no control, but she is not injured for it, barely even brought to attention by this
near miss. Instead of having an effect on the character, or even the narrative itself, the effect of
the accident that does not happen falls upon the reader. In *The Sense of an Ending* (1966), Frank
Kermode addresses this, the “double-take,” in his larger discussion of the kinds of memories that
are exercised in reading narrative fiction:
The second of these memories—registration of what we fail to ‘take in’—is an essential tool of narrative fiction. It is familiar from the ‘double-take’ of the music-hall, and many literary kinds, from poems which catch up words and ideas into new significance, to complicated plots like that of Tom Jones, depend on it [. . .] it is based on an initial deviation of attention which causes a temporal gap between the original apprehension of what the situation signifies and the final understanding that its significance was other.

(53)

The accident that does not happen is a double-take in the above instance because the reader sees what Lila Mae does not (which creates dramatic irony), but also surprises the reader in that what we have anticipated—an accident—does not happen. In The Intuitionist the accident that does not happen reasserts the plot of the narrative; there was no conspiracy, no plot against Lila Mae, but only accident—accident that of course was no accident at all in being, like every event in the novel, the deliberate work of the author.

Jack Gladney’s story also ends with a direct confrontation with pure accident. The final chapter of White Noise depicts a near-crash when Wilder, the youngest of Jack Gladney’s children, decides to ride his tricycle across the expressway:

The boy [. . .] began to pedal across the highway, mystically charged. The drivers could not quite comprehend. In their knotted posture, belted in, they knew this picture did not belong to the hurtling consciousness of the highway, the broad-ribbed modernist stream. In speed there was sense. In signs, in patterns, in split-second lives. What did it mean, this little rotary blur? Some force in the world had gone awry. (322-323)

Accidents that do not happen are the turn—the true catastrophe—that ends Crash, White Noise, The Intuitionist, and Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas, all of which make accidents their subject. 31
In DeLillo, as in Whitehead, this accident affects the reader more than the character because, as Steven Belletto has written, the reader has “trouble distinguishing the narrative from the laws of the universe” (340). It affects the reader because it provides an element of surprise while reminding one that the potential for accident is constantly present. Both of these narratives raise an expectation in the reader for an accident, for a plot that moves toward death. When these expectations are not met, the reader experiences, instead, an accident of reading. The accident that does not happen reminds the reader that the author is in total control. The management of the accident is the management of the event that leads us to the next plot point or the next beautiful description. The accident that does not happen is mystical, as Gladney describes Wilder’s charge across the highway. It is an intuition. The accident that does not happen is outside the stream of modernist and postmodernist life.

The only figure who can bring about this event is the author. And when the author describes an accident that does not happen, he or she is in total control—not only of the narrative, but of the reader. The accident that does not happen stuns the reader as it stuns Wilder. We are left wondering what this “little rotary blur” means. As Mitchum Huehls writes:

If we think of Wilder’s aleatory ride across the highway as analogous to Gary Saul Morson’s real-time model of reading, then Wilder represents the failure of that model: the ostensibly very knowing Wilder reveals that suppressing the unavoidable fact of knowledge and knowingness for the sake of surprise necessarily renders the reading experience incommunicable. . . . Rather than offering some form of redemptive passage beyond the ideological loopiness of reality, Wilder actually teaches us that we will have to figure out how to read despite knowledge. (52-53)
What the “little rotary blur” means is not nothing, as Lila Mae Watson believes to be the meaning of the accident. Rather, the accident that does not happen is one of the most authoritative forms of addressing the reader, of calling the reader’s attention to plot, to narrative, to life. This is not the author who calls for evacuation but an author who demands that we remain situated in the event. The accident that does not happen shows that the accident is an event that, being everything, is always happening. As Lauren Berlant writes of *The Intuitionist*, “the narrator notes that a catastrophe is ‘just what happens when you subtract what happens all the time’” (230). A traumatic event does then, organize *The Intuitionist,*” as well as the other novels discussed, “but this event does not change everything. It threatens to subtend what Lila Mae knows about life, and how she knows it. It induces and reveals a shared history of crisis within the ordinary whose terms the powers that be want to control” (852). By definition the accident not only subtends, but also reveals that which is beneath life. The repetition of the accident in these novels reveals a particularly postmodern fascination with the infinite horizon of narrative in the face of the accumulation of risks that could end all life and thus all narrative. The politics that emerge, as authors represent the accident as that which inspires a desire for total control, can be defined as a politics of reading the meanings made from accidents as a product of their historical moment.

Accidents provide the perfect fictional event through which authors can show the dangers of finding meaning in the consequences of chance. The representation of such accidents, when read for what they are—not accidents whatsoever, but the products of pure human intention—demand that the reader historicize, separating fiction from reality. To read the accident otherwise is to fictionalize reality, make a lie of truth. This can lead to a dangerous politics: one in which the past can be rewritten to fit a “proper” narrative, one in which the future can be authored as
having emerged only from speech acts and actors’ speeches—not from actual events. Under Reagan and in his wake, inauthentic authenticity crystallizes as a narrative trap. While a careful reading can bring the reader into touch with history, reading in the manner of the characters depicted in these works, paranoically leads to seeing history as fiction. Inauthentic authenticity prevails when fiction touches the reader so as to overwrite reality. Viewing history without the ability to historicize is to see the past as fiction. Reagan, in his farewell address, warned, “for those who create the popular culture, well-grounded patriotism is no longer the style. [. . .] If we forget what we did, we don’t know who we are. I am warning of an eradication of that—of the American memory that could result, ultimately, in the erosion of the American spirit” (Reagan, “Farewell Address”). Yet Reagan, like many of the characters discussed in this chapter, embodies an American memory forged in fictional beliefs of control over that which cannot be controlled—the accident—and in being such, remembers a past that never existed. The best makers of culture over the course of the Reagan Era depicted the American spirit as history touched through—not in spite of—experiencing fictions. The realization that neither conspiracy nor teleology constitutes historical reality allows one to be in touch with American history rather than American fantasy. This touch of history through reading and experiencing fictions reveals inauthentic authenticity as the façade of a fated history censored for the sake of a politics of control, rather than history as that into which accident thrusts one. Understanding accident as the driver of history restores agency to the subject—fictional or actual—and inspires this agent to discover historical events as they were, not as conservative politics demands they be remembered.
Notes

1 His legs, however, were not lost to the train, but to a sadistic doctor seeking revenge for Reagan’s character, Drake, courting his daughter. In The President Electric (2009) Timothy Raphael reads the opening of Where’s the Rest of Me? as representing Reagan “as a seasoned veteran of the culture industry poised to claim his missing parts in the political sphere. [. . .] The actor’s performance strategy as president is prefigured in the narrative of his birth: the deployment of mass-mediated cultural forms to represent an idealized America through the performative evocation of a mythic past, a bodying forth of an American identity that is animated vocally” (59).

2 For an extensive treatment of Reagan’s rise to political power as a reaction against the sixties, particularly Lyndon Johnson’s Great Society, see Bernard von Bothmer’s Framing the Sixties: The Use and Abuse of a Decade from Ronald Reagan to George W. Bush (2010), especially his second chapter, “Blaming ‘the Sixties’: The Rise of Ronald Reagan.”

3 For most thorough study of literature and the Reagan era, see Joseph Dewey’s Novels From Reagan’s America: A New Realism (1999). Dewey reads a range of texts from the 1980s—though only nods at DeLillo—as “seek[ing] nothing less than to transfer the understandable need for spectacle to the realm of the immediate” (27). For Dewey the “spectacle realism” that emerged in this period expresses the logic of “a decade when we so neatly veered away from any confrontation with the immediate because it was apparently known and so apparently thin.” He continues, “these narratives fetch us back into the immediate and dare us to participate in the imperfect, to feel its rushing urgency, to face full-front our own immediate world and there to touch, if even for a moment, the complex magic of spectacle” (33).

4 It is Reagan who describes himself as a “semi-automaton” (Reagan 6).

5 As Linda Kauffmann notes, “Nelson Doubleday’s helicopter was used to quell a Vietnam War protest at the University of California, Berkeley, which occurred when Ronald Reagan was governor,” implying that Doubleday’s own conservative politics and sympathies with Reagan had a large role in the novel being censored (167).

6 As Oliver Sacks writes of aphasics’ and agnosics’ response to Reagan in “The President’s Speech” (part of The Man Who Mistook His Wife For a Hat (1998): “We normal—aided, doubtless, by our wish to be fooled, were indeed well and truly fooled (’Populus vult decipi, ergo decipiatur’). And so cunningly was deceptive word-use combined with deceptive tone, that only the brain-damaged remained intact, undeceived” (84).

7 For an extensive treatment of masochism in Crash, see Anthony McCosker’s essay, “A Vision of Masochism in the Affective Pain of Crash”.

8 For a discussion of the ironic viewing experience in Crash see Roberta Jill Craven’s “Ironic Empathy in Crash” (193).

9 As Chaudhuri notes, “Cronenberg’s film keeps the moment of impact ever beyond our grasp—that missed reality that James is trying to recover” (68). However, we do witness two head-on collisions. The impact is denied the viewer because we only see it on the screen, we do not feel it. Our affective response then places us in a similar subject position as Ballard and the film’s other characters. We are curious and disturbed at wanting to feel the impact of a crash.

10 See Mikita Brottman’s essay “The End of the Road: David Cronenberg’s Crash and the Fading of the West” for a reading of this scene and its correcting the Mansfield myth (130).

11 For a brief discussion of the construction of America in White Noise through the setting of the College-on-the-Hill see Margaret Scanlan’s “‘Hijacked Jet Crashes into White House’: Teaching White Noise after September 11,” (30-32).
In Technology and Postmodern Subjectivity in Don DeLillo’s Novels (2010), Randy Laist writes that “Jack’s Hitler is a uniquely American figure from the Golden Age of Hollywood, so it is fitting that Jack’s office at the College-on-the-Hill is housed in the American studies building” (83). While he does not draw a comparison between Reagan’s rise in the same age of Hollywood, and while this chapter does not treat Hitler and Reagan in relation to one another, I will note that neither directly appear in the novel, and instead appear through various media.

Mark Conroy treats the representation of authority in his essay “From Tombstone to Tabloid: Authority Figured in White Noise”. While the essay discusses mass media and its creation of cult figures, the essay does not mention the influence of Reagan in the novel or over the crystallization of media’s role in the culture. See Timothy Parrish’s From the Civil War to the Apocalypse (2008) for a discussion of Ronald Reagan’s use of mass media in relation to DeLillo’s representation of mediation in Underworld (217-219).

See Jeremy Green’s “Disaster Footage: Spectacles of Violence in Don DeLillo’s Fiction” for a discussion of DeLillo’s representation of large-scale disasters and the depiction of celebrity disaster. For a discussion of the novel as a mock-disaster film, see “White Noise as Disaster Movie” by Valerie Wee and John Whalen-Bridge.

See Michael Hardin’s “Postmodernism’s Desire for Simulated Death: Andy Warhol’s Car Crashes, J. G. Ballard’s Crash, and Don DeLillo’s White Noise” for a discussion of representations of death and disaster as simulation and the relationship between popular culture and death as subject and simulacrum.

Colin Hutchinson, in Reaganism, Thatcherism and the Social Novel (2008) writes of Gladney’s exposure to the airborne toxic event as “suggesting that the political quietism of the subservient liberal does not necessarily confer protection from the outcomes of consumerist capitalism, whether environmental or otherwise. White Noise makes it evident that the American middle classes have been betrayed: that a deal has been broken” (70).

In A Pinnacle of Feeling: American Literature and Presidential Government (2008), Sean McCann writes that while “the Regan administration renewed the United States’ aggressive stance in the Cold War, and as neoconservative intellectuals, journalists, and pop culture producers began to press for a reassessment of the war in Vietnam, more self-consciously literary artists sometimes marked their dissent from the Reagan revolution by affirming their commitment to the chastened, sentimental nationalism that flourished in the literature and film of the seventies” (166). While McCann rightly claims that “the most ambitious and elaborate example of [this] trend came [. . .] in DeLillo’s Libra,” White Noise, I argue, also examines “the rise of the politics of personality that exploited mass media to expand presidential prestige at the expense of the parties and representative democracy” (McCann 167).

See The Literary Cold War, 1945 to Vietnam by Adam Piette and Arthur Redding’s review of Piette’s monograph, “‘A Wilderness of Mirrors’: Writing and Reading the Cold War” for a sample of the literature on this topic.

In Technology and Postmodern Subjectivity Laist reads Breedlove’s job as suggesting “an epistemic parallelism between the esoteric priesthood of 80’s literary theory and the complexities of international espionage” (87). Jack’s skepticism of the ability for systems of signs to mean extends beyond both new critical and poststructuralist reading practices toward a pure language, such as, as Laist points out, Wilder’s sounds—each meaning what he feels, but often beyond the intelligibility of those who possess control over language. In other words, Gladney longs for a pure language.

Much like the Peter Pinguin Society of Pynchon’s The Crying of Lot 49, the members of which oppose capitalism because it inevitably leads to Marxism (48-50).

At a distance and through binoculars, Jack experiences the airborne toxic event almost as a television broadcast—and is simultaneously experiencing it as it is reported on the radio. As John Frow, in “The Last Things Before the Last: Notes on White Noise” writes, “It is only in movies, only through cultural mediation, that a vision of nonmediation is possible—and therefore absurd” (184).
A product of the Federal Civil Defense Administration, the air-raid siren was introduced during World War II to warn against air-raids, and was then adapted in the 1950s in order to warn against nuclear strikes.

See the chapter “Actors” in John Lewis Gaddis’s *The Cold War: A New History* (2006) for an analysis of the role Reagan and Pope John Paul the II’s acting background played in their political performances.

In *Postmodern Belief* Amy Hungerford reads the nuns disbelief as “one more satirical joke in white suburbia” (xx). However, this satire implicates, as I argue, a desire for belief for itself. Tom LeClair, writing *In The Loop* (1987), claims that DeLillo treats America as religious, writing “not that its citizens are conventionally religious, but that its essential religious qualities are beyond rational comprehension. They are, like the sacred, mysterious” (14). John McClure’s *Partial Faiths* (2007) provides a thorough treatment of magic and religion in DeLillo’s oeuvre, in which he argues that the weakening of religious practices are replaced with new forms of socialization (87-93).

In an interview with *The Atlantic* Colson Whitehead states that *The Intuitionist* is set in an alternate New York.

Ramón Saldivar, in “The Second Elevation of the Novel: Race, Form and the Postrace Aesthetic in Contemporary Narrative” reads *The Intuitionist* as a form of “Afrofuturism, or simply black speculative fiction, offering an alternate Americana of a past that was not quite this one but is linked to an historical future that can never quite come to be” (7).

For an anatomy of various games and their narrative structures, see Espen Aarseth’s essay “Quest Games as Post-Narrative Discourse” (361-365). For an analysis of videogames and narrative in relation to reading practices, see Scott Brendan Cassidy’s essay “The Video Game as Narrative.” In this piece Cassidy articulates the particular quality of interactivity with narrative, “which implies that their narrative is not fixed” (294).

See Kiri Miller’s essay “Jacking the Dial: Radio, Race, and Place in *Grand Theft Auto*” for a more developed analysis of how the game “offer[s] players the opportunity to explore iconic American cities at particular historical moments from a criminal underclass perspective” (403).

For a narratological analysis of the gameplay experience of *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas* see Kiri Miller’s essay “Grove Street Grimm: *Grand Theft Auto* and Digital Folklore”.

In “Ironic Empathy in *Crash*” Roberta Jill Craven writes that *Crash* represents and critiques how “all interactions, even the most private, have already been preprogrammed by the media. The resulting inability to distinguish oneself and to connect in any authentic way increases the sense of isolation, which further refuels the desire for communion with an other” (188). In this way the film makes a case for finding authenticity in the inauthentic.

For a reading of Wilder’s ride as “modernist narrative gone awry,” as well as a discussion of media saturation and intertextuality in *White Noise*, see Laura Barret’s “How the Dead Speak to the Living’: Intertextuality and the Postmodern Sublime in *White Noise*” (esp. 109).
Chapter 2

End of the Cold War, End of the Future: Failed Suicide as Accident at the Cold War’s End

—He didn’t kill himself, it was an accident.

—An accident! He ties a rope around his neck and climbs out a window, but the rope breaks and he falls forty-six stories, so it’s an accident?


I. Passing on Postmodernism

As I mentioned in closing the last chapter, in bidding farewell on January 11, 1989, Ronald Reagan warned the nation not to let their pride in the United States wane. He noted that before the turmoil of the 1960s such feeling was cultivated through family, community, educational institutions, “And if all else failed you could get a sense of patriotism from the popular culture” (Reagan “Farewell Address). Encouraging his fellow citizens to model their future on the past and not the values portrayed in current popular culture, he continued:

But now, we're about to enter the nineties, and some things have changed [. . .] for those who create the popular culture, well-grounded patriotism is no longer the style. Our spirit is back, but we haven't reinstitutionalized it. We've got to do a better job of getting across that America is freedom—freedom of speech, freedom of religion, freedom of enterprise.

And freedom is special and rare. It's fragile; it needs production [protection]. (Reagan) Freedom needs production. This slip reveals an anxiety toward futurity that proliferated in the final years of the Cold War. The future, like freedom, needs to be produced. Throughout the Cold War the future contained the possibility of ending since full-scale nuclear war possessed the potential to eliminate humankind, and with it, any experience of futurity; one would think that after the Cold War’s end the future would immediately be something that American culture
would embrace. However, as the words of Reagan demonstrate, in the early 1990s the future
became more difficult to imagine without the familiar Soviet threat. The continued fear of being
futureless derives from what Tony Jackson has called the Cold War sense of an ending, which
contributed greatly to mid-to-late twentieth century developments in narrative and our
understanding of narrative, as well as to postmodernism (324-325). The novels *Leviathan* (1992),
by Paul Auster, *The Virgin Suicides* (1993), by Jeffrey Eugenides, and “Musings of a Cigarette
Smoking Man” (1996), an episode of Fox Broadcasting Company’s television series *The X-Files*
(1993-2002), exhibit the American culture’s inability to imagine a future through depicting
characters who wish to foreclose their futurity through suicide. However, in each of these texts
suicide attempts initially or wholly fail, signifying that one lacks agency over one’s role in a
future that will continue to happen, whether one wants it to or not—a representation of failed
suicide attempts that manifests the Cold War anxiety of accidental nuclear annihilation, or
inadvertence.

Jackson emphasizes the difference between nuclear risk and everyday risk: “Needless to
say, all humans confront chance regularly in life, but the idea of chance in relation to a nuclear
ending was different because it was the chance of an epic catastrophe, it was known to so many
people, and it was a product of human invention” (332). This chapter and the next look at this
period of transition from two different points of view: first, how literary and televisual texts
represented narrative’s inability to describe the future through representing characters who feel
trapped in the present; the next chapter explores how this period of transition was represented in
poetry and novels through exploring a deep history that would potentially restore a sense of
history on the long-term, but that nevertheless presents humankind as inevitably disappearing—
as running out of time. Like the texts of the first chapter, those of this one employ the technique
of inauthentic authenticity, particularly in the ways that their narratives’ conclusions undermine the novelistic form. In these texts narrative itself becomes a failed means of controlling history and the future that emerges from it. The failures of narrative contribute to an overwhelming fear of what the future may bring, if it brings anything at all. The future cannot be contained within the novel, the narrative extending beyond the pages, earning its own historicity in the direct implication of the reader/viewer as a subject complicit in carrying the story from the present into the future.

While the Cold War wound down from 1989 to its end in 1992, so too, according to recent accounts, did postmodernism. For lack of a better term, or perhaps as a symptom of postmodernism itself, “post-postmodernism” began to emerge in this period, partially because a new generation of authors, such as Eugenides, influenced by the establishing figures of postmodernism, found their own voice in complement and contrast to those who came before. A divergence from postmodern aesthetics also emerged due to calls from authors of this generation, such as David Foster Wallace, for authors to return to sincerity—which, was less a call to actually return to sincerity than it was to do something new. In this way post-postmodernism has yet to shed that which postmodernism attempted to break from: modernism’s fetish for the new.¹ Of course, Pound didn’t declare “make it new” until 1934, well after the heyday of high modernism, which is to say that one could read each of these aesthetic forms as overlapping, intersecting moments of authentic inauthenticity, pushed and pursued by a culture industry that earns its keep through constantly making “it” new by doing the same old same old. A history of transitions is one way of paring away the fetish for the new, the event, the moment that it all changed. So while Auster and Eugenides owe much to modernist authors, they are also indebted to postmodernist authors such as Gaddis, Barth, Pynchon, DeLillo, and Acker.² While Leviathan,
and *The Virgin Suicides* were published in late postmodernism or post-postmodernism, this chapter studies this moment as one characterized by historical and aesthetic transition. While some, like Minsoo Kang, argue that the death of postmodernism can be traced to a specific date, others, like Andrew Hoberek, claim that the end of postmodernism can be read as a series of transitions. Kang, for example, makes a case that June 18, 1993, the day *Last Action Hero* appeared in theaters, was the moment when mass culture began to fully embrace and produce postmodernist aesthetics, and is thus the moment of postmodernism’s demise (Hoberek 233); Hoberek, on the other hand, contends that “if contemporary fiction is indeed post-postmodern, this does not exemplify some singular, dramatic, readily visible cultural transformation—the search for which in fact constitutes a postmodern preoccupation—but grows out of a range of uneven, tentative, local shifts” (241). Postmodernism, in its transition from modernism, seems to have inherited modernism’s preoccupation with determining the moment *everything changed.*

The interpretation of history via crisis moments is not new to the moment of modernism. However, many significant figures of modernism placed emphasis upon specific dates, a legacy passed on to their postmodern heirs. Not only do you have, in 1934, Ezra Pound retroactively declaring “make it new” when his aesthetic had grown cold, but in 1924 Woolf states: “On or about December 1910 human character changed” (qtd. in Bell 122). And of course, we have James Joyce to thank for placing so much emphasis on June 16, 1904—a date that is of much importance in *The Virgin Suicides*. As well, critics of literature are to blame for popularizing and misquoting such statements like Woolf’s. As Daniel Bell notes in “Modernism Mummified,” Irving Howe, among many others, replace “character” with “nature,” misconstruing and extrapolating a statement that may always have revealed more about Woolf’s biography than about human “character” more generally (122). Woolf discusses how relations between
individuals shifted, in a year in which she began to take up feminist causes, bathed nude with Rupert Brooke, and championed Roger Fry’s “Post-Impressionist Exhibition,” which is to say that in that year it is safe to say that much changed for Woolf (Bell 131n1). *Leviathan*, *The Virgin Suicides*, and *The X-Files* episode “Musings of a Cigarette Smoking Man” likewise attempt to identify the moment that everything changed for their characters and American history—but nevertheless knowingly fail. Such modernist and postmodernist means of fetishizing a particular event as a break with the past, an opening into the future, are found nowhere in these texts. Instead they present the reader with a series of transitions, of stories told and retold, contradicted, a history troubled with the past, present, and future. Such inauthentic authenticity forces the reader to identify history not as a series of revolutionary events—as the end of the Cold War appeared—but, in retrospect, as a series of evolutionary processes that build over time until something happens: a state collapses, ideologies shift, a new age appears to take shape from nothing. However, through deploying inauthentic authenticity, these texts also remind the reader that history continues as a process that shapes the present. In other words, while the Cold War ended, history did not.

These texts’ representations of the failure of suicide attempts—the failure of one’s intentions—are symptomatic of a larger doubt that pervaded American culture: that while the threat of full-scale nuclear war waned it remained difficult to imagine a future without this threat. So while control over intentional or accidental nuclear war remains a determining factor in the state of American culture’s representations of the future, it points to a failure of imagination. “The certainty of destruction and the uncertainty of whether destruction will actually happen made the idea of chance more generally and potently present for more people than ever before,” writes Jackson (332). The future remains out of bounds in these texts, a place and space that
cannot possibly be reached but which also cannot be foreclosed.

In what follows I read failed suicide attempts in *Leviathan*, *The Virgin Suicides*, and “Musings of a Cigarette Smoking Man” in the context of the unexpected, seemingly accidental end of the Cold War. Rather than expressing an open future, the above texts show how American culture continued to obsess over the possible end of the future well into the 1990s, despite the Cold War having ended. With Soviet Communism defeated, the United States appeared to possess the agency to author its own future without contest. However, in works such as *Leviathan*, *The Virgin Suicides*, and *The X-Files*, characters’ beliefs in absolute agency emerge alongside the realization that absolute agency does not make one immune to absolute chance, i.e. accident. This chapter argues that these characters’ suicide attempts provide not only examples of accident ironically undermining personal agency, but also warning of one’s lack of control over larger historical events. Each of these texts depicts characters obsessed with narrating history as a way to assert agency over past events and thus control their own present and future, exhibiting the anxiety in American culture regarding its own future during and after the end of the Cold War—an anxiety that manifests, in these texts, as failed attempts at suicide, the inability to end futurity in spite of one’s intentions.

The texts I discuss below demonstrate that with the Cold War ending, Americans had only begun to comprehend what a world without the threat of nuclear contingency would look like, which the cultural artifacts I discuss comment upon through open-ended narratives and metafictional strategies similar to, but slightly nuanced from, those which arose during the Cold War. Modernist and postmodernist means of fetishizing a particular event as a break with the past, an opening into the future, are found nowhere in these texts. Instead they present the reader with a series of transitions, of stories told, retold, and contradicted, a history troubled with the
past, present, and future. In the following I look at this period of transition through an
investigation of how literary and televisual texts represented narrative’s inability to describe the
future through representing characters that feel trapped in the present. In these texts narrative
itself becomes a failed means of controlling history and the future that emerges from it. The
failures of narrative contribute to an overwhelming fear of what the future may bring, if it brings
anything at all. The future cannot be contained within the novel or television episode, their
narratives extending beyond the pages and frames, earning its own historicity in the direct
implication of the reader/viewer as a subject complicit in carrying the story from the present into
the future, the texts themselves having deliberately made the reader/viewer aware of their own
lack of narrative closure.

Andrew Hoberek points out that this shift can only be determined through attention to the
nuances of history and aesthetics, the shifts in the culture and the culture’s response to such
shifts. He writes of the development of literature after postmodernism in his introduction to the
Twentieth Century Literature special issue After Postmodernism: Form and History in
Contemporary American Fiction that there is “a continuity with the postmodern project as it
works its way back and forth between production and criticism of fiction: postmodern fiction’s
openness to mass culture begets not only the opening of the canon but also the expansion of what
counts as literature in the present” (239).⁵ Leviathan, The Virgin Suicides, and The X-Files
episode “Musings of a Cigarette Smoking Man” knowingly fails to identify the moment that
everything changed for their characters and American history, producing, as Reagan asked, an
attention to American history, while also critiquing that very history.

Adam Kelly nuances Hoberek’s reading of literature after postmodernism in his essay
“Moments of Decision in Contemporary American Fiction.” Writing of Eugenides’s The Virgin
Suicides and Auster’s Leviathan (along with Philip Roth), Kelly argues that “what these novels dramatize most powerfully in the struggles of the narrator to comprehend the hero’s decision is a contemporary (one might even say post-theoretical) awareness of the impossibility of mastery: mastery not only of the truth of the event, but of the means of representation of that truth” (326). For Kelly, the desire for control, and any politics of control, can only be demonstrated as a failure. When he writes of Derrida’s attempts to “move beyond a certain postmodernism, to think that which the postmodern cannot reconcile, namely the relation of the moment of decision to a radical and undecidable futurity beyond mastery or revelation” he identifies the indefiniteness of the future as that which poisons these texts’ present (327).

While a contingent future troubles the present of texts from the early 1990s in Kelly’s account, Samuel Cohen, in After the End of History (2009), identifies a trend in novels published, predominantly, in 1997, to turn to the past. He argues, “Against the hailing of the end of history inspired by the Cold War’s end, these novels [. . .] construct their own histories, exploring the national past to investigate whereby what happened has become history” (3). Looking at texts that were composed and published/broadcast as the Cold War was ending—from 1989-1992—one sees that the view of American history depicted in texts such as Pynchon’s Mason & Dixon (1997), which Cohen discusses at length, was far less determinate. The historical impetus for the texts discussed in this essay, and that this essay shares with Kelly’s piece, is the end of the Cold War marking not an end to futurity—the extinction of humankind—but the opening of this future and the overwhelming feeling of impotence that proliferated throughout the culture: it would have been easier for the world to blow up. While Kelly concludes that The Virgin Suicides and Leviathan are not “clear examples of post-postmodernist texts, if only because these novels still cleave to an attempt to directly represent the moment of
decision” when it cannot be represented, they do signal an aesthetic transition from
postmodernism to whatever, one day, we will name what follows (328). However, that these
texts meditate upon the moment of decision—the failed suicide and the difficulty of representing
accident in narrative—points to a cautious aesthetic, one in which the strategies of both
modernism and postmodernism are both represented and deployed.

While narrative experimentation and difficulty were the answer to modernist and
postmodernist aesthetics, that method is, in *Leviathan*, *The Virgin Suicides*, and *The X-Files*,
turned on its ear. These texts provide narrative difficulty through saying that their narratives can
never convey an event as it happened, then sincerely depicting said event. They wrap back to the
present, foreclosing the future, looking for a new form of expression and deliberately falling
short to inspire in the reader ways of feeling historically. From the beginning they mark their
texts as inauthentic histories, and in doing so authenticate their authors’ narrative control and the
reader’s indeterminate role in making sense of any kind of narrative history.

II. Passing on the Future

Paul Auster’s *Leviathan* begins with the making of history and the unmaking of a body:
“Six days ago, a man blew himself up by the side of a road in northern Wisconsin. There were no
witnesses, but it appears that he was sitting on the grass next to his parked car when the bomb he
was building accidentally went off” (1). In *Leviathan* history forecloses futurity, which the
narrative represents in its ending, extending the past into the future that consists of the reader’s
present. *Leviathan*’s narrator, author Peter Aaron, writes the novel’s opening on July 4, 1990
after reading the news of the roadside explosion, for he immediately thought of his friend and
fellow writer, Benjamin Sachs, whom he hadn’t seen since June of 1989 (3). Both men met “as
chance would have it” in or around 1975 (11). The novel portrays Benjamin Sachs as embodying the American century, from the beginning of the nuclear age to the Cold War’s end. Sachs was born on August 6, 1945 and refers to himself as “America’s first Hiroshima baby,” “the original bomb child,” “the first white man to draw breath in the nuclear age,” even going so far as to “claim that the doctor had delivered him at the precise moment Fat Man was released from the bowels of the Enola Gay” (25). Aaron informs the reader: “in fifteen years, Sachs traveled from one end of himself to the other, and by the time he came to that last place, I doubt he even knew who he was anymore” (15). Sachs, as the embodiment of American Cold War history, wanes in the post-Vietnam period, and after the Cold War’s end, unable to imagine a future without the Cold War, destroys himself by accident with a bomb of his own design.

Aaron believes that Sachs’s accidentally blowing himself up is related to his perception of the threat of thermonuclear war: “Sachs was hardly the first person to come up with this idea, but considering what happened to him nine days ago, there’s a certain eeriness to the obsession, as if it were a kind of deadly pun, a mixed-up word that took root inside him and proliferated beyond control” (27). The pun, the mixed up word that means by accident, is that Sachs managed to survive the Cold War but died by his own bomb. As the embodiment of the American century, Sachs, without any enemies beyond the state, turns on himself, just as the culture wars presented an insular fragmentation in the years following the end of the Cold War. Sachs interprets reality as if it were authored (49), knowingly reading the world in this way:

Sachs loved these ironies, the vast follies and contradictions of history, the way in which facts were constantly turning themselves on their head. By gorging himself on those facts, he was able to read the world as though it were a work of the imagination, turning
documented events into literary symbols, tropes that pointed to some dark, complex pattern embedded in the real. (27)

For Sachs, a paranoid reading of history provides one with the ability to read his own birth in this very manner. Sachs believes that “once we acquired the power to destroy ourselves, the very notion of human life had been altered; even the air we breathed was contaminated with the stench of death” (27). For Sachs the mere existence of the bomb taints the present, turning it and the future into foregone extinction for humankind.

The narrative of *Leviathan* hinges on the accident that radically alters Ben Sachs, and the accident itself can be understood through reading the political moment in which it occurs. “The era of Ronald Reagan began,” opens the chapter in which Sachs suffers his accidental fall from a fourth floor fire escape. “By pure chance” he falls on “July 4, 1986, the one hundredth anniversary of the statue of liberty” (120). Aaron notes the effect that Reagan’s presidency had on Sachs: “Almost imperceptibly, Sachs came to be seen as a throwback, as someone out of step with the spirit of the time. The world had changed around him, and in the present climate of selfishness and intolerance, of moronic, chest-pounding Americanism, his opinions sounded curiously harsh and moralistic” (116). Sachs holds fast to the ideals of the 1960s while around him liberalism wanes, appearing to have no future. Aaron continues, “It was bad enough that the Right was everywhere in the ascendant, but even more disturbing to him was the collapse of any effective opposition to it. The Democratic Party had caved in; the Left had all but disappeared; the press was mute” (116-117). The fall of liberalism to Reaganism precedes Sachs’s own fall. A tepid political present forecloses any hopes for liberalism in the future, for progress, and it seems that only radicalism remains. Benjamin Sachs, in one breath, understands his fall from a fire escape as an accident, and in the next demands that he was, at least initially, in control—that he
merely failed in a suicide attempt. For Sachs, the experience of the accident correlates with history having no end, which, however skewed, in his perception means that the future is comprised of a series of accidents.

Of the accident, Aaron says that a woman named Agnes Darwin tripped into Maria Turner, who in turn fell into Sachs who was sitting on the edge of the fire escape’s rail. Agnes Darwin, meaning “holy Darwin,” plays on the idea that this was a mistake, the culmination of a series of random events, rather than the design of a divine hand. Auster here reminds the reader that while in life there is no divine author, the author always serves as God in the novel. Aaron continues: “There is no question that Sachs could have been killed. Given that he was four stories off the ground, it seems almost a miracle that he wasn’t.” (119). Sachs plummets but is saved through narrative machination passing as chance. First he lands on a clothesline, which snaps, but “bathmats, blankets, and towels” cushion Sachs’s landing (119). While pathetic, there is little improbable about a clothesline breaking his fall. And though Sachs’s body recovers from the fall, his psyche does not: “he was never the same after that. In those few seconds before he hit the ground, it was as if Sachs lost everything. His entire life flew apart in midair, and from that moment until his death four years later, he never put it back together again” (120). Here Sachs loses the language to describe the accident, his history, and his future. And with language lost, Sachs retreats into solitude and emerges as a man who makes history, a domestic terrorist. The accident reveals something hidden about Sachs, and discovering what was revealed about Sachs is “the thing” that Aaron, in writing *Leviathan*, struggles “to come to terms with, the mystery [he’s] still trying to solve” (118-119, 120). While Aaron can trace Sachs’s decline to the decline of liberal politics, his disdain for Reaganism, he cannot understand why Sachs deteriorated so radically after his fall. The disintegration of liberalism in American culture during
the Reagan era emerges as the mystery at the heart of *Leviathan*. The novel, in attempting to imagine the future of the United States after the Cold War and its state as the supreme political and military force in the world, fixates upon a fear of a future of relentless conservatism.

While Sachs may rage against the machine, his lifestyle has become that of the yuppie. Aaron, and the rest of the characters in *Leviathan*, whether they like it or not, have benefited from Reagan’s presidency, which is why Sachs cannot understand his fall as an accident. Sachs confesses to Aaron that he was on the fire escape because he wanted Maria Turner to touch him. However, Sachs had sworn to himself and his wife that he would no longer commit infidelities. Since he couldn’t bring himself to touch Maria’s leg, he decided that he would let her pursue him. Sachs interprets his accident as deliberate self-punishment for not taking matters into his own hands and actively pursuing Maria. Upon hearing this, Aaron asks, “Are you telling me you jumped?” Ben responds: “No, nothing as simple as that. I ran a stupid risk, that’s all. I did something unforgivable because I was too ashamed to admit to myself that I wanted to touch Maria Turner’s leg” (128-129). Aaron does not understand why Sachs fixates upon his interaction with Maria, but understands that “In Sachs’s mind […] there was a direct connection. The one thing had caused the other, which meant that he didn’t see the fall as an accident or a piece of bad luck so much as some grotesque form of punishment” (131).

Yet, this grotesque form of punishment quickly shifts in Sachs’s perception to a deliberate attempt at suicide: “I had put myself in a position to fall, I realized, and I had done it on purpose. That was my discovery, the unassailable conclusion that rose up out of my silence. I learned that I didn’t want to live. For reasons that are still impenetrable to me, I climbed onto the railing that night in order to kill myself” (135). Sachs rewrites the accident so as to assert control over his life, over history. Catching the change in Sachs’s account of his fall, Aaron
points out that “You told me you fell because you were too afraid to touch Maria’s leg. Now you change your story and tell me that you fell on purpose. You can’t have it both ways. It’s got to be one or the other” (135-136). First Sachs falls by accident, and then falls because he unconsciously punishes himself for desiring Maria Turner, and finally he falls because he chooses to kill himself. Sachs’s narrative reconstruction of the event changes each time so as to provide him with more control, moving from a totally passive to totally active state over the course of his story. He thus erases the accident and replaces it with intention.8

Sachs refuses to accept that he could not simultaneously have fallen accidentally, unconsciously, and consciously. He tells Aaron, “It’s both. The one thing led to the other, and they can’t be separated. I’m not saying I understand it, I’m just telling you how it was, what I know to be true. I was ready to do away with myself that night. I can still feel it in my gut, and it scares the hell out of me to walk around with that feeling” (136). This logic of having it both ways permeated American culture during Reagan’s Presidency, most famously in Reagan’s deployment of language in response to the Iran-Contra affair. Reagan first claimed on November 13, 1986: “Our government has a firm policy not to capitulate to terrorist demands. [. . .] we did not, repeat, did not trade weapons or anything else for hostages, nor will we” (Reagan). On March 4, 1987 Reagan said, “a few months ago I told the American people I did not trade arms for hostages. My heart and best intentions still tell me that’s true, but the facts and the evidence tell me it’s not” (Reagan). Clearly, Reagan, like Sachs, wants it both ways. His heart and “best intentions,” like Sachs’s “gut [. . .] feeling,” somehow balance against evidence, the truth. Sachs has become a man of his time, his reasoning the same as the neoconservative politics he so reviles.
Unable to continue living the bourgeois yuppie life, Sachs retreats from his marriage, his friends, New York City, like his hero Thoreau, into the woods, and there tries to live the politics that he promotes. However, this retreat is not enough. That Sachs finds some kind of peace in moving from a literary-political project to acts of political terrorism in the final years of the Cold War and beyond reveals the kind of future that *Leviathan* imagines for the United States. Without a foreign threat Sachs falls apart, becomes a domestic terrorist. Likewise, the international problems of the United States wane, and what follows is a turn inward, an uneasy sense of peace that stirs unrest within the nation.\(^9\) The inability to imagine the future—any future—culminates in the novel’s final paragraph when Harris, an FBI agent arrives and asks about Sachs. At this final moment the narrative breaks from its chronotope, which throughout the novel has been one of Aaron’s first person present account of his friendship with Ben Sachs:

“Then I pointed to the studio, and without saying another word I led Harris across the yard in the hot afternoon sun. We walked up the stairs together, and once we were inside, I handed him the pages of this book” (275). Obviously, it is impossible for Aaron to have handed Harris the literal pages of *Leviathan*; he could not have written its final sentences had he done so. But, unlike Sachs, we can interpret this event both ways. *Leviathan*’s narrative resists staying true to its word, insisting to the reader that the book just finished is the book that Harris was handed. The future is paradoxically left both open and foreclosed. The words of *Leviathan* are always the same, yet insist that they can be changed, that accident can alter teleology, open the future, even if only to deny the transmission of its own historical narrative. While the formal features of *Leviathan* insist that the text is at once both opened and closed, *The Virgin Suicides*, through its second person plural narrator casts doubt upon the veracity of the events it represents.
III. Pasts Always Present

Amidst the turmoil of the Cold War’s end, a novelist a generation removed from Auster had been composing his own narrative of failed and successful suicide set within an American crisis. It was in March 1993, three months after the publication of *Leviathan*, that Jeffrey Eugenides made his debut as a novelist with *The Virgin Suicides*. Set from June 1973 to July of 1974 and told in the first person plural, the novel’s narrators—obsessed neighborhood boys grown into middle-aged men—attempt to solve the mysterious suicides of the six Lisbon sisters: Cecilia, age 13; Lux, age 14; Bonnie, age 15; Mary, age 16; and Therese, age 17. Debra Shostak, in “‘A Story We Could Live With’: Narrative Voice, The Reader, and Jeffrey Eugenides’s *The Virgin Suicides*” describes the novel’s first person plural narration as “‘impossible’ in its counterintuitive proposition of a group speaking as one, [which] offers Eugenides a rich resource to probe cultural conditions, psychological effects, and the reading process” (808). This impossible narrative voice corresponds to *Leviathan*’s impossible ending, in which both the future and the past are left open. The story, at the end, is neither over, nor satisfyingly resolved. Like Peter Aaron, the narrators of *The Virgin Suicides*, despite their efforts, “never find the pieces to put them back together” (249).

Like Colson Whitehead’s veiling of time period in *The Intuitionist*, discussed in the previous chapter, *The Virgin Suicides* demands careful reading if one wants to know the dates in which it is set. In a few throwaway details regarding baseball, the novel tells the reader that it is set in 1973—the year of the oil crisis, of Watergate, of in the estimation of many, the end of the 1960s. Mr. Lisbon, the girls’ father, insists that he wants to trade Tigers’ relief pitcher Bob Miller, who played for Detroit only in 1973 (49). Further detail allows for one to construct a reliable chronology of the novel’s events: “Exhibit #3, however, a photograph taken by Mr.
Buell, shows Chase ready to swing his new Louisville Slugger, and in the background the Lisbon house has all its shutters open (we find a magnifying glass helpful). The photo was taken on October 13, Chase’s birthday and the opening of the World Series” (89). The magnifying glass is indeed helpful: the only World Series of the 1970s that began on October 13 took place in 1973.12

The fact that the novel is set from June 1973 to July 1974 uncovers the meaning of the Lisbon sisters’ suicides as an expression of American anxiety toward both its present and the future—namely the results of the Watergate scandal. This anxiety toward the future, just as palpable in 1993, if not more so, than in 1973-74, arises from national crisis. The boys who narrate the story about the dissolution of the Lisbon sisters represent a Cold War America that is fascinated with Soviet Russia and that has experienced Vietnam. Eugenides thus telegraphs the confusion that followed the end of mid-70s America onto mid-90s America. Through the boys, Cold War paranoids who go to great lengths to spy on the Lisbon sisters, we are told, “We knew that the girls were our twins, and that they knew everything about us though we couldn’t fathom them at all [. . .] our job was to create the noise that seemed to fascinate them” (43-44). After Cecelia kills herself by jumping out a second story window onto a wrought iron fence in her parents’ front yard, neighborhood men come together to remove the fence. Watching the men struggle in a genuine act of community to remove the fence results in the narrators musing, “for a moment our century was noble again” (54). However, the fence proves too much for the men alone, so they have a truck tear it out. Once the truck has torn the fence from the ground “Everyone felt a lot better, as though the lake had been cleaned up, or the air, or the other side’s bombs destroyed. There wasn’t much you could do to save us, but at least the fence was gone” (55). From environmental pollution—a threat already present—the boys shift to thoughts of
thermonuclear arms and their foreclosed future. For a moment the Cold War has ended, or at least their Cold War feelings have disappeared. The irony here is that these feelings remain present, just under the surface, since feeling like the Cold War has ended is very much a Cold War feeling.

To open the future, the narrators of *The Virgin Suicides* suspend the present as a way of comprehending the traumas of the past twenty years of their lives. The boys are trapped in an eternal present, as Trip Fontaine, the one person to have dated a Lisbon sister, tells them years later of the first time he saw Lux:

In the orange light the students’ heads looked like sea anemones, undulating quietly, and the silence of the room was that of the ocean floor. “Every second is eternal,” Trip told us, describing how as he sat in his desk the girl in front of him, for no apparent reason, had turned around and looked at him. He couldn’t say she was beautiful because all he could see were her eyes. [. . .] the two blue eyes lifted him on a sea wave and held him suspended. “She was the still point of the turning world,” he told us, quoting Eliot, whose *Collected Poems* he had found on the shelf of the detoxification center. (78)

While burnt out Trip quotes from “Burnt Norton” (1936), the narrators allude to the conclusion of “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” (1920) with their references to the silence of the ocean floor and the sea suspending him—“We have lingered in the chambers of the sea / By sea girls wreathed with seaweed red and brown / Till human voices wake us and we drown” (129-131). Both of Eliot’s poems speak of being trapped in an interminable present. Daniel Grausam has written of the lines from “Burnt Norton” that Trip cites and alludes to—“What might have been and what has been / Point to one end which is always present”—as they are deployed in Richard Powers’s novel *Prisoner’s Dilemma* (1988) (Eliot 9-10). Grausam argues: “These lines from T.S.
Eliot’s ‘Burnt Norton’ are especially apt, gesturing as they do both to the history that produced the present and the possibility of other histories creating other presents; like *Prisoner’s Dilemma*, *Four Quartets* wants to believe that history isn’t teleology” (146). Eliot’s poetry provokes a similar meaning in Eugenides’s novel. *The Virgin Suicides* also wants to believe that history is not teleological, going so far as to depict the boys compiling piece after piece of mundane debris from the wreckage of the Lisbon sisters. The novel takes the textual form of the case study, a gathering of interviews and various exhibits, only some of which we see. This results in the convergence of numerous conflicting narratives regarding the Lisbon sisters and the impossibility of ever understanding them as anything but a textual construction, the subject of a frustrated narrative that obfuscates history for the sake of historicity.

While *Leviathan* presents Sachs’s three simultaneous reasons for his fall, *The Virgin Suicides* provides an even more complex narrative and series of reasons for the Lisbon sisters’ suicides. On June 16th Cecelia Lisbon slits her wrists in a failed suicide attempt. Cecelia’s attempted suicide, however, is not referred to as a suicide; rather, Mrs. Lisbon euphemistically calls the event “Cecelia’s Accident” (Eugenides 15). The “we” that stands in for the group of boys attempts to gather the real story from various witnesses, themselves included. For instance, two neighbors of the Lisbons, Mrs. Buell and Mrs. Scheer, take a Bundt cake “in sympathy” to the family (17). When interviewed years later, Mrs. Buell claims that Mrs. Lisbon sent her daughters upstairs and put the Bundt cake in the refrigerator, denying the neighbors their wish that all should share a piece right then, while the cake was still warm. But the narrator reports, “Mrs. Scheer remembered it differently” (18). She claims instead that “The truth is, Mrs. Lisbon thanked us quite graciously. Nothing seemed wrong at all. I started to wonder if maybe it was true that the girl had only fallen and cut herself. Mrs. Lisbon invited us out to the sun room and
we each had a piece of cake” (18). These contradictory narratives open the reported events to interpretation, allowing the narrative of *The Virgin Suicides*, as in *Leviathan*, to deny the reader narrative closure and thus critique teleology. Again, the lack of a coherent past denies the narrators the ability to move on, to enter the present and the future. The novel plays with accidents and intention, for from this event our narrators are given evidence that allows them to present two contradictory stories that leave the reader teasing meaning from the residual silence that is left when the narrators will not or cannot say what happened. Either Mrs. Lisbon invited Mrs. Buell and Mrs. Scheer in, or she did not. However, Eugenides’s characters accomplish what Benjamin Sachs could not, but Peter Aaron could with *Leviathan*’s conclusion—they make both stories happen; the reader is left with impressions from both, despite their being mutually exclusive.

In revising Cecelia’s suicide attempt, Mrs. Lisbon embraces accident, which she correlates with a lack of intentionality or fate. The neighbors’ readings of Mrs. Lisbon’s twist on Cecelia’s suicide attempt demonstrate an accident of reading. Herein lies the brilliance of *The Virgin Suicides*’ first-person plural narration. The novel represents a community of readers who have compiled gossip and rumor for two decades. The sisters of the novel cannot tell their own story, and the middle-aged male narrators know that they can never tell the story of the Lisbon sisters in its entirety. Yet this does not stop them from telling the story of the Lisbon sisters as an accident that forever changed the way that they tell their own story. The trauma of the sisters’ suicides haunts the boys, which is why they attempt to tell the story, to pass it on, to make it past, to fill the silence with some sound, any sound, even if it does not sound right. In telling and retelling this story—which is merely an exercise in trying to get their story straight—the man-child narrators suspend history, stranding themselves in the past and present, foreclosing the
future.14 This calls to the reader’s attention the problems of understanding the past as a series of coherent events, for in their incoherence, the events of The Virgin Suicides lead not to telling, to the passing on of history, but, instead, to silence.

Leviathan and The Virgin Suicides are stories that present the future as an empty, uninhabitable space. Neither of these novels, mired in telling and retelling past events, has any space for the future. The inability to narrate history destroys one’s access to the future, stranding one in the present, like the reader at the end of Leviathan experiencing the paradox of having finished a novel that cannot, if taken at its word, be over. The Virgin Suicides makes a similar gesture in its ending, one that leaves the story we have just experienced untold, impossible to speak, a series of fragments from the past. The first-person plural narrator makes a closing remark that signals the passage of time both in its use of the plural pronoun and in its invocation of the numerous times that an attempt has been made to tell the story through piecing it together and, each time, has failed to tell the whole story. The narrator moves from a reflection upon the Lisbon sisters’ suicides to how these suicides shaped the rest of the narrators’ lives:

They made us participate in their own madness, because we couldn’t help but retrace their steps, rethink their thoughts, and see that none of them led to us. We couldn’t imagine the emptiness of a creature who put a razor to her wrists and opened her veins, the emptiness and the calm. And we had to smear our muzzles in their last traces, of mud marks on the floor, trunks kicked out from under them, we had to breathe forever the air of the rooms in which they killed themselves. (Eugenides 248-249)

There is no teleology—the story of the Lisbon sisters did not have to lead to the boys’ attempt to tell their story. The sisters remain a destination that cannot be reached, a treasure that cannot be possessed. In other words, they are preserved in the realm of romantic cliché and pubescent
fantasy. They were never seen for who they were, merely for whom the boys fantasized them to be, which is why the boys “retrace their steps, rethink their thoughts” and find no end, no culmination of history. In their manhood, the boys chase down witnesses and try to take away subjective bias by adopting the methodology of the case study. Nevertheless, this methodological retracing and rethinking—this retelling of the story that is *The Virgin Suicides*—continues the men’s teenage paralysis, their fixation upon the sisters’ paths. The narrators have no future. They will never grow up.

In both of the above cases, some characters possess an identity that others silence and overwrite. Even the project of preserving these identities and producing a context in which they could be heard only further overwrites the characters and undermines the larger political project of imagining their future beyond the Cold War. While these characters speak through the accident, no one can know if what they said was what we heard, if what they did was what we saw them do, if these things carry meaning, if they even occurred. We must learn to settle then into the fictions that they inhabit, into making what we have seen, what we have read, into something that it is not. Only through embracing the accident in these texts can we see what future waits beneath the accidents of our present, those futures we fight both for and against. The reader must accept, defying logic and teleology, that none of these events happened—they are, of course, fiction. However, they demand that we be affected as if they did transpire. While Ben Sachs cannot have it both ways, the readers of fiction can, and must.

### IV. *The X-Files, Fighting the Future through Reconstructing the Past*

Like the Lisbon sisters, Samantha Mulder, sister of FBI Agent Fox Mulder (David Duchovny), disappears during the turmoil of the Watergate scandal. Samantha vanishes on
November 27, 1973, the day that the United States Senate confirmed Gerald Ford as Vice President of the United States. Her disappearance occurs as she and Mulder talk while, in the background, a television news program reports on the missing eighteen-and-a-half minutes of the Nixon tapes. That Samantha disappears while the eighteen-and-a-half minute gap is being reported—what Alexander Haig, positing his “devil theories,” asserted could have been the work of “some sinister force”—directly connects the disappearance of Mulder’s sister with government conspiracy (Lardner). Mulder becomes convinced that Samantha was abducted, and, like the characters in the novels discussed above, understands this event as having occurred for several different reasons over the course of the series: he first believes that aliens took her, then, later in the series, that it was the government alone, then the government working with aliens, who abducted her, and finally that she fell victim to a serial killer. No matter the cause, Samantha’s disappearance results in Mulder’s obsession with the paranormal, leading to his working the X-Files, in which he believes the answer to his sister’s disappearance and other conspiracies await to be unveiled if only he can put the case studies that comprise the X-files together and, from scant, fragmentary evidence, write history.

In this way, The X-Files engages with Cold War history and postmodern aesthetics more explicitly than Leviathan and The Virgin Suicides. In its season four episode, “Musings of a Cigarette Smoking Man” (1996), the series explores a conspiracy theory that purportedly reveals the origins of its most sinister figure, the Cigarette Smoking Man (William B. Davis). CSM, a member of the shadow government known as the Syndicate, acts throughout the series as a foil, and sometime ally, for Agents Mulder and Scully in their attempts to “fight the future,” which is to say to fight against the teleological plots of government and alien conspirators. The episode focuses on the Cigarette Smoking Man’s role in world events before Mulder begins to work the
X-files. In it the viewer is presented with a conspiratorial history of the assassinations of President John Kennedy, Martin Luther King Jr., the Cold War’s end, and the existence of alien life. The first line of dialogue in the episode is “. . . elaborate and dark conspiracy.” Subject established, the episode consists of Melvin Frohike (Tom Braidwood), a member of the conspiracy theorist group The Lone Gunmen, telling his colleagues John Fitzgerald Byers (Bruce Harwood) and Richard Langley (Dean Haglund), as well as Mulder and Scully, of what he believes may be the history of the Cigarette Smoking Man. None of the show’s protagonists are seen (except for Frohike at the episode’s end); instead, the viewer watches the Cigarette Smoking Man listen to this conversation with the aid of surveillance technology, interspersed with flashbacks, both in color and in black and white.

While the episode depicts no literal act of suicide, the Cigarette Smoking Man gives up his existence in order to author the future. The Cigarette Smoking Man undoes himself, with the aid of the government, in order to control history, to become, like the CIA conspirators in DeLillo’s *Libra*, a man “who believed history was in [his] care” (127). The show’s creators, in revealing the purported history of the Cigarette Smoking Man, explore the creation of convoluted narratives that stem from events that are interpreted both as teleological and as the effects of chance. Like Auster, and Eugenides, the creators of “Musings of a Cigarette Smoking Man”—and *The X-Files* as a whole—imagine a character that is at once a subject of history and the author of that same history. His desire for control, his role in authoring history, comes to pass as nothing less than a desire to author a future that remains, despite all efforts, indeterminate, left to chance, which the series insists can be fought and conquered.

The episode focuses upon the Cigarette Smoking Man’s desire to be an author, whether in his role as author of history or in his failure to become a successful author of Cold War
science fiction spy thrillers. In its representation of various texts—*The Manchurian Candidate* (1959); the titular character’s novel, *Take A Chance: A Jack Colquitt Adventure*, written under the *nom de plume* Raul Bloodworth; the magazine *Roman à Clef* that the novel is serialized in; and, finally, the magazine from which Frohike has discovered this possible history of the Cigarette Smoking Man—the representation of fictions-become-history expresses a post Cold War desire for a complete understanding of the past that allows one to author a riskless future.18

On October 30, 1962, mere days after the Cuban Missile Crisis, the first of the episode’s flashbacks begins. We see the Cigarette Smoking Man reading a copy of *The Manchurian Candidate*. Bill Mulder, father of Fox and Samantha, asks: “Why don’t you just go see the movie,” to which CSM replies, “I’d rather read the worst novel ever written than sit through the best movie ever made.” The episode, from its beginning, ironically privileges the written word over visual representation. CSM reads the kind of fiction that he wishes to write while living as a member of the shadow government, an author of conspiracy. Bill Mulder shows CSM a photo of a one-year old Fox, telling him that Fox just spoke his first word: “J.F.K.” Of course, J.F.K. is not so much a word as it is an abbreviation. The episode comments upon condensing signifier for signified then proceeds to illustrate the dangers of understanding one’s present and future as developing from a belief in condensed, simplified, conspiracy theories of history. The episode returns to shots similar to that above, either of the Cigarette Smoking Man reading or writing. Here he holds the cover of *The Manchurian Candidate* to the reader, so that the act of televisual viewing and reading combine through allusion (Figure 1). The viewer is told to carefully watch as others read and write.
Later called before a group of government officials, the Cigarette Smoking Man is told, “There are extraordinary men . . . those who must identify . . . comprehend, and ultimately shoulder the responsibility for not only their own existence, but their country’s, and the world’s as well.” This statement becomes an offer: the Cigarette Smoking Man can accept his assignment to assassinate President Kennedy and become one of history’s extraordinary men, but, the cost of accepting this assignment is nothing less than the total erasure of his personal history. In order for history to be written, the author must disappear via an act of symbolic suicide. He accepts and kills Kennedy. We next see CSM on April 30, 1967 as he sits at a typewriter, completing a novel (Figure 2). On the radio Martin Luther King Jr. delivers his speech “It’s a Dark Day in Our Nation.” The Cigarette Smoking Man speaks and types, “I can kill you whenever I please . . . but not today,” then stares at the page, reading his words. Reading the Cigarette Smoking Man read, the viewer notices that the medium close-up and shallow focus forces one to meditate upon the
Cigarette Smoking Man’s act of reading his own writing—until the medium of the radio breaks into the scene, interrupting our viewing and his reading/writing. Immediately upon finishing his novel, King’s words disturb him: “This had driven many to feel that only Marxism has the revolutionary spirit. Therefore Communism is a judgment against our failure to make democracy real and follow through with the revolution we initiate. Our only hope today lies in our ability to recapture the revolution.” As CSM completes his novel he realizes that King must be assassinated, implying that the two events connect. As a roman à clef, his novel thinly veils his own history, one that he cannot complete because he must continue to author world events.

Figure 2. “I can kill you whenever I please . . .”

Shortly after he assassinates King, CSM receives a rejection letter for his novel, which, in part, reads: “I felt the plot of TAKE A CHANCE to be preposterous, the characters unbelievable, the ending lame, and the writing, frankly, crap.” The letter, signed Albert Goodwinkle, serves as an overt “wink” to the audience from the episode’s creators acknowledging the generic features of
the episode, its reliance upon clichéd conspiracy theory, its all too simple history of the Cigarette Smoking Man (Figure 3). The Cigarette Smoking Man’s aspirations for the future are extinguished due to the intervention of the show’s creators. This reading, however, is complicated when, immediately after the viewer and CSM has read the rejection letter, we watch CSM watch Robert Kennedy on television, speaking of the assassination of King and quoting Aeschylus: “Even in our sleep, pain which cannot forget falls drop by drop upon the heart until in our own despair and against our will comes wisdom through the awful grace of god.” The Cigarette Smoking Man recites these lines with Kennedy, having just played god in authoring history, yet having had his authorial hopes dashed by Goodwinkle. A master at authoring conspiracies in history, CSM cannot succeed in becoming a published author of conspiracy thrillers.
However, when the Cold War ends it appears that he has successfully authored the history of the American century. One would imagine that with the conflict’s end CSM would no longer have to fight the future. Finally, he could relinquish his role as author of history. It is December 24, 1991 when we next see him. He sits in a boardroom being briefed on the progress of his plots by a group of men who inform him that no one seems interested in Anita Hill, that the Rodney King Trial has been moved to Simi Valley—Saddam Hussein calls, is told to call back. Then they learn that Gorbachev has resigned. The Cold War is nearly over. As one of the men states: “There’s no more enemies.” CSM hands out Christmas gifts to his colleagues—matching ties, marking a tying up of the plots of history, the resolution of the Cold War. It seems that the end of history is the happy ending that CSM has authored over four decades.

In his apartment that night the Cigarette Smoking Man types: “Jack Colquitt, alone in his apartment at Christmas. He believed in sacrifice. Yet some nights he longed for a second chance” (Figure 4). This desire for chance signals that the Cigarette Smoking Man retrospectively wishes that he lacked control over history. His desire for success as an author here becomes apparent as a yearning for chance, a new life in which the only plots he devises are pure fiction, not the orchestration of historical events. Nevertheless, his writing is interrupted when the phone rings and he is called away to witness the crash-site of an alien vessel and the murder of its survivor. Again, the viewer must watch from the other side of the typewriter as history calls the Cigarette Smoking Man away from his act of writing into the authorship of world events. With his fellow conspirator, known as Deep Throat—the moniker Mark Felt used to distribute information about Watergate to Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein—and here called Ronald, CSM asks: “How many historic events have only the two of us witnessed together, Ronald? How often did we make or change history? And our names can never grace
any pages of record. No monument will ever bear our image. And yet once again, tonight, the course of human history will be set by two unknown men standing in the shadows.” After voicing his longing to be acknowledged as an author of history, Ronald tells him to kill the alien, to which, enigmatically, CSM responds: “I’ve never killed anybody [. . .] I have a chance to go an entire lifetime without killing anybody or anything.” This statement brings into doubt all that the episode has presented. The history that the episode has depicted begins to unravel, its authenticity doubtful. Both the episode and the Cigarette Smoking Man want it both ways. The viewer is here asked to take a chance on this possible history.

Frohike’s words toward the end of episode raise further doubts about the history we have just watched. He quotes from Thoreau, “The mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation,” then, speaking of the Cigarette Smoking Man, continues, “His life has been anything but quiet, yet I believe nothing but desperate. He’s the most dangerous man alive, not so much because he

Figure 4. Longing for a second chance.
believes in his actions, but because he believes his actions are all which life allows him. And yet, the only person that can never escape him is himself.” Frohike reads the Cigarette Smoking Man as lacking agency, a victim of historical pressure, the author of a text that resists his control as he resists chance, but nevertheless is wholly subject to chance. The episode ends with the Cigarette Smoking Man, his sight fixed on Frohike as he emerges from the offices of the Lone Gunmen, speaking the concluding lines of his novel: “I can kill you whenever I please . . . but not today.” However, Frohike, before emerging, has placed the integrity of the entire history of the Cigarette Smoking Man into question, calling into doubt any information that the episode may have conveyed, when he says: “So far, this is based on a story I read in one of my weekly subscriptions that rang a bell. I’m going to check out the private hacker source that has been working on tracking a few leads that can produce definitive proof, and then we’ll have him nailed.” Has Frohike taken this history from Roman à Clef—has he read CSM’s novel and believed it, or has it been disseminated through other channels? Has the entire episode been a fiction crafted by one, or several, of its characters? Is the episode the ending CSM did not author?

The episode literally emerges from the pages of a conspiracy theory. The history depicted is not conclusive, possibly something from the pages of Take A Chance, possibly the fabrication of a conspiracy theorist. Recorded history resembles fiction, and like the characters in fiction—the Cigarette Smoking Man, the Lone Gunmen, Mulder and Scully—their actions are not left to chance but to authorial design. The episode reflects upon authorship, as the Cigarette Smoking Man looks for the issue of Roman à Clef that holds his story; he stares at two magazines that point to the episode’s privileging of textuality: Writer’s Block and End Credits—both of which promise to help the reader produce writing—literally showing one how to write in the future and
into one’s future (Figures 5 and 6). In presenting a linear history, a series of conspiracy theories, the episode inspires paranoid thinking among the viewers. This reminds the reader that they are watching a fiction, and that history itself, when read as a fiction, can leave one stranded in the present with no sense of the future.

Figure 5. *Writer’s Block* and *End Credits.*
Likewise, chance intervenes in the publication of the novel *Take A Chance*. We see CSM in his apartment, opening a letter accepting his novel for publication. The content of his novel, we discover, is that of alien assassinations, and it will be serialized in the magazine *Roman à Clef*. CSM voices his wish for the artwork to have a “Tom Clancy-ish kind of look,” again pointing to the type of writing he wishes to author. However, upon reading his published novel he discovers that the ending has been changed, that it is not “the ending that I wrote. It’s all wrong.” After the Cigarette Smoking Man has read the ending that he didn’t write, after he has stared at the magazines promising to cure writer’s block, the televisual alludes beyond the writerly to the filmic with a parody of the much parodied “Life is like a box of chocolates” scene from *Forrest Gump* (1994) (Figure 7). While the Cigarette Smoking Man’s monologue is little better than a bitter parody of Gump’s, the episode comments on itself as a parody of the underground history of the American century. While *Forrest Gump* placed Tom Hanks, as
Gump, in a variety of historical moments—shaking hands with Kennedy, being honored by Johnson, among other events—in order to reflect upon the turmoil and triumph of the American century, “Musings of a Cigarette Smoking Man” provides a shadow history, placing its titular character in some of the most traumatic moments of the twentieth century and revealing a history that no one can see—a history that, when published, has the “wrong” ending in the pages of a pulp magazine—and pointing, perhaps, to another film from 1994, one that lost the best picture Academy award to Forrest Gump: Pulp Fiction. The Cigarette Smoking Man is the author of a pulp and pulped history, one of the underground detritus of the American century. The episode’s own content builds upon a series of clichés and tired parodies that come together to make a claim for the end of the Cold War blocking one’s ability to both author the future and literature that is “new.”
V. Looking Forward to Nothing

*Leviathan, The Virgin Suicides,* and *The X-Files* insist upon an indeterminate future in their open endings. In defying narrative closure, these texts rupture with the past and leave the future open to chance. In depicting authorship as having lost the ability to control accident, these texts examine a cultural anxiety that, without the Cold War, the future was open, but under threat of replicating the same patterns of Cold War life. In other words, it was feared that American culture would not produce a new future. These texts show that as the Cold War ended American culture struggled to imagine a future beyond that conflict.

However, the turmoil of this moment and the anxiety that this lack of futurity caused resulted in the beginning of a shift away from modernist and postmodern aesthetic practices toward an reflexive aesthetic that questions the integrity of narratives, especially in reflecting upon the role the United States played in the history of the twentieth century. While critics such as Samuel Cohen have identified American fiction’s reflective and retrospective mood as emerging in the mid-1990s in texts such as DeLillo’s *Underworld* (1997), Roth’s *American Pastoral* (1997), and Morrison’s *Paradise* (1997), one can see in reading *Leviathan,* *The Virgin Suicides,* and “Musings of a Cigarette Smoking Man,” that this impulse developed from anxieties toward the future that were prevalent in the culture and the culture’s texts before the mid-90s.

The sense of closure and retrospection depicted in these texts emerged from serious doubts that the United States had lost its ability to produce a future that could reassure American culture that the half-century long conflict was finished, although the nation had evaded full-scale nuclear war and emerged triumphant from the Cold War. While this was the happier ending, like the ending of *Take A Chance,* it felt “all wrong.” Despite this being the ending that allowed for a future over which the nation now possessed sole authorship, the years that followed saw the culture produce
the future through looking back at the Cold War. Having it both ways, looking back in order to imagine the future, American society began to long for that time when the enemies were apparent, the threat global, and the worst that could happen was simply the accidental end of the future.
Notes

1 In “E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction” Wallace writes “irony, poker-faced silence, and fear of ridicule are distinctive features of contemporary U.S. culture (of which cutting-edge fiction is part) that enjoy any significant relation to the television whose weird precise hand has my generation by the throat” (49) and, writing of irony and postmodern maximalist metafiction: “how have irony, irreverence, and rebellion come to be not liberating but enfeebling in the culture today’s avant-garde tries to write about? One clue’s to be found in the fact that irony is still around, bigger than ever after 30 long years as the dominant mode of hip expression” (67). One could argue today that after 50 long years, irony remains as “the dominant mode of hip expression.” Stephen Burn, in Jonathan Franzen at the End of Postmodernism, writes “a fascination with the new beginnings to be found in endings seems to have been deeply etched into the core of postmodernism” which is but one of many examples from Burn’s study in which he describes postmodernism as doing the exact same thing as post-postmodernism in order to prove that post-postmodernism is different from its predecessor. Moreover, one could argue that such a statement also places postmodernism much closer to modernism (14). Burn admits, “Post-postmodernism explicitly looks back to, or dramatizes its roots within postmodernism. As such it is a development from rather than an explicit rejection of, the prevailing movement, and so—just as modernist works have affinities with postmodernist works—post modernist novels betray […] a family resemblance to the previous generation’s work” (19) and later goes on to say that “Post-postmodernist novels are informed by the postmodernist critique of the naïve realist belief that language can be a true mirror of reality, and yet they are suspicious of the logical climax of this critique: Derrida’s famous statement that ‘there is nothing outside the text’” (20). According to Burn, this results in younger novelists writing less metafiction and “more obviously address[ing] the idea of a real world beyond the problems raised by nonreferential systems of discourse” (20-21). In other words, it’s modernist postmodernism—which is to say, it’s postmodernism. In “Tribal Politics and the Postmodern Product” Timothy Parrish provides a similar critique of Burn: “nearly all of the qualities he identifies as post-postmodernist are exactly what Hutcheon and Jameson describe as postmodernist” (651).

2 Paul Auster, after receiving his Master’s from Columbia, traveled to Paris and spent time with Beckett. For an extended discussion of Beckett’s influence upon Auster, see “Beckett and Auster: Fathers and Sons and the Creativity of Misreading” by Julie Campbell. Eugenides has spoken at length in interviews about the influences of both modernist and postmodernist authors, which I quote below.

3 However, at least as early as Pynchon’s V: the texts of postmodernism have played with this idea of rupture. Benny Profane experiences no Joycean epiphany when asked what he’s learned at the novel’s end; instead he replies, “I haven’t learned a goddamn thing” (491). Of course, in Ulysses Joyce anticipated this in ending each episode with an anti-epiphany. For the relationship between DeLillo’s writing and modernism see Philip Nel’s essay “DeLillo and Modernism” in The Cambridge Companion to Don DeLillo. Needless to say, there is more work to be done on reading modernism, postmodernism, and that which follows postmodernism through their similarities and transitions from one to the others rather than through continuing to find difference and rupture.

4 The problem of periodization—in this case modernism to postmodernism to post-postmodernism is well illustrated in the journal Modernism/modernity—the mouthpiece of new modernist studies—and its fascination with David Foster Wallace in total disregard for nearly any other author of his generation. Modernism/modernity began publication in 1994, two years after the journal Contemporary Literature began publishing only articles that treated literature published after 1945. The last essay strictly on modernist figures dealt with Dora Marsden and Ezra Pound, and was published in 1992. The early nineties then are a time when, institutionally, the fields of modernist studies and contemporary literature studies were separated in the pages of publications and contemporary literature began to be distinguished as post-45, something separate from modernism proper.

5 In this same issue Timothy Bewes argues, “Paul Auster, the most ‘postmodern’ of contemporary authors, is revealed by Lukács’s The Theory of the Novel to be also the most novelistic of writers” (294). For an extended discussion of Auster’s, for lack of a better term, “postmodern realism,” see “‘Another History’: Alternative Americas in Paul Auster’s Fiction” by Jesús Ángel González.
Aaron’s narration is composed over the course of two months, from July 4, 1990 to September 5, 1990 (3, 272). For a brief discussion of chance in Auster’s *oeuvre*, see Steven E. Alford’s “Chance in Contemporary Narrative: The Example of Paul Auster,” and Debra Shostak’s “In the Country of Missing Persons: Paul Auster’s Narratives of Trauma.” In *No Accident, Comrade* (2011) Steven Belletto links Auster’s representations of chance to the Cold War: “Auster’s work is a vestige of Cold War attitudes about narrative insofar as it is uneasy about the nature of its own design, an anxiety made visible through its abiding interest in narrative chance” (135).

Although the Cold War, by many accounts was still winding down in 1990, Aaron reports late in the novel, “the Cold War suddenly stopped. But Sachs was still out there, a solitary speck in the American night, hurtling toward his destruction in a stolen car” (266). Jonathan Culler, in *On Puns: The Foundations of Letters* writes that in the pun lies “an opposition that we find difficult to evade or overcome: between accident or meaningless convergence and substance or meaningful relation. (16). Belletto reads this passage in *No Accident, Comrade*, extending Culler’s discussion of puns to a reading of narrative chance in the works of Nabokov (62-64).

While Emma Hegerty, in her essay “The Practice of Solitude: Agency and the Postmodern Novelist in Paul Auster’s *Leviathan*,” reads this scene differently, stating, “Sachs concentrates upon the part he played in the turn of events” (855), I read Sachs as being unable to decide what to concentrate upon, which leads to him desiring a state of passivity, one in which he can have it “both ways.”

In “Portraits in Absentia: Repetition Compulsion and the Postmodern Uncanny in Paul Auster’s *Leviathan*” Scott A. Dimovitz writes, “*Leviathan* rejects postmodern notions of identity as subjectivity, suggesting that identity could be defined not merely as an intersection of institutions, society or language, but rather as the meeting place of subjects and objects—the old humanist division between the individual and the world”—which we see in Sachs’s fixation upon his birth coinciding with the dropping of the bomb (447). For an extended reading of Sachs as author of literature and terror, see Brendan Martin’s chapter, “The Authority of Authorship: The Ambiguities of Life-Writing in *Leviathan*” in his monograph, *Paul Auster’s Postmodernity*.

For an extended discussion of narrative voice in *The Virgin Suicides* and *Middlesex* (2002) see Claudia Ioana Dorooholschi’s essay “Viewing Trip: Point of View and Meaning in the Novels of Jeffrey Eugenides.”

In *1973 Nervous Breakdown* Andreas Killen provides an extensive study of that year as “a cultural watershed, a moment of major realignments and shifts in American politics, culture, and society. This year marked not just the end of the sixties but the onset of a debate, one that continues to this day, about the legacy of that turbulent decade” (3). Both *The Virgin Suicides* and *The X-Files* treat this year in the manner Killen describes.

In “‘Why Don’t You Just Leave It Up To Nature’: an Adaptationist Reading of the Novels of Jeffrey Eugenides,” Kenneth Womack and Amy Mallory-Kani claim that the novel extends into August of 1974. Rachel McLennan, in “Chasing After the Wind: The Adolescent Aporias of Jeffrey Eugenides” reads *The Virgin Suicides* as a coming of age story for both the narrators—who never mature—and for the United States, agreeing with Kenneth Millard’s claims regarding the novel in *Coming of Age in Contemporary American Fiction*, emphasizing, however, that “the disappearing female adolescents in Eugenides’s novels illustrate that narratives of female adolescents, authored and authorized by themselves, would seemingly not be possible” in “Eugenides’s novels, in which teleological narrative development, and the male subject position it validates, is dominant in the American societies depicted” (35). However, the novel’s narrative—the boys’ narrative—reaches no teleological end. Resolution could only be reached if the Lisbon sisters could tell their own stories. In “Running Out of Gas: The Energy Crisis in 1970s Suburban Narratives” Christian Long historicizes the turmoil of Eugenides’s novel to 1973, writing *The Virgin Suicides* accepts the volatility of oil and energy crises as facts of life, which in turn give force to the Lisbon girls’ inexorable movement toward suicide as a refutation of the suburban form, a cry against the suburban development pattern’s larger self-destructive logic” (357). Each of these readings accept that the domestic politics of the novel’s setting bleed into the characters’ actions, which in turn allow the reader to historicize both the present of the novel’s setting and the present of its publication.
The date of Cecelia’s suicide attempt corresponds to Bloomsday, June 16th, the day on which Joyce’s *Ulysses* (1922) is set. Eugenides discusses modernism’s influence upon him in an interview with James Schiff that his generation read “backwards,” beginning with experimental works—avant-garde modernism and postmodernism—then moved back to “realist” works (103). More directly, Eugenides discusses in the same interview Faulkner’s “A Rose For Emily,” in regard to its first person plural narrator, as an indirect, he says “unconscious” influence upon *The Virgin Suicides*—“unconscious” because he claims not to have remembered “A Rose for Emily” until finishing *The Virgin Suicides* (105). Eugenides directly addresses the influence of modernism when he states: “Ezra Pound’s dictum to ‘make it new’ is still something I think about” (106). Finally, in regard to the influence of modernism upon Eugenides, he states that *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* “technically changed [his] life” (116). Eugenides shares these same sentiments in an interview with Jonathan Safran Foer (76).

Shostak writes of the novel’s conclusion: “Perhaps ‘history’ is what has been most repressed in the narrative [the narrators] construct because history would require insertion of the girls’ uncontextualized voices” (826). Like the Reagan of the prior chapter, history is represed and forgotten. However, it is significant that in *The Virgin Suicides* this history is that of the Cold War.

This information is relayed in the tenth episode of the fourth season, “Paper Hearts,” which was written by Vince Gilligan, creator of *Breaking Bad* (2008-2013). Isla J. Bick, in “The Trauma Is Out There: Historical Disjunctions and The Posttraumatic Narrative as Process in *The X-Files*” writes of Samantha Mulder’s disappearance as “articulated into an overtly paranoid construction as [Mulder] and fellow Special Agent Dana Scully (Gillian Anderson) uncover government conspiracies and retroactive denials of these conspiracies. This one highly personal event, of which Mulder possesses only fragmentary memories, is the nexus about which he organizes the world and is the rupture in his history to which the series ritualistically returns” (321). Mulder’s paranoid reading of the X-Files, based upon the traumatic loss of his sister, very much parallels the investigation of *The Virgin Suicides* narrators—both stemming from the loss of girls during Watergate, recovered through case studies and witness testimony. In “Alien Assassinations: *The X-Files* and the Paranoid Structure of History” Robert Markley writes: “At the beginning of every episode, viewers of *The X-Files* are confronted by the paradoxical mantras of post-Watergate consciousness: white capital letters appear against menacing backgrounds warning us to ‘Trust No One’ and declaring that ‘The Truth Is Out There.’ The episodes that follow these injunctions fascinate us [. . .] because we respond viscerally as well as intellectually to weekly suggestions that we are trapped in a history that we have not made and no longer trust” (77).

Sherry R. Truffin, in “Trying to Tell ‘The Truth’: Metafiction and Historiographic Metafiction in *The X-Files*,” writes “The X-Files may be the most popular form of historiographic metafiction ever produced. The show is [. . .] an extended meditation on the inescapability and elusiveness of history, both personal and public” (249). For a more general discussion of postmodernism and *The X-Files*, see Doug Mann’s “Truth, *The X-Files*, and the Postmodern Condition” and Douglas Kellner’s “*The X-Files* and the Aesthetics and Politics of Postmodern Pop,” which reads the series as imploding genre, performing pastiche, and undermining the conventions of both modernist and postmodernist aesthetics (161, 164). Christy L. Burns, in “Erasure: Alienation, Paranoia, and Loss of Memory in *The X-Files*” writes “While still participating in this construction of American paranoia, *The X-Files* also effectively deconstructs American conspiracy theories and the same paranoia.” (199).

In this episode Chris Owens plays the young cigarette smoking man.

Markley writes that this episode “may be the most typical, or archetypical, of any aired during the first four seasons of the series because [. . .] the Cancer Man is driven by his alienation from the very Truth to which he presumably holds the key. As his desire to become a pulp novelist, to reveal the Truth in, and only in fictional form suggests, he becomes a stand-in for a Symbolic Order (the ‘government’) structured around the injunction engraved on his lighter ‘Trust No One’” (84-85). He also writes of the Cigarette Smoking Man’s desire: “to step out of the shadows of history and into print is, in some measure, to compensate for his lack of a name, to confirm his ‘second chance’ as Raul Bloodworth” (93).
Chapter 3

From Split Atoms to Spliced Genes: the Evolution of Cold War Fear

Only by an ingenious economy, an accident of evolution, does the organ of ingestion sometimes get to be used for song.


I. Looking Back in Order to Look Forward

“A Colloquy of Ancient Men,” from the beginning of Richard Kenney’s collection The Invention of the Zero (1993) displays a problem of writing historical poetry that is aware of its representation of contingency:

1

In the beginning was the Word comes weird. . . . After

2

AE: world. . . . The Lord God does not play dice with the JRO: worlds. . . . We waited until the blast had passed, walked out of the shelter and then it was extremely solemn. We knew the world would not be the same. I remembered the line from the Hindu scripture, the Bhagavad-Gita: Vishnu is trying to persuade the Prince that he should do his duty and to impress him he takes on his multi-armed form and says Now I am become Death, the destroyer of

CD: World monkeys; and from the latter, at a remote period, Man, the wonder and glory of the universe, proceeded. . . . The
Simiadae then branched off into two great stems, the New World and the Old (Kenney 7)

The initials stand for Albert Einstein, J. Robert Oppenheimer, and Charles Darwin. In the above passage, the atomic bomb becomes capable of reducing life to zero through physical violence. The fears that the bomb created and perpetuated, however, may be, on the level of ideas, no more violent than the Darwinian revolution’s reduction of man to a “world monkey.” While humankind may be a world monkey, it is also a word monkey, capable of language, and a weird monkey, in part because of this use of language. In his use of the phrase weird—meaning fated—monkey, Kenney ascribes significance to humanity’s ability to understand its historical situation through its being born into and use of language. The text brings together words, weirds, and worlds, twisting about in search for an origin of, if not human being then the beginning of modern human being. The force of Kenney’s poetry emerges from its play on the alphabetic similarity between these three words and therefore hinges upon the accidents of the English language’s development. It is from this accidental similarity that the poem proceeds to spin meaning, all the while telling a story of how origin stories are always told after. “In the beginning was the / Word” expresses its meaning through enjambment. How can the word exist before that which it signifies?¹ This transposition, or hysteron proteron, continues with the proverb “after word comes weird,” which performs a meaning similar to that of the passage cited above—expressing the ease of reading history as teleological while denying a linear teleological reading. Kenney thus undermines teleology, twists the words, makes them weird, and in doing so reveals the search for origins as often being a veiled search for an explanation that history moves toward a final cause. The mention of the word and weird leads to a transposed series of voices expressing the state of humankind over the course of the twentieth century—while the passage
clutches for a beginning it leads to new voices already ancient, going back to Newton and others for some kind of grounding in the modern.

The search for a zero, a beginning, is also a nothing, an absence. It is an invention through language, through the study of history. This study and invention is, in Kenney’s poem, a search for something that can be traced back *ad infinitum*. Hence the origin, the zero, must be invented. When read with this meaning, *The Invention of the Zero* complicates origin’s relationship with telos, which is to say that there may be no relationship between the two. In other words, if one wishes to find an origin and if one wishes to find a telos, Kenney’s poem posits that one may be just as fictional as the other. Kenney writes into his poem the systematic search for order in the universe via the study of physics. Einstein’s line, from a letter to Max Born written in 1926 (Einstein 91), discusses quantum physics, a bifurcation of the field of physics that invented a need for a theory of everything, or, as some call it, a final theory.² Here the poem begins to meditate upon unification through bifurcation, taking a story of fate, of the weird, and expressing it as a denial of chance, which was refuted in the original correspondence (though eighteen years later) when Max Born wrote, “you have to throw dice in your deterministic world” (Born 152).

Kenney throws us forward to a seminal moment in twentieth century physics, one that shifts from the throwing of two dice to the splitting of the atom—all images of an event emerging from either combination or bifurcation—one coming from two, two coming from one. Kenney most likely found the words of Oppenheimer in *The Making of the Atomic Bomb* (1986) by Richard Rhodes, in which the zero is the ground zero of the first detonation, where Oppenheimer is described as “the theoretical physicist who was also a poet, who found physics, as Bethe says, ‘the best way to do philosophy’” (Rhodes 676). Kenney’s poetry, a reordering of
found words, famous quotations of famous quotations, moving a word here, a phrase there, making the language weird, making it, as Pound commanded, new, reflects not only upon the new sciences of the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, but also demonstrates a doubt that shudders through the language. This shudder comes to be expressed in the culture when this language becomes a common form of expression—with these words, the throwing of dice and the destruction of worlds become common sayings in an all too uncommon world.

Dice that are said to not be thrown and a bomb that was certainly exploded lead us forward in the poem, backward in time, to Darwin’s words from *The Descent of Man* (1871), the denotation of which was historically a greater detonation than that of Oppenheimer’s bomb. Kenney has reversed Darwin’s words in his poem; the original reads, “The Simiadae then branched off into two great stems, the New World and Old World Monkeys, and from the latter, at a remote period, Man, the wonder and glory of the Universe, proceeded” (Darwin 193). Kenny constructs origin through the use of hysteron proteron, the latter coming prior, the after coming first. His writing of origins is based upon making words weird, as when he adds “world” into the opening words of Einstein. Doing so binds form and content, and allows him to show the bifurcation of physics into quantum physics—expressing the competition between fields—which leads to the description of the splitting of the atom. Moving beyond physics, we read the third speaker, Darwin, and his detailing of the bifurcation of two kinds of monkey that leads to the human, who somehow exists at the center of a universe that, as the descent from other animal species designates, man only imagined himself inhabiting. From this invented center humankind nonetheless has inquired into the secrets of the atom, split them, parsed them, and thrown the dice.
God may or may not play dice, but man is a gambler, and as this chapter will demonstrate, the early 1990s were a time where man looked back at the history of the twentieth century and wondered at all of the chances that were taken in the name of science, in the name of humanity. While I argued in the last chapter that American culture suffered from an inability to imagine futurity, this chapter examines how American culture at the same time turned to deep history for a sense of the past at the end of the Cold War. Kenney’s verse reflects upon one of the great concerns of twentieth century science, namely the cultural dominance that two sciences held over culture in the twentieth century: physics and biology. In the first half of the century physics was the dominant field in its captivation of the producers and consumers of culture, but by the 1950s the two sciences were in competition. At the end of the century, biology had emerged as the science that popular culture fixated upon.

This chapter examines the way that two texts from the final years of the Cold War reflect upon the relationship between biology and literature, particularly in regard to how the cultural imagination shifted from a fear of the consequences of splitting atoms to the consequences of splicing genes. In this chapter I read *The Gold Bug Variations* (1991) and the novel *Jurassic Park* (1990) by Michael Crichton as well as Kenney’s poetry. In reading novels alongside poetry, this chapter shows how evolutionary scale penetrated and permeated the culture. Reading these texts alongside the evolutionary biology that they use to explore the various scales of human existence—scales of time and space, scales of affect ranging from apathy to sympathy—I examine the way that these texts represent, through their use of science, the ideological shifts regarding the end of the Cold War. Moreover, Crichton’s and Powers’s novels each represent evolution as a series of accidents without teleology, a series of changes that occur due to a
changing environment. In turning to evolutionary scales of time, a deep history, both texts examine how events occur without intentionality and instead occur by accident.

Reading these texts allows one to see the waning of the initial fears that emerged and played out over the first thirty years of the Cold War and also reveals how and why the culture invented and indulged in a fear of genetic manipulation—a fear that was not wholly new but instead mutated and emerged from the great fear of the Cold War, nuclear annihilation. While nuclear annihilation was the great physical fear of the Cold War, the great ideological fear was communism’s defeat of capitalism. Although this chapter begins with a reading of the relationship between the fear of nuclear annihilation and the fear of genetic manipulation, it turns to a discussion of the power of capital—particularly after the end of the Cold War—to be spent upon the manipulation of genes. In this regard, the representation of genetic manipulation becomes a metaphor for the manipulation of economic markets, which is an expression of the fears of the ends of history and the ends of humanity. Genetic manipulation also stands in for authorship over that which cannot be authored. Both texts warn that chance cannot be controlled at the level of DNA—and demonstrate that accidents will occur, no matter how much control human subjects believe themselves to have.

II. Scale, Extinction, and the Cold War Imagination

The cultural impact of such texts as Kubrick’s Dr. Strangelove (1964), Pynchon’s Gravity’s Rainbow (1973), Nevil Shute’s novel, and its film adaptation, On the Beach (1957, 1959), or the TV movie The Day After (1983) demonstrate thermonuclear war as the foremost threat of the Cold War. The aforementioned texts comprise part of a large array of works that explicitly or implicitly depict nuclear war as the horror that reigned over and ended not only the
historical period, but human civilization as well. Yet the utter obliteration of life that thermonuclear war threatened was but the most blatant of numerous threats. The specter of genetic mutation due to exposure to nuclear radiation (e.g. Godzilla, or any number of comic book characters) also produced a fear that continues to inform our recollections of the Cold War.

These two fears share an intimate relationship. If the first—total thermonuclear war—doesn’t get you, the second—mutation due to exposure—certainly will. Mutation functioned imaginatively, of course, as a fantastic alternative to a more horrifying reality, death due to radiation. Nevertheless, this relationship was only complicated in 1973 with the first successful genetically modified bacteria, which presented a new threat—the scientific altering of living material. This new threat represented an attempt to control the act of mutation—in melodramatic science fictional parlance, to play god. And while the consequences of playing god is the subject of much earlier literature, from Shelley’s *Frankenstein* (1818) to Wells’ *The Island of Doctor Moreau* (1896), it was nevertheless in the final years of the Cold War that the fear of genetic manipulation began to take the place of thermonuclear annihilation as American culture’s dominant fear, namely in that the fiction of genetic manipulation had become reality.

This shift from fear of nuclear war to that of genetic manipulation manifested anxieties about deep time in the final decade of the Cold War. The collapse of the Soviet Union produced angst from victory, which arose in debates about the end of history. The texts I discuss—Michael Crichton’s *Jurassic Park* (1990) and Richard Powers’s *The Gold Bug Variations* (1991)—situate American culture and its fears on varying scales of time, looking both back at the Cold War and forward to an uncertain future. Mark McGurl has termed the literary historian’s interest in deep time “the posthuman comedy, a critical fiction meant to draw together a number of modern literary works in which scientific knowledge of the spatiotemporal vastness and numerousness of
the nonhuman world becomes visible as a formal, representational, and finally existential problem” (537). *Jurassic Park* and *The Gold Bug Variations* explore such formal, representational, and existential problems through an interrogation of how the shift in the predominant fear of thermonuclear war to genetic manipulation shaped imagined scales of time; examining these texts in the context of the Cold War’s end demonstrates this conflict’s continuing power over the contemporary American imagination. In reading *Jurassic Park* and *Gold Bug* I demonstrate how the renaissance in Cold War studies can effectively change our understanding of old and new technologies’ influence over shifting American anxieties, and in doing so, show how attention to the representation of emerging technologies in interstitial texts can productively add to Cold War studies.

While Bruno Latour has called Richard Powers “the master of scientifiction,” and Crichton was, since the publication of *The Andromeda Strain* (1969) considered a master of Science Fiction, they both deploy hard science in their novels while also moving freely into the realms of the speculative (Latour x). Although Powers has stated that reading *Jurassic Park* with *Gold Bug* “wasn’t a juxtaposition that would have naturally occurred to me,” I argue that when read together these two novels provide insight into the final years of the Cold War and the conflicts that followed (Tortorello). In “Chaos and Complexity in Richard Powers’s *The Gold Bug Variations*,” Scott Hermanson compares Crichton and Powers: “Although other writers (Michael Crichton, William Gibson) may make reference to chaos theory and its components, they rarely go beyond creative metaphors and quirky plot twists. Powers, on the other hand, creates a world based on nonlinear dynamics” (38). While I agree with Hermanson’s comparison, in looking beyond the bounds of genre and the distinctions between “middlebrow” and “highbrow,” one comes to see these two novels express a cultural anxiety about the end of
the Cold War that exhibits popular understandings of time scales. These novels depict this anxiety in their representation of the threat of genetic contamination stemming from nuclear fallout or rapid evolution, using scale and metaphor to examine the accidental origin of all life and the potential for all life to accidentally end. Crichton and Powers, while not alone in representing these anxieties, provide a very similar take on the end of the Cold War from two different perspectives in the culture, and together, these novels demonstrate the penetration of one particular set of fears throughout late 1980s and early 1990s American culture. This fear of biological transformation due to radiation can be traced to a much earlier period of the conflict, yet it permeated the culture well into the 1990s and still continues to shape America’s contemporary anxieties and domestic and foreign policies.

The 1980s were a period in which the atomic and the biologic and their two different scales of time collided and coalesced, each changing the other. In focusing on the varying scales of the evolutionary and the nuclear, both novels explore the proliferating fears that sprang from the belief that science can control nature, and, if science can control nature, then it can control accident. Fredric Jameson, in *Archaeologies of the Future* (2005), writes that over the last half of the twentieth century “the paradigm shift[ed] in modern science itself from physics to the life sciences” (67). This change and the problems of depicting it in narrative are played out in the pages of *Gold Bug* and *Jurassic Park*. Jameson continues, “it seems likely that today the complexities of biology and the genetic, indeed bio-power itself, offer a content and a raw material far more recalcitrant to plot formation than even Einsteinian cosmology and the undecidability of atomic sub-particles” (67). This shift signaled anxieties of the biological as replacing those of the nuclear. A particularly emblematic example is the image of a mushroom cloud comprised of dinosaurs, which concludes the summer 1984 *Diacritics* issue “Nuclear
Criticism” (see Figure 1). Zoë Sophia’s rubber stamp piece, from her series Extinction Sux, constructs a relationship between the extinction of the dinosaurs and the possibility of man-made extinction. She depicts the fear of human extinction as analogous to the extinction of the dinosaurs. This anachronistic nuclear apocalypse made of extinct bodies shows the viewer that human history can end, just as these creatures much larger and older than us were obliterated. *Jurassic Park* and *The Gold Bug Variations*, when read together, provide details of the culture’s displacement of its anxieties regarding extinction from the imagination of thermonuclear war to genetic engineering. Integral to this shift is the turning of the discoveries of science from their use as weapons in an ideological struggle with the Soviet Union to the sole purposes of capital, a displacement that emerged from the disappearance of thermonuclear war as an immediate threat. With the United States the only remaining superpower, the nuclear no longer threatened to obliterate futurity; thus the biological would be allowed to proliferate. Both *Gold Bug* and *Jurassic Park* are products of the cultural imagination of this period and shaped the way the culture responded to these new hopes and threats. In this transition the dinosaur plays a prominent role, as the Sophia piece and *Jurassic Park* demonstrate; in the former the dinosaur represents the continued fear of nuclear annihilation, while in the latter, it presents a burgeoning fear of genetic manipulation. Reading geneticist Erwin Chargaff’s 1976 letter to *Science*, “On the Dangers of Genetic Meddling” (a text that *The Gold Bug Variations* and *Jurassic Park* share), one begins to see how all three of these texts express a cultural transition from the dominant fear of nuclear annihilation to that of genetic manipulation. “You cannot recall a new form of life” reads the second epigraph of *Jurassic Park*; this is taken from a longer passage in Chargaff’s letter that pleads: “You can stop splitting the atom; you can stop visiting the moon; you can stop using aerosols; you may even decide not to kill entire populations by the use of a few bombs. But
Figure 1. From *Extinction Sux*, rubber-stamp by Zoë Sophia.
you cannot recall a new form of life” (938). This passage conflates genetic manipulation and the dangers of the nuclear; the dinosaurs of Jurassic Park are the new forms of life that cannot be recalled, and are, in Crichton’s novel, a far graver threat than the thermonuclear.

Gold Bug presents genetic manipulation in a similar manner. Jan O’Deigh narrates a trip to the country with Franklin Todd and geneticist Stuart Ressler. Todd and Ressler argue about the benefits and hindrances of genetic engineering and Ressler cites Chargaff (mistaking the source as Nature rather than Science): “Check out Chargaff’s piece in Nature. Half-dozen years old. ‘Have we the right to counteract, irreversibly, the evolutionary wisdom of millions of years . . . ? The world is given to us on loan. We come and we go. . . ’ This, from the fellow who first revealed the base rations of DNA” (410-411). The rest of the passage Ressler recites comes from the end of Chargaff’s letter, which continues: “and after a time we leave earth and air and water to others who come after us. My generation or perhaps the one preceding mine, has been the first to engage, under the leadership of the exact sciences, in a destructive colonial warfare against nature. The future will curse us for it” (940). Chargaff calls the reader’s attention to the 4 billion year old history of life on earth and the minuteness of human significance in this process, a long history and a long futurity with which both Gold Bug and Jurassic Park engage. Powers and Crichton, by referring to Chargaff, call attention to the immense power that humankind has come to possess and to a larger sense of being in the world, a sense of science not only colonizing nature, but also colonizing the future. Nevertheless, both authors, through quoting Chargaff invoke contingency and insist that accidents will happen. Nature plays dice, via natural selection, but they show that humankind wants to load the dice.

The representation of historical events through such juxtaposed scales pushes the reader to the limits of the sensible, extending metaphor to the point that it carries meaninglessness as its
most prominent meaning. This act is political in that it forces the reader to question the passage of history, to imagine events on a larger scale and consider what could have happened had different events occurred; in other words, it demands a reader acknowledge that the history we know could be fiction, the fiction we know could be history. While one could claim that this is merely an effect of historical fiction, these two novels stand out in their exploration of the accidents of the recent past. The interest in scale that these novels depict reorients the typical vision of witnessing history firsthand as a chain of events. They represent, through their use of scale, one single catastrophe: capital unfolding without control, engineering life with its only end the proliferation of more capital. Through deploying evolutionary and nuclear scales, both authors remove telos from the story of the human, placing the human within the natural world and emphasizing the dangers of humans embracing teleological thought.

Description of varying scales, especially through the use of metaphor, presents what Bruce Robbins has identified as two possible ways for the American novel to address events at a global, rather than national, scale: a “confession of the novel’s inability to tell meaningful stories of identity and relationship at the global scale [. . .] reflecting back to us the world’s true meaninglessness,” and “reading the distant world with sympathy and accuracy, or at least a good-faith effort to make it as familiar as the streets where we work or live” (1097). Though Robbins is discussing more recent novels, texts like Jurassic Park and Gold Bug, through their exploration of scale, place the United States’ role in the world within a longer, more encompassing timeframe. Rather than situating the United States, or even the human, at the peak of a hierarchy, Powers and Crichton represent the human on an evolutionary scale, placing our species on a continuum amongst all other forms of life. Moreover, in depicting evolutionary scale alongside nuclear scale, these novels examine
how the culture’s imaginings of the evolutionary originate in the threat of thermonuclear war, mass extinction, and the conflict between American capitalism and Soviet Communism.

The threat of genetic manipulation with which these novels are concerned is the act of turning the discoveries of science to the uses of capital. Stuart Ressler makes explicit the fears of *Jurassic Park* when he responds to Todd’s question, “So what bothers you about genetic engineering?”:

“It’s not science. Science is not about control. It is about cultivating a perpetual condition of wonder in the face of something that forever grows one step richer and subtler than our latest theory about it. It is about reverence, not mastery. It might, from time to time, spin off an occasional miracle cure of the kind you dream about. The world we would know, the living, interlocked world, is a lot more complex than any market. The market is a poor simulation of the ecosystem; market models will never more than parody the increasingly complex web of interdependent nature. All these plates in the air, and we want to flail at them. ‘Genetic engineering’ is full of attempts to replace a dense, diversified, heterogeneous assortment of strains with one superior one. Something about us is in love with whittling down: we want the one solution that will drive out all others. Take our miracle superstrains, magnificent on the surface, but unlike the messy populations of nature, deceptive, thin, susceptible. One bug. One blight. . . . No; the human marketplace has about as much chance of improving on the work of natural selection as a *per diem* typist has of improving Bartlett’s *Familiar Quotations.*” (Powers 411-412)

According to Ressler, pure science is not about telos but about the pursuit of discovery without intended ends. He favors, as a form of emergence, accident over pre-determination, emphasizing
that history, both ancient and recent, is far too complex for anyone to understand. Just as capitalist markets fluctuate based off of chance events, so too does life. To attempt to exact control is only to manufacture telos—a narrative, in this case—from chance. Genetic engineering attempts to exert control over something that has never been controlled. At the very least a hubristic endeavor, such meddling recalls the desire to split the atom. Neither was undertaken for the sake of discovery alone, but instead for a greater cause—the first, war and the second, capital. In either case, tragedy emerges from a semantic difference: deploying science to inflict death or control life. Ressler wants a science that does not answer to capitalism, a model not based upon the market, something that he imagines as more natural, that cannot be authored, but must emerge. We see that he desires the free pursuit of science, but he does not want science on the free market.

III. A Prehistoric End of History

While in *Gold Bug* we do not get to see the ramifications of science on the free market, *Jurassic Park* depicts the horrifying ramifications of science for profit: the attempt to control life inflicts death, and the potential for scientific breakthroughs is accompanied by the potential for destruction. Making history come to life literally means risking the end of life. The novel emphasizes the initial problems of imagining an end to history by using evolution as a means to describe scale and the problems of historicizing. If Francis Fukuyama’s “The End of History,” which appeared in the same summer as the events of Crichton’s novel, also became a story of the last man, then *Jurassic Park* can be productively read as a conceit for what kind of life comes after history. The novel resists the essay “The End of History,” in which Fukuyama asserts that the twentieth century presented two threats to liberalism: fascism and communism. Crichton’s
text instead explores the potential problems of the invisible hand guiding genetic research, positing that there is a third challenge to liberalism: capitalism. The following instance of *Jurassic Park* representing scale—in this case, in the words of mathematician and chaos theorist Ian Malcolm—illustrates capitalism’s conflict with liberalism:

> And now chaos theory proves that unpredictability is built into our daily lives. It is as mundane as the rainstorm we cannot predict. And so the grand vision of science, hundreds of years old—the dream of total control—has died in our century. And with it much of the justification, the rationale for science to do what it does. And for us to listen to it. Science has always said that it may not know everything now but it will know, eventually. But now we see that isn’t true. It is an idle boast. (313)

Ian Malcolm, like Stuart Ressler in *Gold Bug*, sees the pursuit of science as a non-teleological endeavor. Yet while Ressler opposes corporatizing science, Malcolm’s philosophy is more complicated; he rejects the capitalist pursuit of science and also denies teleology through rebutting Stalin’s defense of science in *Dialectical and Historical Materialism*, which reads:

> “social life, the history of society, ceases to be an agglomeration of ‘accidents’, for the history of society becomes a development of society according to regular laws, and the study of the history of society becomes a science” (19). For Stalin there are no accidents, only events without understood causes, “things which are as yet not known, but which will be disclosed and made known by the efforts of science and practice” (17). Both Malcolm and Ressler understand science as a constant pursuit of chance, of happenstance, which allows them to both deploy the pursuit of science as a pursuit of happiness—thus signed as an American endeavor, one that, at the end of history, takes on the resonance of a purely capitalist venture. Malcolm continues:
We are witnessing the end of the scientific era. Science, like other outmoded systems, is destroying itself. As it gains in power, it proves itself incapable of handling the power. Because things are going very fast now. Fifty years ago, everyone was gaga over the atomic bomb. That was power. No one could imagine anything more. Yet, a bare decade after the bomb, we began to have genetic power. And genetic power is far more potent than atomic power. And it will be in everyone’s hands. It will be in kits for backyard gardeners. Experiments for schoolchildren. Cheap labs for terrorists and dictators. And that will force everyone to ask the same question—What should I do with my power?—which is the very questions science says it cannot answer. (Crichton 313)

Once again Malcolm and Ressler are in agreement, locating the threat of genetics in its ability to be sold on the free market. Malcolm views scientific breakthroughs like genetic manipulation as paradigm shifts that will radically alter the world. A caricature and mouthpiece for the frenzy over chaos theory in late 1980s and early 1990s, he believes that such science must be regulated, not available to just anyone who can afford it. Here and throughout the novel, he differs from Hammond, the dreamer and entrepreneur behind the nightmare that is Jurassic Park, who doubts the threats that genetics presents to the world. Unlike Malcolm, who calls for regulation, Hammond believes that capitalism will always balance itself out. The novel thus appears to present two characters that embody the clashing ideologies of the post-45 period: Hammond the capitalist versus Malcolm the Marxist. Malcolm, however, voices a theory of history that counters Marxist telos. He actually believes that genetic research on the free market presents a threat to the market itself, to the liberalism that allows it to exist. In other words, to save capitalism, Malcolm believes that capitalism must be regulated. This theory goes beyond Marxist ideology in that he does not believe that one can foresee an end to history. For Malcolm, telos
can only be invented after the fact and history’s end cannot be foreseen because the singularities and sensitive dependences of chaos theory, as he would have it, express the unreliability of fictions about the future. These passages express an anxiety about the ability for narrative to ever fully convey the intentions of its author. Postmodern theory and aesthetics critiqued the technocratic “dream of total control” that Malcolm speaks of, while in *Gold Bug* Powers states: “science is not about control. That is technology” (128-129). Chaos, chance, or accident, is here that for which a cause is beyond human knowledge. One cannot read the signs correctly, and therefore the effect appears accidental.

Malcolm, then, reflects on the postmodern critique of science and of historical narrative while exploring the ends of science and history as products of the enlightenment. At the time of *Jurassic Park*’s publication Soviet Communism was falling apart. The Soviet Union, as a system of power, was based upon a teleological view of history. In a sense, the isolated world behind the iron curtain very much paralleled the controlled environment of Jurassic Park, one that, in the words of Malcolm, “is not the real world. It is intended to be an adapted environment that only imitates a natural environment. In that sense, it’s a true park, rather like a Japanese formal garden. Nature manipulated to be more natural than the real thing” (133). The novel’s representation of nature as more real than the natural elaborates upon the problem of evolution as metaphor. In *Jurassic Park* creatures that evolved in an environment 65 million years past cannot possibly be wholly adapted to the contemporary world. The novel introduces the prehistoric into the contemporary, playing on a different end of history, one in which the past exists in the present, simultaneously interacting with and making history—a fantasy in which nothing evolves, nothing changes. Yet the dinosaurs of Jurassic Park are but modified versions of this past; they represent a capitalist attempt to turn history into commodity, dangerous in suggesting
that history can be manufactured, authored, rather than emerge from contingent events. The commodification of history that *Jurassic Park* critiques also critiques teleology in showing that such a use of history forecloses the possibility of other outcomes.

*The Gold Bug Variations* cuts even deeper into the wound of the Cold War’s end and the trauma this inflicted by revealing a desire *within* triumphant capitalism for the resurrection of communism. The novel explicitly depicts capital’s struggle with itself and with socialism. Working together as computer programmers, Franklin Todd and Stuart Ressler decide that they should give their co-worker “Uncle Jimmy[,] a raise” after putting him through a grueling amount of overtime at work due to an error (458). Todd says, “We could penny-shave him. Take every salary we handle. Round the fractional cents down, pitch the remainder into Jimmy’s account. No one is out more than a partial cent, and Jimmy is [. . .] lots richer” (458). However, the programmers make another error when moving this capital, one that results in Jimmy’s paycheck *not* deducting a monthly fee for health insurance. After being removed from the insurance policy, Jimmy voices concern over his lack of insurance to both the insurance company and Todd and Ressler. Though his friends tell him not to worry, that he will go back on the group insurance policy after the deduction from his next paycheck is processed, Jimmy’s questions to the insurance company “awakened a sleepy corporate hierarchy,” one that anguishes Jimmy both mentally and physically (537). He is questioned about his knowledge of the source of the “computer irregularity” and, we are told, “already nursing accumulated anxiety over his inadvertent failure to meet a premium, [Jimmy] was so bewildered by the probe [. . .] that he ruptured an aneurysm that had been hiding an inherited deficiency, secret and soft in his cerebral arteries. He apoplexed on the examination carpet, proclaiming innocence while going into a coma” (Powers 537-538). The large amount of money that Jimmy receives leads to his loss of
insurance, and his attempt to regain coverage leads to his illness. Had the state provided him with healthcare, there would not have been such a conflict between capital and health. Here capital itself conflicts with liberalism.

*Jurassic Park* also portrays capitalism as a source of conflict with the liberalism that allows it to exist and sustain itself in a deliberately horrifying manner. The dinosaurs are themselves capitalist creations that threaten liberalism. Paleontologist, evolutionary biologist, and historian of science Stephen J. Gould reviews both the novel and Steven Spielberg’s film adaptation of *Jurassic Park* in “Dinomania” (1993), which interprets the park’s carnivores as postmodernists of another type. The big old fearsome standard, *Tyrannosaurus rex*, presides over Jurassic Park in all her glory [. . .] But the mantle of carnivorous heroism has clearly passed to the much smaller *Velociraptor* [. . .] Downsizing and diversity are in; constrained hugeness has become a tragic flaw. *Velociraptor* is everything that modern corporate life values in a tough competitor—mean, lean, lithe, and intelligent. (2)

The velociraptors, read as the products and agents of capital, provide an ominous twist to life on the island. They not only breed, overcoming an unnatural double-failsafe programmed into their DNA to prevent reproduction, but manage to escape the island, disappearing into the natural world and becoming part of it. The raptors adapt, one could say, to all environments, to all markets, and exceed the scale of life that was modeled for them upon the island and within the park. Their escape conforms to the warning of Erwin Chargaff discussed earlier: “You cannot recall a new form of life.” *Jurassic Park* attempts to balance its moral between two beliefs in the scale of time. The first is that a new form of life can endanger all life currently on the planet, representing the immediate consequences of a present in which life from the past has returned, and in so doing made a great evolutionary leap and threatened an end to history. The second is
that the existence of all the planet’s current life is, on the grand scale, inconsequential and incidental. History cannot end, but humanity’s perception and understanding of history can disappear.

*Jurassic Park* represents, through dinosaurs’ return to life, Gould’s and Niles Eldredge’s concept of punctuated equilibrium, that evolutionary change can occur rapidly; in doing so, the novel makes an argument against such change, not in the terms of evolution, but in the terms of the historical-political. In 1992 Gould traveled to Russia and witnessed the aftermath of the Soviet Union’s collapse. He wrote about this trip in his “This View of Life” column in *Natural History* that same year. The article, “Life in a punctuation,” applies punctuated equilibrium to Marxism. Gould summarizes his theory of punctuated equilibrium, writing: “Most species are stable for most of their geological lifetimes, often lasting many millions of years—the equilibrium—and that change does not usually occur by imperceptibly gradual alteration of entire species but rather by isolation of small populations and their geologically instantaneous transformation to new species—the punctuation” (4). *Jurassic Park* provides just such an environment: the dinosaurs are isolated in a small population, they are brought back instantaneously, and they evolve independently (though far more rapidly than Gould theorizes).

In this article Gould discusses a piece by the economist David Warsh, which appeared in the *Boston Globe* earlier that year and which applies the theory of punctuated equilibrium to the legacy of Marx. Gould responds, turning his own theory of evolution into a bad metaphor for Marxist political theory. The application of his theory, just like the consequences of the life created in Jurassic Park, holds no consequences to the overall history of life. Instead, Gould focuses far more on the punctuation than the equilibrium, and in doing so makes a false assertion: that if something can happen, then it will happen.
Gould’s language is Crichton’s language, for he sees his theory as “the proper scaling of ordinary events into the vastness of geological time” (4). During his visit to Russia Gould witnessed first hand the failure of the communist state. Gould turns to Warsh on this failure, summarizing the climax of Warsh’s “ironic theme: just as Russia displays abject failure of the largest experiment in Marx’s particular economic theory, the growth of punctuational thinking validates his broader views on the nature of change” (5). He continues, claiming Warsh “missed the most ironic point of all,” that Gould witnessed a great success of Marx’s theory in the failure of the Soviet Union. This success is the application of punctuated equilibrium, his own theory, to the political, “in a most eerie and striking manner, the second component of Marx’s thesis: the validity of the larger model of punctuational change” (5). While the sudden end of the Soviet Union signaled the failure of the Marxist state, nevertheless this failure of Marxist theory provided a success, for from such a rapid change came the triumph for Marx’s theory of revolution. In *Jurassic Park*, the rapid change that the raptors represent threatens to destroy all life on the island, and, if let into the world, lead to an apocalypse beyond the thermonuclear—genetically engineered life destroying natural life. In *Jurassic Park* the artificial destroys the natural, which parallels the understanding of Soviet communism as annihilating *laissez-faire* capitalism.

Of course, evolution is not revolution. Punctuated equilibrium has been disputed since Gould and Eldridge published their article in 1972, not because it is unfeasible, but because of a common misunderstanding. It is thought of as instantaneous, an event, as revolutions are often thought to happen—as in fact, it is represented as happening in *Jurassic Park*. Punctuated equilibrium, in Gould’s application of it to the disintegration of the Soviet Union, is represented as a moment of *kairos*: change that comes in a burst. However, this does not adhere to his initial
definition of punctuated equilibrium. Punctuated equilibrium, rather than a break from Darwin, fits into Darwin’s theory of natural selection over time through adaptation.\textsuperscript{17} As philosopher of science Daniel Dennett explains, punctuated equilibrium can appear to be instantaneous when diagrammed in a certain way, “but that is just a misleading artifact of the huge vertical scale adopted, which shows millions of years to the inch. The sideways motion is not really instantaneous. It is only geologically instantaneous” (285). What we have, then, is an issue of scale.\textsuperscript{18} One will see something very different depending on how one looks at evolution or revolution, on a scale of minutes, as opposed to a scale of millions of years. This returns us to the earlier statement: evolution, as it happens, is an accidental event based upon life’s adaptation to its current environment and the changes that have transpired in that environment. The dinosaurs in \textit{Jurassic Park} grew in a lab but evolved in a different environment; this is how they come to threaten devastation. The environment, the world itself, has evolved without them and cannot evolve quickly enough to keep up with them. Chance, in the end, has more effect upon the life of the dinosaurs in the park than any human authorship.

Gould’s application of punctuated equilibrium to the collapse of the Soviet Union not only misrepresents evolution through the metaphor, but also upholds a fantasy that political events transpire instantaneously rather than through the gradual toil of human and other agents. Such a view of history makes inauthentic the authentic struggles of individuals over not just a generation, but generations. This is precisely what we see in \textit{Jurassic Park}: a punctuated equilibrium—at the level of evolution’s representation in the novel—in which the newly created dinosaurs, at the end of history, evolve as if there were no history any longer, no large time scale or minor events. W. J. T. Mitchell, in \textit{The Last Dinosaur Book}, addresses both Dennett and Gould, writing: “Stephen Jay Gould’s theory of ‘punctuated equilibrium’ is probably the best-
known attempt to restore catastrophism to evolutionary theory in terms of chance and accident” (213). However, the restoration of catastrophism was merely a popular misconception, which *Jurassic Park* borrowed from and contributed to. In doing so, punctuated equilibrium becomes, in the pages of Crichton’s novel, an instance of inauthentic authenticity—a commentary upon a culture that believes that evolution proceeds in a teleological manner. In other words, the idea that evolution must proceed to the current moment is represented in *Jurassic Park* and critiqued in the misconceptions of a character such as Wu.

Richard Dawkins contextualizes such a misrepresentation of punctuated equilibrium when he writes that “the punctuationists aren’t talking about jumps in evolution, they are talking about episodes of relatively rapid evolution” (346). This issue of scale, when applied to something like human revolutions, is at best a way of saying that some political events reach a point, as they did in the Soviet Union, where it *seems* that everything falls apart. But this appearance is not the case: revolutions, on a short scale of time, a human scale, may seem to happen instantaneously, but, historically, a political event such as a revolution occurs over long periods of time due to numerous causes. We see, in *Jurassic Park*, dinosaurs changing at a rate that is relatively as fast as the post-war world was changing due to the collapse of the Soviet Union. The desire to witness rapid change represents nostalgia for the waning possibility of nuclear war. Such an immense and immediate danger to all life actually gave life meaning. Without the threat of full-scale thermonuclear war, life lost the significance ascribed to it over the conflict. Thus the desire to see life change rapidly is tied to the desire to see all life disappear in a flash. In *Jurassic Park*, a genetic entertainment complex replaces the military industrial complex that kept Americans enthralled with fear and the suspense of life ending. These
dinosaurs as weapons of mass destruction, as an extension of capital, reflect nostalgia for the conflicts of the Cold War.19

*Jurassic Park* addresses the problem of depicting an instantaneous change in history rather than change through the accumulation of gradual events by questioning the authenticity of the cloned dinosaurs and their place in history. Born from such evolutionary and revolutionary punctuation as Gould discusses, they are thought of as potentially not even being dinosaurs, but a wholly new life form (Crichton 334). Wu, the head geneticist at Jurassic Park, thinks of himself as William Paley’s watchmaker: an argument for God as designer and creator of life that postulates if one discovers a complex object, a watch, then one must conclude that “the watch must have had a maker” (Gould 8). Wu, however, does not create life but recreates it in the manner of Dawkins’ blind watchmaker, natural selection, described as “blind because it does not see ahead, does not plan consequences, has no purpose in view” (29). Wu only has a purpose through creating telos; he grows the DNA, discovering what kind of dinosaur he has recreated, engineering the dinosaur so that it can survive. Wu gradually adapts them, at the level of the DNA, through trial and error in a manner similar to that of an author writing through drafts of a novel; in short, he constructs a narrative (Crichton 334). These are gradual steps, not a punctuated equilibrium, but, on an evolutionary timescale, they constitute rapid advances in the DNA.

Yet despite Wu’s role as the dinosaurs’ apparent author he begins to doubt his work: “And the limits of his science had left him with a mysterious feeling about the dinosaurs in the park. He was never sure, never really sure at all, whether the behavior of the animals was historically accurate or not. Were they behaving as they really had in the past? It was an open question, ultimately unanswerable” (334). Wu fails to understand that these dinosaurs are not any
dinosaurs that have lived before, but a life utterly new, built from the remains of the old. The prehistoric haunting the end of history, more ghost than alive, this new form of life has emerged from capital and has broken the limits of its engineered genes, moved beyond being synthetic life produced in an artificial environment. The dinosaurs adapt to their surroundings, evolving: “though Wu would never admit it, the discovery that the dinosaurs were breeding represented a tremendous validation of his work. A breeding animal was demonstrably effective in a fundamental way; it implied that Wu had put all the pieces together correctly. He had re-created an animal millions of years old, with such precision that the creature could even reproduce itself’ (334). The accident—his error, their DNA—also continues reproducing. These dinosaurs have become authentic life but inauthentic dinosaurs, new in their evolution. Not only do they represent capital transcending its own limits, they are life itself, its own limit. At the end of the Cold War, the dinosaur comes back to life, surviving the meteor that brought its own kind of nuclear winter. Their return is an apocalyptic celebration of the fact that the bombs never fell from the sky and ended all human life; they survive because we evaded a similar end.\textsuperscript{20}

Our evolution is thus equated with the threat of nuclear war, which is an unconscious recognition of how close we are to the dinosaurs—hence the image of Gould on the cover of \textit{Newsweek} (see Figure 2), which bears headlines about both nuclear arms and the “mysteries of evolution.” A \textit{Tyrannosaurus Rex} and Gould, bearing a trilobite, bridge these headlines, one pointing to our extinction, the other to our origin. Even in the contemporaneous critical consciousness, Americans could not help but equate the idea of possible nuclear apocalypse with the extinction of the dinosaurs. The great evolutionary denial of \textit{Jurassic Park} is the use of frog DNA to complete the missing links in recovered dinosaur DNA. As Dennett explains, the “choice of [. . .] frog” DNA “manifests an interesting error—an instance [. . .] of the Great Chain
of Being fallacy. Humans, of course, are more closely related to dinosaurs than either is to frogs. Human DNA would have been better than frog DNA. Bird DNA would be better still” (114-115 n. 9). The denial of humankind’s genetic proximity to dinosaurs is what allows the dinosaurs to reproduce, having inherited the sex-changing genetic trait of frogs. It is our sense of history’s ending and denial of evolution that has made them. The triumph of capital, even over life itself, evolves in *Jurassic Park* into a revolution. These dinosaurs, born of capital, threaten to end all human life, therefore also threatening to end all capital.
IV. Anthropocentric Still Life

*The Gold Bug Variations* demands that the reader imagine life not as something that struggles to any preconceived end, but that struggles for the sake of life itself: “Evolution sets such unlikelihoods into existence that it seems, given time, universally ingenious, eternally able to one-up. In fact, it’s a patch job, short-term kludges barely breaking even, ducking down blind alleys, working only with existing parts. The map is full of places that one can’t get to from here” (469). That which evolves life is an accident contingent upon a series of other accidents—accidents of natural selection, of environment. “Nothing is a priori,” the passage continues, “other solutions will never hit upon the particular next trick, no matter how many eons you let spin. Life on the planet could have been entirely different: billions of years of prokaryotes, unchanged since inception, stretching on steadily until the sun dies” (469). The scale represented here invokes the amazing improbability that is life, insists on its precarious preciousness at the most minute level; through this focus on the minute, it points to the importance of all life, of the living world as one connected being that clambered among the wreckage of history, making a path to right now, accident by accident.

The novel thus marvels at the immense magnitude of life through describing its smallest level, the four nucleotides that make up the three codons that code for all life. In *Gold Bug* the Cold War is represented as a perpetual war. It is a war that will go on decades beyond the 1980s, a war in which the only end imaginable is the destruction of all life on the planet. Yet it describes the fear of indecipherable mutation as outweighing the fear of annihilation: “The specter is more terrifying than mass extinction. The annihilation of most of the globe seemed survivable so long as some fraction of the message remained intact. But if monstrous meaninglessness propagates with the speed and exactitude of natural transmission, everything is over” (495). While full-scale
nuclear war would instantaneously end all life, the fallout from even the testing of such weapons can mutate DNA, scrambling the sequence that writes life.\textsuperscript{22} The threat of instantaneous death becomes a long death on the human scale of time. In this way nuclear time alters evolutionary time, raising the question: can life outlive certain radioactive isotopes’ half-lives? Powers writes, “The loss of a great library to fire is a tragedy. But the surreptitious introduction of thousands of untraceable errors into reliable books, errors picked up and distributed endlessly by tireless researchers, is nightmare beyond measure” (495). Life, metaphorically figured as “a great library,” can be consumed in a great conflagration at any moment, but fallout corrupts the smaller parts of this library of life, the books, words, and letters, becoming altered until unintelligible, until life cannot read itself, cannot reproduce life. The library in this metaphor shifts the descriptive scale, relating the body to a house of texts, which immediately takes the immensely small and grows it to a vast scale. It equates reading with reproducing, culture and life continuing through the ability to read and write.\textsuperscript{23} Life could have never emerged, or it could disappear in the blast of bombs, but more terrifyingly, fallout could contaminate life’s code, turning life into slaughter, scrambling the letters in all of the books in life’s library to the point that they are unreadable. In both scenarios—instant death or mutation of the text—there is no way to describe what has happened, and in this destruction of narrative resides a fear that, for Powers, drives the desire for representation, to live amidst threats that are meaningful in their creation of the meaningless.\textsuperscript{24}

In the face of such incomprehension Powers describes the desire to comprehend through representation, to tell a story: “A flat-out fascination with the threat, soberly maintaining that the only thing to do when the world begins to end is to stand aside and paint it. Uncover it. Name it” (341). The flat-out fascination is also a fallout fascination—a fearful fantasy based on the reality
that total death is totally possible. Yet the still image itself, in capturing the threat, rather than representing resignation in the face of fallout, gives a final protest against the possibility of annihilation. The description, like the image, captures the conflagration that will consume the painting and the painter. This fallout fascination is akin to the opening of Joan Didion’s *Democracy* (1984), published the same year in which the 1980s portion of *Gold Bug* is set. A “detonation theorist [. . .] a pretty fair Sunday painter,” Jack Lovett tells Victor Inez, used to try to render the pink of the fallout sky. “He never got it. Just never captured it. Never came close” (11). If the world will be destroyed then the only creative act that makes any sense, according to Powers, is the representation of such destruction. Like the detonation theorist of Democracy, the characters in Powers’s texts desire to contain that which cannot be contained. They want to deploy containment policy through aesthetic means so as to isolate the damage done—a damage that would have no viewer or reader. The art becomes incomprehensible in both form and content—the fallout, if apocalyptic, could not be represented or perceived—and thus becomes the equivalent of the library’s burning.

The burning of the library, like the velociraptors’ ability to reproduce, signifies internal corruption destroying the whole. In their depiction of the genetic code mutating beyond legibility and authorial control, both novels display a fear of alien intrusion into their subject’s genetics and their own narrative traditions. In this way, *Jurassic Park* and *Gold Bug* deploy modernist forms of writing in their variations of the incest taboo that, in *Our America* (1995), Walter Benn Michaels locates in American modernism as “an attempt through language to substitute the blood ties of family for the affective and/or legal ties of love and marriage. It picks up the linguistic fantasy of the word becoming the thing” (5). The velociraptors of *Jurassic Park* are all genetically the same and are all born of computer code become flesh. They, like Jan O’Deigh of
Gold Bug, are barren. However, the very impurity of the velociraptors’ DNA—its mixture with that of frogs—leads to its being recoded and to the failed authorship of Wu and the other geneticists. Likewise, Jan’s portion of the Gold Bug’s narrative is comprised of various facts and snippets of information taken from reference books and encyclopedias that, when spliced with Franklin Todd’s biography of Ressler, make their offspring—the text of The Gold Bug Variations. While we have seen novels such as Leviathan and The Virgin Suicides trouble narrative through paradox and contradiction, the bodies and stories of The Gold Bug Variations and Jurassic Park are not obliterated by the bomb (or any lesser bomb), and instead synthesize; the plots, engineered into one another, nevertheless remain separate, a reproduction not through the body but only through the word that is then circulated on the market that both novels attempt to critique.

The Gold Bug Variations and Jurassic Park depict and perform this incestuous reproduction as an argument against the purity of capital. Jan O’Deigh, after Ressler’s death and her year of unemployment and mourning, goes to an ATM to make a withdrawal. At the ATM, Jan tells us that she punched in her “four-digit sequence and watched the screen flash ‘Incorrect code. Please try again.’ Before I could reason with the machine, it cleared its screen and posted a new message: ‘Hello old friend. Here’s an easy one’” (Powers 628). The “incorrect code” is actually the correct code, or how else could Jan receive this message? Ressler’s language, translated from code, speaks to O’Deigh through the ATM—a different kind of automatic telling. The desire presented here is twofold: one can become the purity of language and continue after one’s death, become embedded in a code at once both correct and incorrect. While the characters discussed in the last chapter wanted to have things both ways, the characters in Gold Bug do not.
Ressler speaks beyond the grave because he programmed this message in life, because he planned for a future that he knew would transpire after his death.

Ressler’s words pause the transaction and become the notes of Bach’s Goldberg Variations. The dead speak, music plays, and capital momentarily stops—all because of an “incorrect” code. The impossibility of the ATM code being both correct and incorrect manifests yet another symptom of capitalism’s nostalgia for socialism. “With a little programming,” Jan declares, “everything is possible.” Design and pure language become objects in the world: song, a message from the dead. Jan continues, “In the return of silence, the screen displayed: ‘Machine adaptation by SR.’ It cleared and wrote one more quote to compound the quodlibet: ‘He is a man. Take him for all in all.’ Another thirty seconds later, it changed again to read, ‘Please enter your transaction’” (631). She is urged to reconcile with Todd so that their stories can become a product for the reader, and in coupling her story with his, the novel becomes authored. This recursive act of the novel splicing its two stories together recalls the velociraptors defying the fail-safes due to their original DNA being spliced; ultimately, this desire for splicing reflects the culture’s anxiety over division.

As two of the last novels composed during the Cold War, Jurassic Park and The Gold Bug Variations both express a desire for foreign threats. Both depict the shift in anxieties from the nuclear to the genetic and anticipate the resurgence of, in the words of Pat Buchanan, “the cultural war,” which would become “as critical to the kind of nation we shall be as the Cold War [was]” (Buchanan). With the Cold War ended, both novels, like the nation, dwell upon internal fears and express the threats of the future as those of being unable to communicate with any meaning. The end of the Cold War, the victory that should have brought the nation together, instead divided it. The spliced genes of the dinosaurs and the spliced narrative of Gold Bug
reflect a prescient fear of a future for the nation. In this future the lack of an external threat results in internal divisiveness. They demonstrate not only the shifting anxieties of the Cold War’s final years, but also a fear for a future in which capital does not purify or unite, but continues to alienate and birth new fears. In this way, these two novels can—indeed, should—be read as interstitial. Two of the final texts of the Cold War, they are also two of the first published after the end of history, and as such they point not only to fears from the past but to those of their future. The anxieties of both eras, reflected in these novels, continue to torment our present. By reading these novels as products of the cultural transition from anxieties of the nuclear to anxieties of the genetic, one can effectively see the lineage of literary fears born of the Cold War into texts produced beyond that conflict’s supposed close. Rather than preemptively announcing the end of the threat of annihilation, these novels show how this threat evolves, adapts, and continues to inform the production of contemporary American literature, suggesting that it is only in excavating the terrors of our cultural lineage that new anxieties and fears can be identified, faced, and overcome.
Notes

1 In *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics* (1999), N. Katherine Hayles, in a discussion of the metaphysics of presence addresses the breakdown of teleological systems into random systems: “meaning is not front-loaded into the system, and the origin does not act to ground signification.” (Hayles 285). Kenney’s poem operates in just such a manner, taking linear order and making it strange through a reorganization of the words in well known phrases, evolving meanings while weaving together various voices and moments of history to create a present reading experience.

2 The problem that Einstein and others recognized (and continue to recognize) between his General Theory of Relativity and Quantum Mechanics that does not allow for a Theory of Everything is that, in short, in quantum mechanics things can happen that the General Theory of Relativity cannot explain—i.e. a particle being two places at once.

3 That said, Richard Powers’s and Michael Crichton’s politics differ. While Powers, as Latour’s need for a coining indicates, is not often thought of as an author of Science Fiction, his politics lean toward the left while Crichton, at least on issues of science, tends toward the right. See, for instance, Crichton’s “Aliens Cause Global Warming” and his testimony before the Senate.


5 In “The Prodigious Fiction of Richard Powers, William Vollmann and David Foster Wallace,” Tom LeClair favors a reading of *The Gold Bug Variations* that emphasizes the power of the natural world and the complexity derived from the seemingly simple, both of which LeClair claims “enunciates a new naturalism” (LeClair 20). For a challenge to this reading see “Science and the Sacred: Intertextuality in Richard Powers’s *The Gold Bug Variations*” by J. D. Thomas, who cleverly argues that the use of religious language in Powers’s novel is the most effective way to describe the realities of science. Finally, see Jay Labinger’s “Encoding an Infinite Message: Richard Powers’s *Gold Bug Variations* [sic]” for a discussion of how metaphor functions in the novel as a system that produces variety. These three essays make arguments that not only express how Powers uses evolution as an argument against telos, but also how he combines the content of his novel with its form, weaving wonders from waste.

6 Both *Gold Bug* and *Jurassic Park* are far more interested in contingency and evolution than convergence. As I later argue, this is due to the influence of Stephen Jay Gould and Niles Eldredge’s theory of punctuated equilibrium, among others. For discussions of Gould and convergence, see Nick Lane’s *Power, Sex, Suicide* (2005) (22-23). See also E. O. Wilson’s *Consilience: The Unity of Knowledge* (1998) and Gould and Eldredge’s reviews of Wilson’s influential text.

7 In *The Blind Watchmaker* (1986) Dawkins clarifies the kind of chance inherent to the process of evolution while also addressing the challenge for thinking in terms of evolutionary time and the popular confusion of chance and absolute chance (xvii-xix). See also Monod’s *Chance and Necessity* (1971) for a similar discussion. In the first two chapters of *Towards a New Philosophy of Biology: Observations of an Evolutionist* (1988), Ernst Mayer makes a strong argument against teleology, in which he states: “there is neither a program nor a law that can explain and predict biological evolution in any teleological manner” (3). For a discussion of teleological thinking in the work of Darwin, see “Darwin was a Teleologist” by James G. Lennox. For a response to Lennox’s essay, see “Darwin’s Concept of Final Cause: Neither New Nor Trivial” by T. L. Short. For an argument against metaphors of design in
evolutionary biology see Not By Design: Retiring Darwin’s Watchmaker (2011) by John O. Reiss (particularly 328-330), which relates the problems of evolutionary development. This study’s first chapter provides a strong philosophical background regarding the problem of teleology in regards to evolutionary theory.

8 In Our Posthuman Future (2002), Fukuyama writes at length about genetic engineering and its regulation. As a whole, his study is one that looks to a future where hierarchy is broken down due to genetic engineering, a fear that he argues, can be stopped through government regulation.

9 In The Last Dinosaur Book (1998) W. J. T. Mitchell discusses the commonly agreed upon theory regarding the extinction of the dinosaurs, “the Alvarez hypothesis, which proposes that a giant meteorite struck the earth about 65 million years ago, raising a global dust cloud and producing a ‘nuclear winter’ that wiped out the dinosaurs and many other life forms as well. [...] Clearly it had a kind of automatic appeal to the popular imagination in the Cold War era, when the threat of something like the Alvarez meteorite seemed a real possibility” (211). The anachronism of nuclear winter killing the dinosaurs speaks to the perverse logic of dinosaurs’ return after the end of the Cold War. This logic dictates that if it did not kill us, then we can bring them back, using the science that we feared would end us to produce life that will end us; as Mitchell writes: “We live, it is often said, in the period of DNA and the computer. Dramatic as the discovery of nuclear energy was, it was really only a quantitative extension of the age of energy—the development of a bigger productive and destructive force. As we reach the end of the twentieth century, however, it is clear that biology has replaced physics at the frontier of science, and that computers and artificial intelligence constitute the frontier of technology” (216). In From Walden Pond to Jurassic Park (2001), Paul Lauter describes the film Jurassic Park as containing two contradictions relevant to my argument, both of which are also present in the novel. The first being that “the film [...] uses advanced technology both to mount a critique of science and to produce a resonating example of its outcomes” (108). Lauter is discussing the advanced special effects that were used in the film, but nevertheless, the novel proceeds to make a similar critique. The second contradiction is that, as Lauter writes, “it seems to me that the impact of the film is to neutralize the very critique of commodity production that it mounts” (111). While my point regarding Lauter’s above “contradiction” may seem to fall into the trap of the second contradiction, it does not, for the above critique of science is a critique of capital, one that both texts make in showing that once money has been spent to create a commodity, as will be demonstrated below, it takes a lot more than the tenets of chaos theory to get that commodity off the market.

10 For a general discussion of chaos theory, see James Gleick’s Chaos: Making a New Science (1987). For discussions of chaos theory and its application to literary studies, see Chaos Bound: Orderly Disorder in Contemporary Literature and Science (1990) by N. Katherine Hayles, as well the collection of essays, Chaos and Order: Complex Dynamics in Literature and Science (1991), which Hayles edited. While neither of these studies discusses Jurassic Park, the philosophers Evan Kirchhoff and Carl Matheson heavily critique Hayles’s understanding and application of chaos theory in their article, “Chaos and Literature.” For further discussion of chaos theory and its uses and abuses in literary criticism, see Fashionable Nonsense: Postmodern Intellectual’s Abuse of Science (1999) by Alan Sokal and Jean Bricmont.

11 For a discussion of the impact of evolutionary biology on American culture see Steven Belletto’s discussion of Jacques Monod in No Accident Comrade, pp. 7-13, as well as his discussion of creative design, pp. 147-148. For a discussion of science and narrative, see The Postmodern Condition (1979) by Lyotard, pp. 53-60.

12 In his speech, “Aliens Cause Global Warming” Crichton discusses postmodernism’s understanding of science and questions whether the “post-modernists” are correct in relation to scientific evidence and debates regarding SETI and global warming. For a discussion of enlightenment thinking’s legacy, see Bruno Latour’s We Have Never Been Modern (1991), especially pp. 46-48. For a discussion of modernity against itself, see Ulrich Beck’s Risk Society (1992).


14 W. J. T. Mitchell writes of labor and production in Jurassic Park, designating the age that a text like Jurassic Park represents as one of “biocybernetic reproduction” (216).
15 For an extended study of the relationship between biology and dialectics, see Richard Levin’s and Richard Lewontin’s The Dialectical Biologist (1985), especially the first chapter on the ideology of evolution and the eighth chapter on the commodification of science.

16 In The Blind Watchmaker Dawkins discusses punctuated equilibrium at great length. Particularly applicable to the above discussion are his comments on pages 344-346 and 354.

17 For Gould’s take on the debate and the theory, see his Punctuated Equilibrium (2007).

18 Denying the revolutionary radicalism of punctuationism in The Blind Watchmaker, Richard Dawkins returns to Gould’s initial assertions, demystifying the mass media reports of punctuated equilibrium that Gould and Eldredge encouraged. He writes that they “chose, especially in their later writings in which they were eagerly following journalists, to sell their ideas as being radically opposed to Darwin’s and opposed to the neo-Darwinian synthesis” (343). However, their ideas are not opposed to Darwin’s initial ideas. What Gould, Eldredge and other punctuationists oppose is “Darwin’s alleged belief in the constancy of rates of evolution […] because they think that evolution […] occurs rapidly during relatively brief bursts of activity. […] When we say ‘relatively’ brief we mean, of course, brief relative to the geological timescale in general” (344-345).

19 For an extended discussion of Cold War nostalgia, see Daniel Grausam’s “‘It is only a statement of the power of what comes after’: Atomic Nostalgia and the Ends of Postmodernism.” Of particular interest to the topic at hand is his reading of Richard Powers’s 2000 novel, Plowing the Dark.

20 Gould himself testified before Congress (as seen in his Nova special, “Stephen Jay Gould: This View of Life”) that nuclear winter had occurred at least once before on earth, and that was the event that destroyed the dinosaurs. In a 1983 article he contributed to, “Long-Term Biological Consequences of Nuclear War,” (by Ehrlich et al.) he made a similar claim. See also the article “Nuclear Winter: Global Consequences of Multiple Nuclear Explosions” by Turco et al. for a similar analysis.

21 In her essay “From Extinction to Electronics: Dead Frogs, Live Dinosaurs, and Electric Sheep” Ursula K. Heise provides a compelling ecological reading of the use of frog DNA in Jurassic Park: “The dinosaurs in the theme park, therefore, are not genetically pure, but partially frogs. Not only does this genetic mix turn them into creatures that are partially prehistoric and partially contemporary, it also associates them with another family of animals that is threatened by species loss” (63).

22 Earlier in the novel Ressler watches a debate between Linus Pauling and Edward Teller, which was held in 1958 (Powers 242-246). In the debate the physicist Teller (who worked on the development of the hydrogen bomb) argued that nuclear energy is safe and should continue to be used and developed for the good of the public. Pauling, a chemist and biochemist argued against continued nuclear testing, focusing on the dangers of fallout as a reason to stop testing. For a full manuscript of the debate see: <http://osulibrary.oregonstate.edu/specialcollections/coll/pauling/peace/papers/1958p2.1.html>.

23 For an extended discussion of language, the genetic, and metaphor, see Refiguring Life: Metaphors of Twentieth Century Biology (1995) by Evelyn Fox Keller.


25 N. Katherine Hayles, in How We Became Posthuman, discusses Powers’s recursive language as it relates to computer programming—which in Gold Bug is compared to the function of DNA (Hayles 264-269).

26 For a discussion of the anxieties and aesthetic expressions that stemmed from the possibility of total annihilation due to full-scale thermonuclear war, see Daniel Grausam’s On Endings (2011). For the most thorough and influential study of containment policy and its effect upon American culture, see Alan Nadel’s Containment Culture (1995).

Chapter 4

The Reality of Chance in American Fantasy: Representing Trauma, Accident, and Identity

Men are born for games. Nothing else. Every child knows that play is nobler than work. He knows too that the worth or merit of a game is not inherent in the game itself but rather in the value of that which is put at hazard. Games of chance require a wager to have meaning at all. Games of sport involve the skill and strength of the opponents and the humiliation of defeat and the pride of victory are in themselves sufficient stake because they inhere in the worth of the principals and define them. But trial of chance or trial of worth all games aspire to the condition of war for here that which is wagered swallows up game, player, all.

–Cormac McCarthy, Blood Meridian (1985)

I. Playing with Chance, Relinquishing Control

In Kathy Acker’s Blood and Guts in High School (1984) Janey, while captive to a Persian slave trader, writes a poem titled “A throw of the dice will never abolish chance” (105).1 We are told that this is a poem that Janey wrote “by herself,” one that the slave trader will not see, will not correspond with. The slave trader has kept Janey captive, subjecting her to sadism and sexual slavery, the equivalent of living in a sexual dungeon. This poem appears in the section titled “The Persian Poems.” Janey has found a Persian primer and has begun to teach herself the language of her master. However, the mastery of her master’s language does not set her free. It is Acker’s narrative control that results in Janey finding the Persian grammar and that pushes the plot along. Janey remains the slave of both her Persian master and Acker, who controls what she translates. Through her use of experimentation—the intrusion of, for example, handwritten Persian—Acker creates a sense of chance for the reader in his or her endeavors to make meaning from the text. From the perspective of the reader, it seems that at any moment in Blood and Guts
in High School the linear narrative can be—and often is—broken with the intrusion of an innovation. Thus, the poem “A throw of the dice will never abolish chance” insists upon the fact that no matter how many encounters one has with chance, chance itself will continue to be a guiding factor in one’s existence, subjecting one to a form of ontological slavery. Blood And Guts in High School seems to be structured through a series of chance transitions and encounters, and this poem directs the reader to understand the novel as a throw of the dice. Chance will not be abolished no matter how much narrative structure is used to counter it. Or, in alternate terms, chance is a fundamental element in establishing narrative control, in not only understanding the novel but also in allowing for the plot of the novel to progress, all the while enslaving the reader and Janey, pushing us forward in a plot that is out of our control, in Acker’s hands. The poem begins:

I don’t want nothing no more

I just wanna be left alone

I don want no cancer in my bones

All you people in the streets

You don wanna marry me

I don’t know what or who’s happening (Acker 105-106)

Janey’s poem expresses what the reader experiences throughout the novel: that it is not clear what is happening due to the fact that Acker’s prose controls and guides us through a narrative that seems to be structured through a throw of the dice. At this point both the reader and Janey may want some clarity, some closure to the narrative rather than the narrative’s continued growth—a kind of aesthetic cancer, each story growing into another seemingly without purpose
or meaning. There is no marriage between Janey and the stories that happen to her, and this is why Janey and the reader are both frustrated and “don’t know what or who’s happening.”

What is happening is that, through deploying such careful authorial control in such an experimental manner, Acker is relinquishing some of her control over the text’s meaning through depicting non-linear forms of representation. The inclusion of maps, diagrams, and drawings, as well as varying font styles, plagiarism (of Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter* and Mallarmé, among other texts), and a reflexivity associated with the methods of postmodern aesthetics, results in Acker plunging the reader into the labyrinth of her text and allowing them to find their own ways in and out rather than guiding them down one path. Through relying upon chance, Acker creates the freedom for the reader to approach the text as a series of dice rolls, chance encounters that undermine the text as an interpellative force and allow one to subjugate the text. Acker’s deployment of chance and accident subverts her own authorial control, opening the text, creating the frustrating moments where it seems that anything could and very well may happen in this novel, but also allowing the reader to understand the novel as a series of chance encounters with a language that, through this use of accident, has become increasingly alien.

The particular strangeness of Acker’s representation and deployment of accident becomes apparent when compared with the novel’s first use of accident. At the end of the first section, “Inside High School,” Janey and the rest of “THE SCORPIONS” flee a rock show in their van, when “A tiny red light appeared in the blackness. The red light grew larger and larger. I don’t remember the crash. Everyone died but Monkey who got brain damage and me. For a few days I floated in a dream” (44). As Katie Muth points out in “Postmodern Fiction as Poststructuralist Theory: Kathy Acker’s *Blood and Guts in High School,*” the dream maps immediately follow this car accident (89). The accident is initially used as a means of controlling the plot, pushing
the narrative forward and leading the reader into the experimental dream maps. The “alinear and labyrinthine” dream maps “interpret themselves [. . .] only to lead us into new dead-ends or to revisit old ones” (Muth 92, 94). The dream maps depict numerous unrelated events that stem from the trauma of the accident—the tuché—which Lacan called “the encounter with the real” (Lacan 53). The dreams themselves, as symptoms of the various traumas Janey has suffered, represent the inability to process accident and translate accident into narrative. Acker resists giving a narrative translation of the maps, providing them as drawn diagrams with descriptive passages that act as “a proliferation of refusals that send us scrambling through the text to make sense of it—refusals that slow us down, trip us up, abandon the story, and thus give us the uneasy feeling that something other than what we’ve just been piecing together matters more—refusals that, however, deny to us what that something else might be” (Muth 99).

Acker’s novel places chance and accident into narrative so as to undermine any coherent sense of plot or story, but such refusals proliferate throughout texts from the 1970s, depicting an America that was obsessed with not just controlling chance but the ways that chance encounters control narrative. In turning to the 1970s in this final chapter I hope to show the continuity between American culture’s perception of accident crystallizing into conspiracy in the late 1960s, as I discussed in the introduction, and how the evasion and denial of accident in the 1980s and early 1990s began to form. Three of these post-73 texts that show chance as a means of controlling narrative, Dungeons & Dragons (1974, 1978), The Deer Hunter (1978), and Gravity’s Rainbow (1973), manifest similar labyrinthine narrative structures subverted through the use of chance. These texts depict an American anxiety that developed after the end of the 1960s, Vietnam, and Watergate, one that desires to exist within the overwhelming force of a master narrative in the face of a world in which all that has happened is out of one’s control. The
depictions of chance as a means of control reveal that in seizing chance the individual has the capacity to author their own existence against perceived visions of teleology. The resistance of teleology via chance and accident ultimately shows an America that yearned for a master narrative that would lead the country away from the turmoil of the 1960s and return America to the perceived utopic period of the 1950s. Of course, such a place can exist nowhere but in the recurrent narrative structure of a nostalgic vision of America in which ethics could be seen in no uncertain terms. Such a narrative is embodied in the election of Ronald Reagan, as discussed in the first and second chapters, to the office of President “on the strength of his promise to bury that decade and the systemic crises it had come to stand for” (Killen 273).² Such a vision was impossible after the traumas of the 1960s. Americans could no longer see a straight dividing line between good and bad; instead, the problem of what it meant to be an American and a responsible ethical agent in the world, one in control of one’s present and future actions, became a labyrinthine journey. In the chapter that follows, I show that, like Acker, these authors use accident and games of chance to depict the American imagination as paranoid fantasy: as Russian roulette played against one’s enemies as well as closest friends, as dungeon crawls where the only way one could become an agent was to throw the dice. These texts reveal that Americans in this period yearned for the paranoid fantasy and denied the possibility of chance, which is represented in these texts as the ultimate threat to American’s sense of a coherent identity and history—a threat that, as I discuss in the conclusion that follows this chapter, continues to this day.
II. Satan Plays Dice: *Dungeons & Dragons* and the Fantasy of Controlling Identity

“You have authorized Russian roulette. [. . .] Over the months to come there will be many thrilling and harmless clicks of the gun as Dungeons and Dragons [sic] is held to the heads of our young people. But another deadly explosion will come” (Brooke). So said the Faith Bible Evangelical Free Church’s Reverend Robert O. Bakke to Putnam, Connecticut’s Board of Education. The Board of Education had just decided to allow students to continue playing *Dungeons & Dragons* at school after a heated debate between members of the Board, school officials, the Reverend, concerned parents, and the Christian Information Council. The reason for this debate regarding the ban of the role-playing game: the suicide of a local teenager, Roland Cartier. Since the early 1980s *Dungeons & Dragons* and *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons*, the first and best-selling fantasy role-playing game, has been the subject of controversy regarding its effects upon players’ abilities to separate their own identities from those of their imagined characters and the narratives in which they participate. The Reverend’s words, delivered in the form and with the authority of prophecy, compare a game in which one plays the role of a character-type from fantasy to the “game” of Russian roulette. Following the Reverend’s metaphor to its ends, the act of performing a character is equivalent to placing a bullet in the chamber of a gun, spinning the chamber, then holding the loaded weapon to one’s head and pulling the trigger.

The problem that the Reverend has with *Dungeons & Dragons* is, according to his metaphor, with the game’s deployment of chance, the accidental intruding into his belief system. Yet while *Dungeons & Dragons* appears to be based largely upon chance—the roll of the dice—the narrative structure of the game, on the part of the Dungeon Master and the players, actually
allows for few accidents to intrude upon the game’s narrative, as Daniel Punday explains in his

*Five Strands of Fictionality* (2010):

role-playing games are built around controlling chance: depending on random events but narrowly limiting the effects of chance to overrule player tactics. When players know, for example, precisely their number of hit-points and the possible damage caused by an opponent’s weapon, they can calculate all possible outcomes of a particular encounter. This predictability can help to explain why many handbooks warn players against knowing too much about the rules of the game. [. . .] The desire not to allow players to calculate the odds of every action can be seen as a recognition that doing so robs the game of the feeling that something extraordinary might happen. Obviously, outside of the scope of actions covered by numerically based rules, the game can still stage surprising events and introduce unlikely characters. But since these rules are often used to determine the outcome of particularly important events (a climatic battle, for instance), allowing them to be entirely predictable seems to some designers to set an inappropriate tone for the game as a whole. (Punday 164)

Chance must be controlled in the narrative of the game in order for the narrative to remain coherent and successfully tell a story that satisfies both the needs of the players and the Dungeon Master. Chance creates a large part of the game’s suspense at the level of simulated combat, but the structured use of chance in the game only creates suspense, namely in the expectation that one’s character can perish, thus ending the story for that player. In his study *Shared Fantasy: Role-Playing Games as Social Worlds* (1983) the sociologist Gary Alan Fine discusses the way chance is used in the game: “it is not the chancy [sic] roll of the dice per se that players most object to. Rather, it is the location of this chance in the game. Rolls are particularly objectionable
at critical junctures in the game when they may result in severe negative outcomes” (91). The players know that chance will be a factor in the game, and because they know this they wish to forgo the roll of the dice and provide speech acts that will clearly designate what their character does. In the game, language is used as a means of control, a way of adding to the Dungeon Master’s narrative and even providing a counter to it. Fine continues, “for nonessential events, players sometimes roll the dice even when they clearly have the right to speak for their characters, for example, how much alcohol a player will consume or what to say to an attractive female character. However, this overplaying of the chance factors is rare and it is far more common for players to deny the implications of chance through folk beliefs and through cheating” (91). The players have no problem putting the non-narrative aspects of the game, i.e. events that have no effect upon the greater narrative arc, into the hands of chance. Nevertheless, as Fine notes, players try to avoid chance so that they can achieve their desires without having to rely upon factors outside of their imaginations and their use of language.

The element of chance in both Russian roulette and Dungeons & Dragons makes the lives of individuals—whether real or imagined—subject to the throw of the dice, the spin of the chamber. The perils are found in the Reverend’s agreement with the Christian Information Council’s statement that “playing these games can desensitize players to murder, suicide, rape, torture, robbery, the occult or any other immoral or illegal act [. . .] the company, TSR, is making a profit while familiarizing its millions of followers with terms and rituals of occult forms of religion” (Brooke). For both the Reverend and the Christian Information Council, playing Dungeons & Dragons alters the identities of the player. This change in identity results in the characters committing in reality the acts that their characters commit in fantasy. However, his agreement with this statement goes beyond the terrors of the mere teaching of “the occult.” The
Reverend finds the largest risk in the element of chance. His is a fear of “the occult” and a fear that playing “the occult” will lead, through accident, to a belief in the occult, which will result in a transformation of the teenage player into a real-life occultist. In other words, the casting of dice becomes equivalent to the casting of spells.

What *Dungeons & Dragons* provides for Reverend Bakke and the Christian Information Council is an enemy that is but one part of a vast occult conspiracy to corrupt American youth and destroy Christian values. In their paranoid reading, the enemies of *Dungeons & Dragons* remove the element of chance from the game—as seen in the Reverend’s metaphor and as will be seen in Jack Chick’s comic strip, “Dark Dungeons”—and remove the element of chance from reality as well. Their denial of chance derives from their belief in a teleological Christian history, one in which good will triumph over evil. It is significant that their beliefs mirror the fictional worlds of fantasy role-playing games. In *The Fantasy Role-Playing Game: A New Performing Art* (2001) Daniel Mackay explains that the fantasy genre expresses the desire for a world lacking moral ambiguity:

the wave of fantasy films in which good and evil are clearly defined indicated a nostalgic longing for a time before the aggravating cultural, political, and economic ambiguities of the late 1960s and 1970s. The ambiguities of this era did not correspond to the mirages of communism versus free world, cowboy versus Indian, and good guy versus bad guy that permeated the political rhetoric and the cultural climate of the 1950s. The initial success of role-playing games captured the attention of an American looking for good versus evil, if not in real life then at least in their character’s abilities and physical attributes according to the role-playing game’s rules. (Mackay 23-24)
In the fantasy world of the game’s opponents—one that mirrors that of *Dungeons & Dragons*’ own fantasy setting—an overwhelming demonic force conspires against all that is good. The demonic force, however, as I argue below, stands in for more mundane but nonetheless troubling social problems, such as homosexuality and drug abuse. Eve Sedgwick has written of paranoia (extending Guy Hocquenghem’s theorizing): “If paranoia reflects the repression of same sex desire [. . .] then paranoia is a uniquely privileged site for illuminating not homosexuality itself, but precisely the mechanisms of homophobic and heterosexist enforcement against it” (126).

This fantasy appeals so much because it removes any element of chance from reality: it is easier to combat a Satanic conspiracy than it is to stop or explain homosexuality, teenage drug abuse, or Russian roulette. The fantasy of Satanic conspiracy works both upon the game’s proponents and opponents, as both long for a world with clearly defined heroes and villains. However, the opponents were the ones who believed and continue to believe that fantasy—Satanic conspiracy, the occult—are corrupting the players of this game, rather than actual social problems that stem from an America in conflict not with outside forces but with itself. The era of Reagan “was nostalgic in the literal and original sense of the term, a longing to return to the homeland, which the afflicted one desperately feels he will never see again” (Wilentz 136). While Wilentz points out that Reaganism is not the only instance of American nostalgia, Daniel Marcus writes that “Reagan depicted the 1950s as the stopping point of American historical progress, and functioned in conservative rhetoric as the repository of the accumulated virtues of the past” (61). The nostalgia of *Dungeons & Dragons* opponents is typical of the overwhelming ideology of the Reagan era; one that looks to the 1950s as the location of a prelapsarian America.

This nostalgia is teleological, and such teleology extends into the way that the contemporary situation is imagined as one that maps onto the preconceived notions of the
perceived political climate of the 1950s while also creating a hope of redeeming the present and restoring the longed for, lost past. In this case, we see evangelical Christians battling *Dungeons & Dragons* much in the same manner that a player of the game would battle monsters. Both the believer and the player are indulging in paranoid thinking. This paranoia is best represented in Thomas Pynchon’s description of the effects of the drug Oneirine: “About the paranoia noted under the drug, there is nothing remarkable. Like other sorts of paranoia, it is nothing less than the onset, the leading edge, of the discovery that *everything is connected, everything in the Creation*, a secondary illumination—not yet blindingly One, but at least connected, and perhaps a route In” (703). However, the player must believe that everything connects because they are playing a game in which various bits of information, as in a mystery, will lead them to a solution—whether it is a monster’s one weakness or the way one must turn inside of a dungeon. One can successfully play a game of *Dungeons & Dragons* believing that everything connects because the game, as a narrative structure, *is* teleological. “A paranoid reading practice is closely tied to a notion of the inevitable,” Sedgwick writes; “there are other features of queer reading that can attune it exquisitely to a heartbeat of contingency” (Sedgwick 147). Paranoid reading works in *Dungeons & Dragons* because the players know that they are playing a story, working towards an end, though this end may not be the one that they or the Dungeon Master intended because of the roll of the dice.6 In this way chance acts as a way for players to cope with a game that does not meet their initial expectations. Through engaging in paranoid reading, the players can accept a game in which their characters perish as the foregone conclusion of a narrative that engaged with chance. While paranoid reading acts as a method for players to enter into a game, for the evangelical opponents of *Dungeons & Dragons*, it is perceived simply as the way of the world. The *telos* that they believe in is one of final conflict in the actual world with terrifying
evil forces, which props their belief that there must be an evil to combat, a demonic force that they must slay and most certainly will overcome. In other words, the critics of *Dungeons & Dragons* read the game as authentically inauthentic, believing that playing it will become real life; rolls of the dice will result in actual perils rather than determining the outcome of fictional narratives.

Reverend Bakke was not the first to decry *Dungeons & Dragons* on the grounds that fantasy role-playing not only teaches “the occult” but also leads tragic consequences. In 1984 the evangelical Christian cartoonist Jack T. Chick wrote and illustrated a comic strip title “Dark Dungeons” that depicts a story similar to the one that *The New York Times* would report a year later. In “Dark Dungeons” teenage friends Marcie and Debbie play *Dungeons & Dragons*. When Marcie’s character Black Leaf dies in the game Marcie responds hysterically, as if she, rather than her character, is dying (Figure 1). Marcie’s panic signifies more than a recreational investment in the game. In fact, she does not take *Dungeons & Dragons* to be a game at all, identifying the death of her character as her own death. This is made all the more apparent in Debbie telling Marcie that she no longer exists. Marcie’s identification with her character and grief over her character’s death is exacerbated through Debbie’s continued play of the game—

![Figure 1. The Death of Black Leaf (panel two of “Dark Dungeons”).](image-url)
the narrative of the fantasy world continues without her. “Dark Dungeons” depicts death as equivalent to one’s inability to continue participating in narrative.

Following Black Leaf’s death and Marcie’s departure, Ms. Frost, the dark-haired Dungeon Master, declares that because Debbie’s character has reached the eighth level she is now ready to use “real spells.” The play of the game has actually taught Debbie “real” occult practices—so much so that she can join a real-life coven (Figure 2). The panel depicts a coven of adults, all robed and seemingly of varying ages, welcoming Debbie. Ms. Frost refers to Debbie with the name of her character as if this facet of the real world is merely an extension of the fantasy world. Interestingly, this coven of witches consists of both genders, while the strip makes protagonists of only female players of Dungeons & Dragons. While there are an equal number of both male and females playing the game, the strip oddly focuses on the problems of three female players. This is particularly strange because most players of the game (especially in the early 1980s) were male. As a piece of propaganda, the strip plays on a host of stereotypes relating to the Bovaryesque figure of the female who longs to live in fantasy rather than engage with reality. Nevertheless, the role of men in this panel also marks the coven as a parallel to the company that published Dungeons and Dragons, TSR (of which the members and writers of the books were all
men). Particularly striking is the man who shakes Marcie’s hand, whose bald-head is perhaps meant to mark him as Anton LaVey, the founder of the Church of Satan. Overall, this panel panders to the fear that a large underground occult network exists and uses something as seemingly innocuous as *Dungeon & Dragons* as a means of recruiting. The fear of *Dungeons & Dragons* that this strip wishes to instill in the reader, whether parent or teenaged player, is based upon the idea that while one may believe that he or she is playing a mere game, they are actually being indoctrinated into occult practice against their intentions and thus by accident.

Despite having entered a “real” world of wizardry, after her initiation, Debbie continues to “play” *Dungeons & Dragons*, ignoring Marcie’s phone calls and grief. When Debbie eventually goes to Marcie’s home, she finds that Marcie has hanged herself; apparently “a part of her died” with the death of her character (Figures 3. and 4). Covered with various *Dungeons &
Figures 3-4. Marcie’s suicide and suicide note (panels ten and eleven of “Dark Dungeons).

*Dragons* paraphernalia, Marcie’s room holds all of the danger signs for a teenager who lives in a fantasy world. This point is made all the more heavily with her suicide note. Marcie blames herself for the death of her character, an extension of herself that she apparently cannot live without. Debbie’s assertion that Marcie didn’t have to kill herself once again situates *Dungeons & Dragons* in the realm of chance. While Marcie certainly did not have to kill herself, Debbie’s exclamation reminds us that there are things out of one’s control—that chance killed Black Leaf and that this chance event lead to Marcie’s decision to end her own life. In taking the blame for Black Leaf’s death Marcie asserts narrative control over events; thus, she takes the blame for Black Leaf’s death and takes control into her own hands, ending her own life. When Marcie ends her own life she also ends any interaction she can have with chance. Chance is the real threat here, not the occult.

Now mourning her friend’s death, Debbie tells Ms. Frost that she should have helped Marcie rather than continued playing the game—to which Ms. Frost responds that Debbie should “get her priorities straight.” Debbie realizes that “Jesus is the only answer” and attends a Christian service, at which the speaker is a man who “came out of witchcraft” (Figure 5).
Marcie chooses Christ to guide her through life rather than the *Dungeon Master’s Guide* (1979). Ms. Frost is here given up for the guidance of an older man that can sympathize with her experiences. Of importance here is that Debbie follows the advice of an older, attractive Christian male. The answer is not to invest one’s life in role-playing a character and studying the occult but rather to be born again. This resolution requires abandoning the world of imaginary fantasy role-playing and entering into the “real” world of male-female relationships—for Evangelical Christians, among others, the original role-playing game. This relationship can only begin with Debbie repenting her sins, performing a speech act that gives her soul to Christ. The intention behind the words she speaks is devoid of chance. The meaning of her words is to be taken as sincere and it is their sincerity that saves her. In this speech act there is no risk of failed intentions. Through investing her faith in Christ, the *logos*, Debbie attempts to defeat chance. While with the roll of dice, one’s intentions have no bearing on the consequences, Debbie here uses words that deliver only her intentions and a known set of consequences.

There are two significant misrepresentations of *Dungeons & Dragons* in “Dark Dungeons.” The first of which, as noted before, is the fact that the strip depicts only young women playing *Dungeons & Dragons*, which is popularly and somewhat accurately associated
with teenage male players. Chick runs into an ideological wall in his attempt to show the evils of the game. Were he to have shown young men being taught occult practices, the strip would have taken on the same implicit homosexual message, but in order for the strip to place the young male players into the world of heterosexual relations, he would have had to introduce a female in the role of either the young male who helps save Debbie or the “speaker,” who clearly stands for a priest. Mike, the young man who aids Debbie, based upon his appearance, very well could be

![Figure 6. Saving Debbie (panel 16 of “Dark Dungeons).](image)

Ms. Frost’s male twin (Figure 6). As Frost’s male double, he saves Debbie from the fantasy world of *Dungeons & Dragons*. Mike cares for Debbie’s immortal soul and displays these feelings for her not through a romantic engagement with her but in the terms of the Christian faith. In the panel above he guides Debbie in the same way that Ms. Frost once guided her. He knows what it is she struggles with, addressing her with loaded language, saying that she should go to the afternoon’s meeting because “the speaker came out of witchcraft” (my emphasis). It is as if the strip itself cannot help but depict *Dungeons & Dragons* as a poor metaphor for other perceived social problems—homosexuality and drug use. While “Dark Dungeons” posits *Dungeons & Dragons* as fraught with teenage homosexual practices—staying up late playing out fantasies with one another—one can also note Marcie’s appearance, distraught state, and plea for
some way to continue playing the game as a stand-in for a dependence upon drugs. The game itself is depicted as being addictive—Marcie’s room only holds *Dungeons & Dragons* paraphernalia—an act that Marcie cannot and does not want to quit. Moreover, Debbie’s disregard for the game, the fact the Ms. Frost pushes her to “real spells,” maps almost perfectly onto the stereotypical gateway drug narrative. While both drug abuse and homosexuality are coded in “Dark Dungeons,” I will later show how both of these perceived social problems were associated with *Dungeons & Dragons* in the late 1970s and early 1980s. As well as accidentally initiating one into occult practice, *Dungeons & Dragons* may, by accident, result in behavior that is equivalent with drug abuse as well as homosexuality.

The second misrepresentation of *Dungeons & Dragons* correlates with both coded depictions of homosexuality and drug abuse. When Ms. Frost kills Marcie’s character she says, “the thief Black Leaf did not find the poison trap, and I declare her dead.” The misrepresentation here is that *Dungeons & Dragons*, a game where one’s desired actions are accomplished through first a speech act (“I’m going to attack the dragon with my sword”) then a roll of the dice has, in “Dark Dungeons,” been evacuated of its element of chance. Ms. Frost simply declares Marcie dead, just as Debbie repents of her sins through a speech act. The game is not played this way, or else it would merely consist of a series of speech acts that the players would utter in order to accomplish their desired goals. There would be no risk and no element of suspense were the game—if it could even still be called a game—played in this way. In removing the element of chance, “Dark Dungeons” portrays the game in the same manner that it portrays indoctrination of and entrance into the world of the occult and Christianity. One achieves their actions, in both the occult and the strip’s representation of *Dungeons & Dragons*, in the same way that one is born again—through a speech act.
In other words, it is a foregone conclusion that playing the game leads to the failure of Christian values and the death of its players. *The New York Times* article in which Reverend Bakke compares playing *Dungeons & Dragons* to playing Russian roulette provides two reports that contradict the claims of the Reverend and the Christian Information Council. Paul Roy, the state police trooper who investigated Cartier’s suicide, said, “Dungeons and Dragons no way killed this kid [sic].” The article continues, “he said the youth had become involved with drugs and had had confrontations with his mother” (Brooke). As well, the article gives the statement of a friend who played *Dungeons & Dragons* with the teen: “I’m sick of them saying that Roland killed himself because it was D and D—it was drugs.” The Reverend’s and Christian Information Council’s attack upon *Dungeons & Dragons* functions in the same manner as Chick’s representation of the game: as a thin veil for problems that the church and society perceives—homosexuality and drug abuse. The Reverend’s and Christian Information Council’s attack upon *Dungeons & Dragons* thus uses the game as a means to overlook the fact that Roland apparently had more mundane—and more serious—problems than an initiation into the occult.

The controversy surrounding *Dungeons & Dragons*, its associations with teenage suicide, and the use of it to veil teenage drug abuse and homosexuality began, as mentioned above, before “Dark Dungeons” was published or Roland Cartier killed himself. In September of 1979 *The New York Times* reported a search that was being conducted in the steam tunnels beneath the University of Michigan. Police and private investigators were looking for James Dallas Egbert III, a sixteen-year-old prodigy who attended the university (Sheppard). *The New York Times* reported: “the student’s disappearance is shrouded in mystery, and school officials believe that he may either have become lost in the tunnels, which carry heat to campus buildings, while playing an elaborate version of a bizarre intellectual game called Dungeons & Dragons [sic] or
that the disappearance might be just a hoax” (Sheppard). William Dear, the private investigator
the Egberts hired to find their son, wrote a book about the ordeal. *The Dungeon Master: The Disappearance of James Dallas Egbert III* (1984) begins on August 22, 1979 with Dear receiving a phone call from Egbert’s uncle. Dear, who became an outspoken critic of *Dungeons & Dragons* after the Egbert case, tells the story of his investigation in a structure that itself follows a game of *Dungeons & Dragons*, falling into a similar problem as that of Chick and Reverend Bakke, namely the elimination of the element of chance for a teleological structure that nevertheless maps onto key narrative elements of *Dungeons & Dragons*.12

Dear depicts himself as a hardboiled detective (Dear ix), and describes his team of investigators as if they are a party of characters from *Dungeons & Dragons*—though it should be said that often it is difficult to tell whether or not this depiction is intentional. Among his party are: his chief investigator, Dick Riddle, who “is loyal, absolutely honest, and persistent”; James Hock, who has “the ability to blend into crowds and become virtually invisible”; and Frank Lambert, “a thirty-year-old, former green beret who served as a sniper in Vietnam” who has “the temper of a wildcat” (Dear 4-5). When describing each of his investigators, he provides a story of a past adventure he had with one of them, such as this one with Frank: “while searching for a map we’d been hired to find, he spent fourteen days on a sailboat, most of the time without food or water. He is almost eerily strong” (Dear 5). Dear bizarrely describes his associates and presents himself as if they are larger-than-life characters—the kind one would find in a game of *Dungeons & Dragons*—while condemning the game itself.

Dear and his party of hyper-masculine investigators go so far as to intimidate one Peggy Hogan, a member of the university’s “Gay Council,” of which Ebert was a member (150). Dear
condemns *Dungeons & Dragons* while discounting Egbert’s use of drugs as the cause of his problems through the reported words of Riddle:

“I think there’s not necessarily any connection between drugs and *Dungeons & Dragons* [sic]. It does bring up a point, however. We know Dallas took drugs, and I find it frightening to think of what the combination of drugs and D & D [sic] might do to him. Again, that false sense of security—he might think his magic-user could do anything. *Dungeons & Dragons* [sic] advertises as a fantasy game; add Dallas’s tremendously creative mind and the power of some drugs to distort reality, and you could very well have a recipe for disaster.” (142)

Drug use alone isn’t the problem—it is the combination of drugs with *Dungeons & Dragons*. While certainly one should be concerned about a sixteen-year old using drugs, it is not clear here what Dear and Riddle feared would happen: would Egbert actually cast a spell? Dear goes further, associating *Dungeons & Dragons* with occult practices through his tangential description of an occult ritual he witnessed while following a lead in his search for Egbert (148-150). While Reverend Bakke, among other critics of *Dungeons & Dragons*, figured the game in terms very similar to the fantasy setting of the game—a struggle between the forces of good against those of evil—Dear took his investigation of Egbert to an even deeper realm of the fantastic, searching the dungeon-like steam tunnels beneath the University of Michigan for Egbert III, enacting what is known in the game as a dungeon crawl.

Perhaps Dear’s endeavors were the most anticlimactic game of *Dungeons & Dragons* ever played. No one was found in the steam tunnels and William Dear never found Egbert III. It was Egbert the III who called Dear from Louisiana, where he had run away. Dear portrays Egbert as a kind of Dungeon Master, manipulating everyone from the start, with his initial note
to a pushpin “map” that he left in his room: “The gun shape on the map represented both a gun and a power plant on campus. The meaning of the gun, I thought, was obvious, as in shooting yourself. Suicide. [...] a gun is the most obvious way to indicate suicide” (268). Why a gun is the most obvious symbol of suicide—and not a symbol of murder—is never stated. What was important to Dear was that Egbert III went so far as to map out a puzzle, a kind of game—a message of where he was and what he was planning. Dear says of this information:

> It occurred to me that Dallas had been, in a way, a dungeon master. By disappearing, leaving clues, and setting up alternative outcomes for his adventure, he had created a game in which the other adventurers—me and my men, his parents, anyone who was involved—never knew what to expect. In Dallas’s ultimate game of Dungeons & Dragons [sic], his only real opponent had been death. (269)

Dear figures Egbert’s suicidal tendencies with the same metaphor that Reverend Bakke used to condemn *Dungeons & Dragons*: Russian roulette. This, of course, ignores the fact that the goal of Russian roulette is *not* to die. Egbert himself showed everyone that if he wanted to shoot himself, he would—and it would not be because he lost a game. A year after he first disappeared, Egbert III held a gun to his own head, pulled the trigger, and finally succeeded in committing suicide (after two failed attempts). Yet Dear reads the game as a reality that Egbert III had forced upon those who were looking for him. Of course, Egbert III was no mastermind, no dungeon master. He was a troubled teen who had struggled with drug abuse and his sexuality. In this regard, the first case that made *Dungeons & Dragons* a scapegoat for various social problems came to be repeated, as if the same dungeon were being crawled through, the dice being rerolled, over the next decade.
On September 22\textsuperscript{nd} 1985 the *Providence Journal* reported that William Dear, among others, was in town to speak against *Dungeons & Dragons*, despite Cartier’s mother saying that the game had nothing to do with his suicide and the fact that the high school would not be sponsoring a club for *Dungeons & Dragons* due to a lack of student interest (McVicar). The cases of Egbert III and Cartier, through the way that the media and various individuals criticized the game, point toward a larger fear regarding the breakdown of American values in the late 1970s and early 1980s, one that has less to do with the Satanic power of a fantasy role-playing game and more to do with American trauma regarding the misadventure in Vietnam.\textsuperscript{13} As Killen writes, “when in the early 1980s Ronald Reagan invoked for the first time the ‘Vietnam syndrome,’ he meant the sense of neurotic, and quite un-American, self-doubt that defeat had inflicted on the nation’s sense of collective purpose, the reluctance to project its military abroad” (107-108). The hysteria around *Dungeons & Dragons*’ incorporation of chance in the late 1970s and early 1980s reflects this breaking point in American culture, when, due to the traumas that the Vietnam War inflicted, the Manichean divide between Soviet and American forces came to be viewed not as the fantasy struggle between evil and good, but as a situation in which there were no heroes, no villains, only hunters and hunted.\textsuperscript{14}

### III. Chasing the Dragon: *The Deer Hunter* and the Disintegrating American

*One shot.* This mantra in Michael Cimino’s 1978 film *The Deer Hunter* speaks to the ways that accident and chance shape identity through inflicting a subject to events that are out of his control. *The Deer Hunter* explores the ways that events beyond one’s control come to affect one’s sense of place in the world and ability to locate one’s self in that world. Early in the film, while preparing to hunt in the woods of rural Pennsylvania, Michael (Robert De Niro) tells Nick
(Christopher Walken) that “one shot” is the signature of the true hunter—that one shot is all it takes for a true hunter to make a kill. According to Michael, more than one shot mars the hunting, depriving the shooter of the actual role or identity of the hunter. The mantra, only spoken a handful of times in the film (and appearing nowhere in the shooting script), nonetheless resonates throughout several scenes in the film, standing behind the acting and actions of the scenes as a shaping force that distinguishes between sport and game—especially after Michael, Nick, and their friend Steven (John Savage), who have willingly enlisted, ship off to Vietnam.\footnote{In Vietnam the mantra of “one shot” acquires new meanings. The three friends are captured by the Vietcong and forced to play games of Russian roulette against other prisoners and one another.\footnote{Nick thinks that he is the only one who escapes after Michael plunges into a river in order to save Steven during a failed rescue attempt. Unknown to Nick, both Michael and Steven survive and return to America. Nick, however, cannot leave. The last time we see Nick until the film’s conclusion, he enters a gambling hall where Russian roulette is being played. Michael sits among the crowd, and while he sees Nick, Nick does not see him. Both Nick and Michael watch the same game of Russian roulette—then Michael watches as Nick approaches the table, holds the gun to the head of the winner, pulls the trigger, then holds the gun to his own head, and pulls the trigger again. The gun does not fire; both chambers are empty. Nick escapes from the fray that ensues in the car of a Frenchman named Grinda (Pierre Segui). Michael pursues them, but to no avail. Believing Michael dead, Nick begins to abuse heroin and play Russian roulette at the behest of Grinda. Only after Michael returns to America does he realize that Nick is still alive—and still playing Russian roulette—when he visits Steven in a veteran’s hospital and discovers that Steven has received large sums of money from an unknown benefactor. Nick, now known only as “the American” has been sending his Russian roulette}
winnings home. Michael decides to make good on a promise he made to Nick before they left: to not leave Nick in Vietnam.

With the change in setting from the rural and recreational hunting of Pennsylvania to the brutal tasks of the Vietnam War, the mantra of “one shot” ceases to be a command used for sport and that of a life-threatening game. At risk in the film’s depictions of Russian roulette are the lives and the identities of the characters. The Deer Hunter uses Russian roulette and the phrase “one shot” to meditate upon the friction between accident and control that shapes identity. The film uses the abrasive dynamic between accident and control to reference the plastic and reflexive nature of the medium of film and its depiction of trauma, as well as the malleable movements of the actors themselves. This is especially relevant in their depiction of a post-Vietnam and post-73 shift in white masculine identity from that of the lone huntsman of the American frontier to that of the American soldier struggling for solidarity and identification with one’s fellow captives and one’s captors as prisoner of war. This shift in identity and exploration of sympathy reveals the complicated relationship that Americans had with their own recent history after the end of the 1960s, explicitly depicted in the film’s erasure of the American myth of the frontier.17 In The Deer Hunter, the fantasy of the American frontier disintegrates as Saigon falls, with “the American” in one of its gambling halls, a gun to his head and all the chips down.18

The Deer Hunter and Dungeons & Dragons share an affinity with fantasy and chance. In the latter, as discussed above, chance and fantasy converge so as to create a nostalgic vision that reinforces the desire for American redemption. This desire manifests in an escape into a fantasy world where unambiguous forms of good and evil confront one another in a series of battles in which good eventually triumphs. Such fantasies operate as an escape from that tumultuous
decade, the 1960s and its wake, into the morally ambiguous 1970s. As demonstrated above, the elimination of chance only reinforces this moral divide and acts as a means to return to a less complicated era, namely that of the 1950s and that decade’s perceived moral clarity regarding a righteous United States of America and its allies battling the horrors of the Soviet Union and its satellites in a struggle between freedom and communism. Yet Dungeons & Dragons, a game in which players enter into dungeons and purge them of “monsters” that are figured as racially other, can also be read as a fantasy version of Vietnam.¹⁹ Like The Deer Hunter it represents a journey into the wilderness in search of experience, a twist on the Puritan hunting myth; yet in the case of The Deer Hunter, the fantasy becomes the reality that the opponents of Dungeons & Dragons feared—accident’s intrusion obliterates American identity. The American youths who discover the reality of war in Vietnam are shattered by this reality; Michael ceases to believe in the mantra of the “one shot,” realizing that chance is far more powerful than any one man’s will to power, while Nick loses himself in a belief that he exists outside of chance—that he is condemned to continue pointing the gun at his head and pulling the trigger without the hammer ever falling on a loaded chamber.

“One shot” is first discussed as Michael and Nick prepare to hunt, where it appears as a piece of advice that Michael once gave Nick and gives once again. “One shot” is spoken as a key word in a philosophy and as a gift—a form of grace that is meant to guide Nick, not just in his hunting, but in his immersion in nature and into Vietnam. In this scene the two walk around Michael’s small home. Their conversation oscillates between playfulness and seriousness as Nick waterproofs his gun while Michael looks at his reflection in the mirror and packs his hunting gear. He wears a hunting cap and a tuxedo:

Nick: You tryin’ to look like a prince?
Michael: What do you mean, “trying”? . . . You should’ve done that a long time ago, that way it would’ve set.

Nick: I know.

Michael: Then why didn’t you do it?

Nick: ‘Cause I forgot. For Christ’s sake Mike, Steven’s getting married in a couple of hours. I don’t know what we’re even doing talking about hunting for the last time before the army. The whole thing . . . it’s crazy.

Michael: I’ll tell you one thing . . . if I found out my life had to end up in the mountains, I’d be all right. But it has to be in your mind.

Nick: What? . . . One shot?

Michael: Two is pussy.

Nick: I don’t think about one shot that much anymore, Mike.

Michael: You have to think about one shot. One shot is what it’s all about. A deer has to be taken with one shot. I try to tell people that. They don’t listen. . . . You really think about Vietnam?

Nick: Yeah. . . I don’t know . . . I guess. I’m thinkin’ about the deer. Going to Nam. I like the trees, you know? I like the way the trees are in the mountains, all the different . . . the way the trees are. . . . I sound like some asshole, right?

Michael: I’ll tell you, Nick, you’re the only guy I go huntin’ with, you know? I like a guy with quick moves and speed. I ain’t gonna hunt with no assholes.

Nick: Well, who’s an asshole?

Nick: Well, you’re a fuckin’ nut. You know that Mike, you’re a maniac, control freak.

Michael: I just don’t like no surprises.

By the end of their dialogue the two friends are smiling, laughing at their jokes. The laughter of their friends and hunting companions, the “assholes,” can be heard as the scene ends. This outside laughter enters the scene as if following the punch line of an absurd and sinister joke. Michael makes his desire for control, his disdain for surprises, explicit in this scene. Talk of Vietnam rises to the surface of this conversation to only submerge beneath the talk of hunting. With dialogue’s mixing of hunting and Vietnam among the discussion of “one shot,” it becomes clear that “one shot” has already begun to mean more than hunting, less than a mantra to be carried to war.

For Michael, the ideal hunter is one who kills in “one shot” and, who through this shot, embodies a pure masculinity—“Two is pussy.” The homosocial interaction of this scene places Michael in the role of the pure masculine hunter and Nick in the role of a more feminized male. He does not think about the “one shot” but instead enjoys hunting for the setting of the mountains and the trees. While both Michael and Nick are in touch with the “virgin” land, it is Michael who “takes” the deer from it while Nick desires to attain harmony with it. Michael will only hunt with Nick because of his speed and because he listens—not only to Michael, but also to the land. Nick likes “the way the trees are,” the way that they exist: the birches, maples, and pines of the Pennsylvanian mountains, all parts of different families of trees, but all together, identifiable as of the same place, existing in the same time. Nick thus finds peace and pleasure in
the accidental nature of the forest. This pleasure and reassurance in accident and deep time is similar to the pleasure a character such as Ressler takes in the chance nature of life and the history of life as discussed in the previous chapter. However, Nick derives this pleasure less from the accidents of evolution and more with the accidents of his mere existence, his ability to be among such elements of nature.

While Nick is clearly preoccupied with their future, Michael’s preoccupation with hunting allows him to exist only in the present—a kind of “one shot” that extends into the past and the future but nonetheless remains an extended moment. Michael demands to be in control because he cannot cope with contingency, the surprises that the future always holds—that which happens between shots. Michael desires to experience time as only event, and not as the moments that lead to and from such an event, while Nick’s thoughts of the trees represent a relationship to a deeper sense of time that manifests in his sympathy with a landscape that existed long before him and will exist long after his demise. Michael, in perceiving time through the “one shot” sees only an extended present, ephemeral and always moving towards the next time he takes a deer; he thus finds security in his ability to control the present, while Nick takes comfort in the vastness of time and space.

The film explores Michael and Nick’s relationships to time and “one shot” when they are forced to play against one another as prisoners of war in Vietnam. Michael approaches Nick and tells him that the only way they are going to escape is if they play against one another and play with three bullets in the chamber of the gun (as opposed to only one). Nick hesitates, seeing that Michael has once again come to rely upon “one shot”: his plan involves each of them holding the gun to their head and pulling the trigger, then using the three bullets to kill three captors, each in one shot, while Nick attains the nearest gun. In this plan, the game of Russian roulette becomes a
complex gambit, a gamble made in order to wrest control from chance. Nick’s hesitance arises from his understanding that the chances of he and Michael actually surviving their attempt to escape are slim—but he goes along with this plan because he also understands that if they do not do something, their lives will, either way, end in a game of Russian roulette (Figure 7).

Figure 7. Chance and Fate in the enemy’s hand.

Cans of Miller High Life and piles of cash rest on the table between Michael and Nick. If it weren’t for the guns, it would look as if they were playing a friendly game of poker—perhaps even Dungeons & Dragons. Between them, the leader of their captors sits, his hand on the pistol, ready to load it. While Nick stoically looks across the table at Michael, Michael gazes at the gun, the faintest smile beginning to break across his face (Figure 8). Here Michael thinks of the “one shot” while Nick thinks about future risks, about all that could go wrong with their plan. Michael consumes the moment, and takes control, while Nick passively exists within it, hand clenched on the table, a representation of the pressure he feels. Michael then looks to the guard to his right and the camera. It is as if time has stopped for everyone but Michael, who has taken control
of the present, willing an event from nothing. The leader then sets the gun on the table—amidst the cans of American beer and Vietnamese currency—and with a fast cut to an insert shot we see the gun spin.

The gun points at Michael. With this insert shot we see that wristwatches rest among the currency and cans of beer, their hands pointing at different times (Figure 9). That Vietnamese currency and American products infiltrate the shot reminds us that this war is a product of not only both nations, but of other globalizing forces—as the watches cannot help but remind one of the doomsday clock and the history of the Cold War, figured in American terms as another kind of Russian roulette. Time has ceased to exist in the moment of the “one shot” upon which Michael and Nick have wagered their futures. In this shot the inanimate have taken on their own active presence. The gun, the object that will produce the “one shot” has frozen, like the watches, upon Michael who has begun, as he will soon tell Nick, to “will the chamber empty.” Devoid of human presence, this close-up takes action out of the hands of the human agents and puts them upon the frozen hands of the watches and the chance that the gun’s chamber holds a bullet. The absence of the human brings home the power of pure chance; agency has become an illusion
that Michael nonetheless strives to actualize. In this shot, all is left to time and chance—time that Michael wills into “one shot,” the driving force of his assertion of control over a spin of fortune’s wheel.22

With a quick change of facial expression, the force of will that Michael exudes over the situation appears (Figure 10). From the faint smile and relaxed hand that holds the gun to the
grimace and clenched pull of the trigger one sees Michael’s will become manifest (Figure 11). In
these actions we witness the manifestation of his desire to control chance, to willfully author the

Figure 11. Willing the chamber empty.

game. The leader turns away from the camera, hiding his initial look of shock and anger at
Michael’s taunting expression. The chamber empty, it becomes Nick’s turn to lift the gun and
place his life in the “one shot” that Michael has devised for their escape. Here the shot has
reversed over the table—the table has, in the eye of the viewer, turned—and we see Nick turn away from chance. He hesitates, setting the gun on the table, unable at first to hold the gun to his head and pull the trigger. But Michael tells him to “will the chamber empty.” This exertion of a will to power, a control of the animate over the inanimate, is outside of Nick’s character; he prefers to exist amidst nature, not control nature with “one shot” (Figures 12-13). Nick’s face contorts to mirror Michael’s as he pulls the trigger, mouth open in an unintelligible speech act meant to command chance to his will. With the turn of his head from the camera to looking past the camera we see the pained and doubtful expression on Nick’s face, one that signifies his lack of control over the situation and resignation to chance. While Michael’s grimace exuded a stern resilience to any other circumstance other than that of his own devising, Nick’s grimace is one of pure pain, a premature response to the understanding that the chance of the chamber holding a bullet has increased.

But this chamber also contains no bullet. Michael again takes his turn, this time willing the chamber full—ready for him to quickly turn the gun on the leader of the enemy soldiers and take “one shot.” While he pulled the trigger during his last turn Michael looked directly at the
leader. Now he looks to the soldier who aims the gun at him, laughter in his eyes, a grimace shifting to a teeth-bared smile (Figure 14). The smile becomes a laugh as he shoots the leader between the eyes. Here the film makes a series of fast cuts as Michael takes “one shot” two more times, killing two guards and giving Nick the time to move fast—to make good on why Michael hunts only with him—and shoot the other guards, which in turn gives Michael time enough to take another of their guns and kill the rest of the enemy soldiers.

In this scene the meaning of “one shot” changes. A game of chance has supplanted the sport of hunting, as the hand of the hunter turns the gun upon himself. The game of Russian roulette, in confluence with the mantra of “one shot,” has made “one shot” mean the creation of control from the contingent. Like Dungeons & Dragons, this game of chance becomes, instead, a game of control, a game in which one’s future rests not upon the sheer luck of the loaded chambers but upon one’s ability to imagine this luck as part of a larger plan. The shift in masculinity that both Michael and Nick display moves from emasculation to a version of the hunter taking from the wild American frontier. In Vietnam, across the table from Michael, Nick becomes consumed with the mantra of “one shot” and loses himself. His sense of time

Figure 14. Michael prepares to take “one shot.”
evaporates the moment that he holds the gun to his head and attempts to will the chamber empty. While he does not actually will the chamber empty—one’s will, of course, has no effect on chance—the trauma of the act empties his identity, shattering his sense of deep time into the fragmentary extended present of the “one shot”—an extended present that leaves him merely “the American” without a past or a future. Nick’s new experience of time is a symptom of the trauma he suffers, representing an American desire for a teleological sense of history, one similar to that which we have seen in the media’s representation of Dungeons & Dragons. This history is one in which the rugged individual can still control his own destiny, shaping history rather than being shaped by the contingencies of history.

The depiction of Michael and Nick’s final game of Russian roulette develops the consequences of the contingencies of this history. “We don’t have much time, Nick” is the first thing that Michael, near the end of the film, says to Nick as he sits across from him in a warehouse in Saigon. They are again about to play Russian roulette against each other. Michael has entered the game against “the American” because Nick does not recognize him, and Michael and Nick do not have much time because Saigon is falling: yet the meaning of Michael’s words resonate beyond this specific reference to a deeper meaning, namely that their sense of time and history is also about to change—especially when we take into account these two characters’ relationships with time. It is Nick who now lives in the present while Michael has a sense of both the past and the future. Without acknowledging Michael’s pleas to stop, Nick lifts the revolver to his head and pulls the trigger (Figure 15). The chamber is empty. Nick’s blank facial expression reads as one of calm, of a silent willing of the chamber empty. He exists in the extended present, a completely different subject now that he has become “the American.” While before he could not bear to hold the gun to his head, could barely play the game, he now evinces a sense of total
control over himself and chance. Michael then holds the gun to his head and asks, “Is this what you want? . . . Is this what you want? . . . I love you Nick” (Figure 16). The concern Michael shows as he gazes at Nick is one of sacrifice. He knows that with the pull of the trigger his future could be lost. He has become aware of time. Sitting across the table, Nick merely stares at Michael, expressing no sign of desire. Michael pulls the trigger: the chamber is again empty.
Michael begins to speak as Nick takes the gun from the referee and Michael pleads for Nick to not play again, to instead come home. He then grabs Nick’s wrist and holds his arm down on the table (Figure 17). As in their earlier game of Russian roulette this insert shot shows a watch—

![Image of a watch on a wrist](image)

Figure 17. Time and time again.

one that Michael now wears. Yet Nick also wears the marks of time—track marks from his heroin use. Michael has become the bearer of linear time, while Nick is lost to two kinds of “one shot”: the injection of the syringe full of heroin and the pull of the trigger in his games of Russian roulette. He lives for two events, the fix and the pull of the trigger. Nick has not only lost his experience of time to the belief that he exists outside of contingency, condemned to a limbo of lost identity; he has also lost his body and any agency he once had while gaining a dependency upon heroin as a means to negotiate time spent away from Russian roulette and “one shot”.  

Holding Nick’s wrist, Michael asks a question that attempts to bring Nick back to a sense of time and that does manage to evoke a response from him:
Michael: Nicky, do you remember all the different ways of the trees? Do you remember that? Do you remember? Huh? The mountains? You remember all that?

Nick: Yeah. One shot.

Michael: One shot! One shot!

Nick: (laughs)

Michael: Hey.

Nick: Yeah.

Nick then holds the gun to his head and pulls the trigger (Figures 18-19). The chamber empties into his temple, smoke and blood emerge, and Nick collapses to the floor where Michael embraces him, Nick dying in Michael’s arms.
In trying to bring Nick back to the sense of deep time that he had at the movie’s beginning, Michael has only condemned Nick, who can only remember “one shot” rather than “all the different ways of the trees.” The way that Michael phrases this reminder—“all the different ways”—returns Michael and Nick, as well as the viewer, to the earlier scene in the movie. It stretches the present moment into the past as Michael and Nick sit across from each other in a recreation of the traumatic event that forced Nick into the present. Nevertheless, confronting the original traumatic situation does not ease Nick’s pain or return to him a sense of history. Instead this return to the original site of trauma delivers the “one shot” that Nick has evaded since he and Michael played against one another in captivity. “The American” can only leave Vietnam as a corpse, which is to say that he can never leave Vietnam; the American subject and the American century are, in *The Deer Hunter*, trapped in Vietnam.²⁴

If as “the American” Nick lives in the constant present of the “one shot” then Michael concurrently becomes another kind of American. He gains a sense of time, but his sense of the past only brings him pain, and his sense of the future—one without Nick—is that of
homecoming and mourning. His home, America, changes because of the loss of Nick. “The American” has died, scattered across the falling Saigon, a man who stands for the lost cause of the lost Vietnam War and the shattering of American identity due to the traumas of the war. The game of Russian roulette and its embodiment of accident finally represents the “one shot” in which Michael once ardently believed but which has since been replaced with disillusionment. For Michael “one shot” has ceased to be something that he can experience. As the other American, he represents the inability of American culture to accept chance and take chances in the late 1970s and 1980s. Instead, American culture retreated into a past that appeared to hold no chance of disruption or violence. Such a denial of chance reveals American culture’s inability to comprehend its present in the late 1970s and early 1980s, and is, ultimately, a denial of the American that is Nick at the film’s end. Like Janey in *Blood and Guts in High School*, this American has died, and rather than scattered across the pages of a novel, his identity has scattered across Vietnam, his loss of life and time a brutal requiem for the high stakes of imperial endeavors.

**IV. The Disintegrated American: Games of Confidence and Conspiracy in *Gravity’s Rainbow***

*The Deer Hunter, Dungeons & Dragons,* and the game’s critics all express a willingness to believe in a teleological conspiracy rather than to engage with immediate social problems that stem from a number of causes. Early in *Gravity’s Rainbow*, Thomas Pynchon explores the confluence of accident and identity in relation to the problems of believing in teleology rather than understanding one’s place in the world as wholly contingent. *Gravity’s Rainbow*, when read with *The Deer Hunter* and the early history of *Dungeons & Dragons*, reveals the beginnings of a
post-73 anxiety regarding American dominance in the aftermath of Vietnam and Watergate, as well as the beginnings of nostalgia for the “simpler” 1950s. Pynchon complicates this in portraying World War II not as the “just” war, but as a precursor to Vietnam, particularly in the way that Tyrone Slothrop suffers a fate similar to Nick’s in *The Deer Hunter*.

In part two of the novel, “Un Perm’ au Casino Hermann Goering,” army lieutenant Tyrone Slothrop literally loses his identity. Katje Borgesius, working for British Intelligence—and possibly, as is so often the case in Pynchon’s novels, as part of a larger conspiracy—distracts Slothrop so that his identity papers can be stolen; she thinks: “Watch closely, while I make one American lieutenant disappear” (198). Slothrop’s encounter with Katje results in his entering a labyrinthine conspiracy—one that is not merely a struggle with identity, but a quest for the rocket 00000 and the Schwarzgerät. In searching for the rocket Slothrop assumes the identities of several different figures: Ian Scuffling, Rocketman, Max Schlepzig, and Plechazunga. Most importantly, though, when Slothrop loses his identity he also loses any capacity to see accident. With the loss of his identity Slothrop believes that he is winding through the heavily plotted passages of a complex labyrinth rather than through a series of picaresque adventures.

Shortly after losing his identity Slothrop enters the Himmler-Spielsaal, which Pynchon describes as if it is an establishing shot in a film: “Deserted in noon’s lull, here are resonant reaches of mahogany, green baize, hanging loops of maroon velvet. Long-handled wood money rakes lie fanned out on the tables. Little silver bells with ebony handles are turned mouth-down on the russet veneer” (202). Everything in the Himmler-Spielsaal appears to be randomly arranged; however, we know that Pynchon has set this scene as he has set up Slothrop. It is important to keep in mind the metafictional facets of this scene—that Slothrop is a character in the midst of a massively plotted labyrinth known as *Gravity’s Rainbow*, and that Pynchon knows
that we know this and that he knows that we know. The novel encourages the structure of teleological paranoid thinking that proliferates throughout its second section. We see this paranoia begin to form as the narration moves from the establishing description of the setting to Slothrop’s point of view:

Around the tables, Empire chairs are lined up precise and playerless. But some are taller than the rest. These are no longer quite outward and visible signs of a game of chance. There is another enterprise here, more real than that, less merciful, and systematically hidden from the likes of Slothrop. Who sits in the taller chairs? Do They have names? What lies on Their smooth baize surfaces? (202)

In the empty game-room Slothrop does not see a game of chance, but something “more real.” But what can be “more real” than chance? As Lacan says in The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis (1973, 1978), originally delivered in 1964, the tuché—Aristotle’s term for a subject’s experience of chance—is translated “as the encounter with the real” (53). He continues: “The function of the tuché, of the real as encounter—the encounter in so far as it may be missed, in so far as it is essentially the missed encounter—first presented itself in the history of psychoanalysis in a form that was in itself already enough to arouse our attention, that of the trauma” (Lacan 55). The encounter with the real, which occurs by accident, inflicts a trauma upon the subject because the accident acts as a surplus that the subject cannot fit into his sense of reality. “Is it not remarkable that, at the origin of the analytic experience,” Lacan says, “the real should have presented itself in the form of that which is unassimilable in it—in the form of the trauma, determining all that follows, and imposing on it an apparently accidental origin?” (55). The encounter with the real—the accident—creates a trauma that places the subject within a teleological framework, one that is determined yet nonetheless is born of accident. The belief in
the determined situation is merely an effect of accident, of an encounter with the real, which not only crushes subjectivity but also forces that subjectivity to remain oblivious to the horror that accident constitutes reality. An encounter with the real, in the case of Slothrop, catalyzes his paranoia, a belief that he is the subject of conspiracy rather than accident.

This conspiracy against Slothrop is doubly written—first by Pynchon, and second by the conspirators, “Them.” With the elimination of chance, Slothrop begins to figure himself as a piece being played in a larger game. The Empire chairs that are “lined up precise and playerless,” point to a pattern that is beyond Slothrop’s understanding. He wonders who is playing him, and he also begins to figure “Them,” these invisible players as well as the furniture, as the table upon which he is being played. They are not only figured as those who sit in the Empire chairs, but as Empire itself, one that transcends the Empire style: a global conspiracy.

In Slothrop’s reckoning, he is the center of a plot—and in this regard, he is not entirely wrong. Metafictionally, as noted above, he is the center of a plot, with Pynchon as author. The danger that Slothrop encounters in losing his identity is not one of not knowing who he is—at this moment in the novel he is all too aware of who he is, an American in World War II Europe without any proof of his being an American—but in imagining how others perceive and plot his identity. The Slothrop family has earned its social and economic status through “timberland whose diminishing green reaches were converted acres at a clip into paper—toilet paper, banknote stock, newsprint—a medium or ground for shit, money, and the Word. [. . .] Shit, money, and the Word, the three American truths, powering the American mobility, claimed the Slothrops, clasped them for good to the country’s fate” (28). Yet without his identity papers, Slothrop has lost his control over authoring himself—his control over the Word, his family legacy and inheritance, as well as any access he may have to money—leaving him only with shit.
Like a player of *Dungeons & Dragons*, Slothrop considers himself to be a powerless figure at the center of an elaborate plot. Without using chance to control his fate, Slothrop is as powerless as a player of *Dungeons & Dragons* who cannot roll the dice but must instead simply battle the fictional monsters of the Dungeon Master’s design with his own words. The words themselves are not enough to change anything; in fiction, it is always one’s word against another’s, and these words do not lead to resolution, only more words. Slothrop, like Nick in *The Deer Hunter*, is an American who loses his identity while at war. Both characters cease believing in chance in order to exist in a world where they have willed chance away. In their paranoid fantasies they can author the world around them rather than be directed by an author or authored by a director. The denial of chance as a means of denying one’s history and fantasizing agency in a world seemingly out of one’s control manifests itself in *Gravity’s Rainbow* as a means of negotiating history in order to understand the present not as a series of coincidences but as a series of plots one can control to a desired end.

Pynchon uses chance to guide and control Slothrop and to provide him with motivation and depth. As Slothrop struggles with accident and teleology—chance and conspiracy—his paranoia is shown to not only be justified, but also to be infectious. The next time we see the Himmler-Spielsaal, it is full of people; however, we are not in the room, but outside with Slothrop, looking in, lacking identity, living a life that seems to be dictated by anything but chance:

*And if you need help, well, I’ll help you.* . . . Voices, music, the shuffling of cards all grow louder, more oppressive, till he stands looking into the Himmler-Spielsaal again, crowded now, jewels flashing, leather gleaming, roulette spokes whirling blurring—it’s here that saturation hits him, it’s all this playing games, too much of it, too many games:
the nasal, obsessive voice of a croupier he can’t see—messieurs, Mesdames, les jeux sont faits—is suddenly speaking out of the Forbidden Wing directly to him, and about what Slothrop has been playing against the invisible House, perhaps after all for his soul, all day—terrified he turns, turns out into the rain again where the electric lights of the Casino, in full holocaust, are glaring off the glazed cobbles. (Pynchon 205).

The sound of the shuffled deck, an embodiment of chance, overwhelms Slothrop and draws his gaze to the Himmler-Spielsaal. The croupier calls out: “les jeux sont faits,” which means, “the chips are down” (literally, “the plays are made”). In this room of gambling, of games of chance, there is nothing that Slothrop can do. He feels that all agency has been taken from him, that he has no chance. The games have become real, and Slothrop, or what Slothrop knows as the “real” Slothrop, has disappeared. Through chance, Slothrop has encountered the real, and these games of chance have become real. Such a paranoid structure is similar to the criticisms of Dungeons & Dragons: the fear of a game of chance results in a belief that erases the accident and substitutes it with telos. Although Slothrop has been playing a game of chance that he was unaware of, he still does not know what kind of game he is playing. The scene continues with Slothrop reflecting upon his losses:

Collar up, Bloat’s hat down over his ears, saying shit every few minutes, shivering, his back aching from the fall out of that tree, he goes stumbling along in the rain. He thinks he might begin to cry. How did this all turn against him so fast? His friends old and new, every last bit of paper and clothing connecting him to what he’s been, have just, fucking, vanished. How can he meet this with any kind of grace? Only much later, worn out, snuffling, cold and wretched in his prison of soggy Army wool, does he think of Katje. (205)
Slothrop mutters shit as he begins to believe that he dwells within a larger plot, a conspiracy—outside of “the Forbidden Wing,” the game room. He is outside of chance, past his family history, though ironically on the page itself, as a creation of words, he has always existed beyond the reaches of chance—a fact that Pynchon and the reader not only are aware of, but derive pleasure from. In his thoughts of Katje, Slothrop finds some solace, despite the fact that it was she who thrust him into this labyrinth. In this regard, Slothrop is dealt grace—while preterite in the world of the novel, he is elect in readerly and authorial terms as the protagonist. The grace that he is given is in being elect as preterite, a suiting role for a character who is figured as the Fool of the Tarot: one who is always about to step off the edge of a cliff, always waiting to fall, suspended between redemption and ignorance, itself a plummet over him, a plummet into which he may descend.  

The labyrinth awaits, the chips are down, the plays have all been made. Slothrop again thinks of the Forbidden Wing, of the call “les jeux sont faits,” as he decides that his life has been plotted from the start, that he is not the author of his own actions but the slave of another’s agency: “The Forbidden Wing. Oh, the hand of a terrible croupier is that touch on the sleeves of his dreams: all in his life of what has looked free or random, is discovered to’ve been under some Control, all the time, the same as a fixed roulette wheel—where only destinations are important, attention is to long-term statistics, not individuals: and where the House always does, of course, keep turning a profit. . . .” (209). In the Casino, in the terms of games of chance, Slothrop decides that for him there have been no accidents, no happenstance, that his life is a novel or film, a narrative that has already been written and in which he is not an actor, merely one who waits for the story to come to its teleological end. Pynchon’s novel has made clear its awareness of the novel as a form that eliminates accident. In other words, it is no accident that the only
other time that the phrase “les jeux sont faits” is used in *Gravity’s Rainbow* occurs when we see Miklos Thanatz, husband of Greta Erdmann and witness to the launching of the rocket 00000, after he has fallen off of the *Anubis*: “Thanatz remains shaking and furious in the well-established rain, under the sandstone arcade. I should have sailed on, he wants to scream, and presently does. ‘I wasn’t supposed to be left with you discards. . . .’” (667). In describing the rain as “well-established,” the narrator again alludes to the set of a film, the canned, pointing out the contrived setting while establishing it. Thanatz, unlike Slothrop, has a sense of self-righteousness about his bad luck. He states that he “wasn’t supposed to be left with you discards.” Of course, the pun here points to the fact that Thanatz himself has been discarded, become preterite, in the same manner that Slothrop has also become preterite. Not only has Thanatz been thrown overboard, he has also been given up for a chance at being dealt a better hand. As the narrative, like the scene above with Slothrop, shifts to Thanatz’s point of view, we learn that he only fell overboard due to a series of accidents:

> Where’s the court of appeals that will hear his sad story? “I lost my footing!” Some mess cook slipped in a puddle of elite vomit and spilled a whole galvanized can full of creamed yellow chicken nausea all over that starboard weather deck, Thanatz didn’t see it, he was looking for Margherita. . . . Too bad, les jeux sont faits, nobody’s listening and the *Anubis* is gone. Better here with the swimming debris, Thanatz, no telling what’ll come sunfishing by, ask that Oberst Enzian, he knows (there is a key, among the wastes of the World . . . and it won’t be found on board the white *Anubis* because they throw everything of value over the side). (667-668)

While the use of “les jeux sont faits” in the earlier passage designates that all of the bets have been made, it creates a sense of foreboding for the reader and especially for Slothrop.32 When the
phrase is first used it means that Slothrop has run out of luck, out of any hope of escaping from the labyrinthine plot of Them (and of course, Pynchon), yet here it is used with a lack of sympathy for Thanatz’s plight. This is because Thanatz is a figure of the elect, here cast down to the role of preterite. In Gravity’s Rainbow the fall of one of the elect is a moment to be celebrated as exactly what the elect deserve, while the fall of a preterite figure such as Slothrop only elevates him, making him a character worthy of attention. Being an outsider, in the world of Gravity’s Rainbow, makes one an insider. That both Slothrop and Thanatz are discarded, are existing outside of a deck, resonates throughout Gravity’s Rainbow—particularly in regard to Slothrop’s family history and the use of Tarot Cards in the novel. The lack of grace associated with Slothrop, his ancestor, and Thanatz is substituted with the free gift of dumb luck, survival through chance, not through the machinations of a conspiracy or the grim fantasies of a paranoid.  

Gravity’s Rainbow makes an argument for understanding chance as an agent in history, one that leads to providential discoveries that could not be made intentionally.

Slothrop has also fallen off of The Anubis—washed overboard in the same storm that caused Thanatz’s fall. Thanatz’s fall mirrors a moment from Slothrop family history—a detail that the narrative divulges just before the croupier calls out “les jeux sont faits” in the Himmler-Spielsaal:

Ghosts of fishermen, glassworkers, fur traders, renegade preachers, hilltop patriarchs and valley politicians go avalanching back from Slothrop here, back to 1630 when Governor Winthorp came over to America on the Arbella, flagship of a great Puritan flotilla that year, on which the first American Slothrop had been a mess cook or something—there go that Arbella and its whole fleet, sailing backward in formation, the wind sucking them east again, the creatures leaning from the margins of the unknown sucking in their
cheeks, growing crosseyed with the effort, in to black deep hollows at the mercy of teeth no longer the milky molars of cherubs, as the old ships zoom out of Boston Harbor, back across an Atlantic whose currents and swells go flowing and heaving in reverse . . . a redemption of every mess cook who slipped and fell when the deck made an unexpected move, the night’s stew collecting itself up out of the planks and off the indignant shoes of the more elect, slithering in a fountain back into the pewter kettle as the servant himself stagers upright again and the vomit he slipped on goes gushing back into the mouth that spilled it . . . Presto change-o! Tyrone Slothrop’s English again! But it doesn’t seem to be redemption exactly that this They have in mind. . . . (203-204)

When we turn back in the novel’s narrative to this first instance of slipping and falling aboard a boat—slipping and falling due to a mess cook’s slipping—we find that the narrative itself is moving in reverse.34 This hysteron proteron brings the mess cook back to his feet, gives Slothrop a whole other nationality (foreshadowing the first identity he takes on, that of the English reporter, Ian Scuffling). This instance of plotting that Pynchon has controlled over the course of some 500 pages is, in the novel, merely accidents that are separated by over two hundred years. The parallels in the above passages seem to be quite an effort to merely show that Thanatz is a member of the Elect who is finally brought low—just as Slothrop was a member of an Elect family and has become preterite.35 Chance, rather than Providence, is marked as the causal agent of history. Such a representation of chance places a responsibility to ethics and history in the hands of individual agents and demands that such agents attempt to comprehend their place in history rather than merely accept the hand that they have been dealt as a foregone conclusion.

As the Fool from the Tarot, Slothrop is always ignorant of the precipice that he walks upon, though constantly about to fall. Yet as he comes to fill his role, Slothrop loses his sense of
a plot, his search for the rocket 00000 and the Schwarzgerät, coming to exist almost solely in the present, with no sense of past or future. In narrative terms, this means that he exists in a series of interlinked but self-contained picaresque adventures rather than in a heavily plotted labyrinth:

“But what then? Slothrop and the S-Gerät and the Jamf/Imipolex mystery have grown to be strangers. He hasn’t really thought about them for a while. Hmm, when was that? The day he sat with Säure in the café, smoking that reefer . . . oh, that was day before yesterday, wasn’t it?” (434). By this point in the novel Slothrop has lost any sense of what he did two days ago: yet his loss of a sense of the present is a way that the narrative can help situate the reader in time. This episode occurs after the longest section of the novel, one that does not deal with Slothrop but instead around seventeen years in the life of Franz Pökl er. In this regard, through having Slothrop exist more and more solely in the present, the narrative helps situate the reader in time after a long diversion. But while the reader is well established in time, Slothrop begins to lose his sense of the present as he also begins to lose his sense of the lack of chance. Existing in the present, like Nick in *The Deer Hunter*, Slothrop experiences this “one shot” not as a form of total control but a total loss of control. The plot loses any sense of purpose, and rather than reinforcing the machinations of a conspiracy, the novel posits that the lack of time—the constant present of the “one shot”—is merely the experience of a pure contingency, an encounter with not only the real, but the idea that the real itself is merely the result of an accident.

Slothrop, rather than indulging in the teleology of paranoia and conspiracy, instead becomes terrified of the possibility that there is no plot but only accident (a fear that, at this point in the narrative, the reader may be sharing):

Rain drips, soaking into the floor, and Slothrop perceives that he is losing his mind. If there is something comforting—religious if you want—about paranoia, there is still also
anti-paranoia, where nothing is connected to anything, a condition not any of us can bear for long. Well right now Slothrop feels himself sliding onto the anti-paranoid part of his cycle, feels the whole city around him going back roofless, vulnerable, uncentered as he is, and only pasteboard images now of the Listening Enemy left between him and the wet sky. (434)

Like the other scenes in which games of chance have been evoked, this passage has rain, but here Slothrop is not standing out in it. The narrative does not give an establishing description of the setting; instead we are thrust into Slothrop’s point of view. “Anti-paranoia, where nothing is connected to anything, a condition not any of us can bear for long” echoes a sentence from Pynchon’s first novel, V. (1963) and the epigraph to this dissertation, in which a character is described as being “in the process of learning life’s single lesson: that there is more accident to it than a man can ever admit to in a lifetime and stay sane” (V. 343). The novel here references the fact that the last episode diverged from following Slothrop—making the point that Slothrop hasn’t done much since we last saw him—while also referencing the fact that the narrative has “uncentered” Slothrop, pushing him to the periphery. We are told: “Either They have put him here for a reason, or he’s just here. He isn’t sure that he wouldn’t actually, rather have that reason. . . .” (434).

Published in 1973, a year that many consider to be the end of the 1960s, Gravity’s Rainbow represents the anxiety that Americans felt about how they had reached their present moment after the various tangents of the last decade. To have one’s identity shaped through the overwhelming force of history, a narrative one always enters in medias res, without control over events of the past, creates a teleology—that all happened because it had to happen, not because of contingency. From around 1973 into the early 1980s American culture experienced history as a paranoid fantasy, a conspiracy that fabricated meaning for the events of
the past decade. But it is utter fantasy to insist that the American dream was not a symptom of encounters with the real—the accidents of history—and was instead something that could still be achieved through sheer will. A far more terrifying world is created when identity is shaped against the overwhelming force of accident, the lack of any narrative but the one that we can read from our disparate, picaresque adventures. In such a world, there is no grace other than that which one provides for others. This American dream was much closer to the nightmare from which Americans hoped to awake in the 1970s—a lost war abroad, rift and breakdown at home—and instead of awakening, Americans continued dreaming this nightmare in which history conspired against them but would, in the end, be overcome not because of any active change in the reality of praxis, but only because that’s the way the story was always supposed to end.

V. Fantasies of Control and Games of Chance

In the short story “The Dungeon Master” (2010) by Sam Lipsyte, the title character, a disturbed teen, asks the story’s narrator, “Remember all the newspaper stories about how the game makes kids crazy? Makes them do horrible things?” to which the narrator responds, “My mom clips them for me” (176). The Dungeon Master replies: “Love those. Take, for example, suicides. The game doesn’t create suicides. If anything, it postpones them. I mean, the world gives you many reasons to snuff it, got to admit” (176). This reference to newspaper articles about Dungeons & Dragons “making” players commit acts of violence against themselves and others locates the story sometime in the mid-late 1980s. The games to which the Dungeon Master subjects his players are not ones of fantastic escape from the mundane horrors of reality, but instead an oppressive and depressive reinforcement of the horrors of the mundane accident.
In this way, the Dungeon Master’s games express a black humor that undermines the occult fantasies of the game’s opponents in showing that reality is far more disturbing than fantasy. For example, the Dungeon Master’s little brother, Marco, has created some thirty-odd characters, each named Valentine (each iteration is numbered, i.e. Valentine the 2nd, the 15th, the 32nd, etc.) who have all died in any number of freak accidents: “It’s painful enough when he rolls the dice, announces that a drunken orc has unspooled some of Valentine’s guts for sport. Worse are the silly accidents. One Valentine tripped on a floor plank and cracked his head on a mead bucket. He died of trauma in the stable” (163). Such a death is obviously not heroic but a subversion of the genre, a horrific intrusion of reality into fantasy, a reminder that the fall that kills the player is a battle not against a mythical monster but only against the dice—chance itself is the only enemy of one’s intentions. So when the “characters rendezvous at an inn called the Jaundiced Chimera,” we are told that, “We’ve all died here before, in brawls and dagger duels, of poisoned ale, or even just of infections borne on unwashed steins (166). Again, there is nothing heroic in succumbing to an infection from bacteria, and it is nothing that one can fight against in the game’s system. There is only the roll of the dice, blind chance, and the hope that somehow the Dungeon Master has a theoretical knowledge of a fantasy character’s immune system. The final representation of the horror of mundane chance intruding into the fantasy setting is the grimmest: “Meanwhile, no runaway oxcart smears us into the road. We are not nipped by rabid squirrels. We do not succumb slowly, like one early Valentine, to rectal cancer” (170). The idea that the Dungeon Master would subject his players to the death of one of their party’s members from a slow battle with rectal cancer is far more terrifying than the idea of occult practice. The Dungeon Master fixated upon condemning the characters of the fantasy game to real world terror
is a cold reminder that, as in Acker, and Mallarmé before her, “a throw of the dice will never abolish chance.”

Lipsyte looks back at the early 1980s from the end of the 2000s and depicts *Dungeons & Dragons* as a game in which reality is much more sadistic than fantasy. Such a depiction of the 1980s argues that the realities that Americans fantasized—think Reagan’s Star Wars—were far more horrifying than the fantasies into which Americans escaped. In other words, what Lipsyte portrays is the fact that there is no chance that anyone can escape from reality. A player, rather than the Dungeon Master, narrates this story primarily because the Dungeon Master does kill himself, eventually succumbing to the horrors of reality rather than escaping into fantasy (Lipsyte 178). That this player, one who has died in narrative scenarios due to numerous chance events, gets to tell the Dungeon Master’s story is ironic, but also fitting in that the player as Dungeon Slave survives in reality so as to be able to make sense of the seemingly meaningless chance events of the games.

The player’s survival in “The Dungeon Master” is equivalent to both Michael’s survival in *The Deer Hunter* and the survival of *Gravity’s Rainbow’s* reader. Each of these texts allow for the player, reader, and viewer to cheat death, surviving after the end only to remind one that such a cheat is ultimately impossible—that with death, the games and the narratives end and that there is no way to understand one’s own death in the terms of a continuing narrative. The chance of survival is ultimately a means of controlling the narrative that one plays. In the context of post-73 American culture, this desire to play out the trauma of the death of the American century shows at once a paradoxical denial of the horrors of recent history and an embracing of these very horrors. A strict black and white moral code returns with the opposition to *Dungeons & Dragons*, but this moral code only reproduces the narrative structures that it critiques. Such a
paradox appears in *The Deer Hunter*, which depicts the futility of attempting to defeat chance through taking chances. This struggle with absolute chance, as seen in *Gravity’s Rainbow*, results in one’s inability to actually establish and hold onto a strong enough narrative to understand one’s place in history and thus deal with the traumas that history has inflicted. American culture’s depiction and consumption of such indulgences into fantasy were symptoms for the underlying reality that in risking the chances of the 1960s, in the streets and in Vietnam, the American century and a version of the American dream were lost. But the dream was truly lost when it became a nightmare, when it was first treated as a game that could be played, something that could be risked for the sake of chance rather than out of necessity. What *Blood and Guts in High School, Dungeons & Dragons, The Deer Hunter, and Gravity’s Rainbow* make apparent is that the end of the American dream gave birth to American fantasies at once reconciliatory and divisive, born of chance and, ultimately, irrational.
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Dealing with the Devil is a

structure’ that one employs. Our belief that fantasy role-playing games are not, as a rule, havens for Satanists is not

proven, but is based on our faith in the secular character of middle-class, adolescent leisure in late twentieth-century

America” (Martin and Fine 109). For further engagements with America’s fear of Satanism and the occult at the end

of the twentieth century see the collection in which this essay appears, The Satanism Scare (1991) edited by Jams T.

Richardson, Joel Best, and David G. Bromley.

The return of the fantasy genre in the years after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 may remind one of the

historical period that Mackay discusses. For example, one need only think of the binaries between good an evil

presented in the Lord of the Rings (2001-2003) films, or, its prequels in the adaptation of The Hobbit (2012-).

For further examinations of the representation of the 1950s in politics, see Daniel Marcus’s Happy Days and

Wonder Years: The Fifties and Sixties in Contemporary Cultural Politics (2004) and Bernhard von Bothmer’s

Framing the Sixties: The Use and Abuse of a Decade from Ronald Reagan to George W. Bush (2010).

Dungeons & Dragons began as a way of making chance an exciting but controllable factor in a narrative game.

Gary Gygax, “a bored insurance underwriter” (Smith 15) and Dave Arneson created Dungeons & Dragons as an

extension of the medieval warfare game that Gygax also co-created, Chainmail (1971). When one plays Chainmail,

one controls an army of soldiers in battles against other players who are also controlling armies; when one plays

Dungeons & Dragons, one plays the role of a character that one has usually created. In Warlocks and Warpdrive

(1999) Kurt Lancaster distinguishes “three overlapping performance frames observable in role-playing games. At

the center are the characters that are part of a dramatic plot—the imaginary realm of the fantasy world; surrounding

this are players participating in a game that has rules; and around this exists the real world. These frames exist

simultaneously, feeding off of each other” (Lancaster 39). What the Reverend and other critics take issue with is the

possibility that these three frames will blend so wholly together that the players will not be able to distinguish

between fantasy and reality. In other words, rather than playing their characters they will become their characters. A

player has a large amount of control over the type of character that they will play and it is the task of the Dungeon

Master to create adventures that are delivered in the form of oral narratives for the various players to engage with. In

Fantasy Role Playing Games (1981) John Eric Holmes explains, “for the player the fascination of the game lies

partly in solving the problems set by the DM, partly in the growth and development of the character he guides

through the game. Starting as an alter-ego of the player, or perhaps a mere blank faceless non-entity, the character

begins to develop as his or her adventures unfold” (Holmes 76). While the player may feel their way into their role,

the Dungeon Master does everything from create the plot and anticipate its various iterations to play any number of

non-player characters that the party encounters over the course of the game session. When encountering various

monsters or enemies in the game and engaging in combat with them, both the Dungeon Master and the players rely

Notes

1 This title is also the title of a Stephane Mallarmé poem. While I will not go into detail about the significance of

Janey’s plagiarism, I will say that this resonates with the Einstein’s idea that God does not play dice. In other words,

when Acker talks about chance she takes no chances, using one of the most famous lines about chance.

2 See Arsenal of Democracy (2009) by Julian E. Zelizer, especially pages 287-299, for further discussion of

Reagan’s election.

3 For a discussion of this controversy see “Satanic Cults, Satanic Play: Is ‘Dungeons &Dragons’ a Breeding Ground

for the Devil?” by Daniel Martin and Gary Alan Fine where they write: “Whatever else they may be for crusading

groups, fantasy role-playing games, especially Dungeons & Dragons, represent a decisive moral realm through

which Satan gains control of individuals and unravels the social fabric of communities. Dealing with the Devil is a

precarious business. One may find that a deal has been struck without one’s full knowledge or consent of the

transaction. Not all demons show their cloven hooves. Unlike university researchers, the Devil rarely provides

‘informed consent’ in bargaining for a soul. Critics claim that such deals may be struck by fantasy game players

whose engrossment in Dungeons & Dragons makes them unwitting and, hence, vulnerable customers to this

salesmanship. Assessing involvement of the Prince of Darkness depends ultimately on the type of ‘plausibility

structure’ that one employs. Our belief that fantasy role-playing games are not, as a rule, havens for Satanists is not

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non-player characters that the party encounters over the course of the game session. When encountering various

monsters or enemies in the game and engaging in combat with them, both the Dungeon Master and the players rely
upon the roll of dice to determine whether or not they successfully attack their opponent and to determine how much damage their attack inflicts.

7 Martin and Fine make a similar point in “Satanic Cults, Satanic Play”: “To see fantasy as the breeding ground of the Devil is in part to give testimony to this enchantment. To engage actively in fantasy role-playing and creative imagination is to enchant. In framing fantasy role-playing games as occultist activities, crusading groups share with Dungeons & Dragons players a sense of ‘the world reenchanted.’ What is different is that fantasy role-players, in contrast to members of the crusading groups, define these activities as inherently social, imaginative, and limited rather than cosmological and self-defining” (Martin and Fine 121).

8 See Gary Alan Fine’s Shared Fantasy for an extensive discussion of the gender makeup of fantasy role-players. For a discussion of male erotic fantasy and role-playing games see Michelle Nephew’s essay “Playing with Identity: Unconscious Desire and Role-playing Games” especially pages 122-123 and 136-137.

9 For a discussion and rejection of folie à deux in regard to role-playing games, see Fine, 218.

10 See J. L. Austin’s How to do Things with Words (1962), especially the first lecture, as well as his “Performative Utterances” and Derrida’s response, “Signature, Event, Context” especially pages 14-15.

11 As Fine writes, “Often the players or the referee must roll dice to determine outcomes of battles or other encounters among players, or between players and hostile creatures. These dice rolls, which determine (through the rules) who is killed or the extent of injury, provide some formal structure for an otherwise very flexible game” (Fine 7). In “The Role-Playing Game and the Game of Role-Playing: The Ludic Self and Everyday Life” Dennis D. Waskul writes “All a player can know are the rules of the game, which detail probabilities for various actions characters might take. The development of a fantasy persona depends on how a player handles the outcomes of these probabilities, which always entail uncertainty and chance. Consequently, the fantasy personas of role-playing games are not unlike people in everyday life, chiefly influenced not by the basic traits they start out with, but the choices they make, the outcome of those decisions, chance, and the ongoing dialectical relationship between consequences and personal adjustments” (Waskul 25).

12 As well as Dear’s book, Rona Jaffe wrote a work of fiction based on the Egbert case, Mazes and Monsters (1981), which was adapted into a TV movie starring a young Tom Hanks Mazes and Monsters (1982).


15 Lawrence H. Suid explains the early gestation of The Deer Hunter in his study Guts & Glory: The Making of the American Military Image in Film (2002). According to Suid the film emerged simply from the idea of a man having to play Russian roulette (Suid 352). From there it became a screenplay known as The Man Who Came to Play, though was not initially set in Vietnam. Quinn Redeker came up with the initial idea and developed it and wrote the first draft of the screenplay with his partner Lou Garfinkle. It was Garfinkle who said, “No, The war in Vietnam is current. Nobody is touching it. It seems to me that we can develop something that will perfectly delineate the problem Americans have living with a gun at their heads. That is a condition man should not have to live with” (Suid 352). The original version of the script involved two characters, Merle and Keys. Both meet in a POW camp in Cambodia. Keys cares for Merle, who suffered a head wound when he was captured. Keys, an air force pilot, manipulates the wounded Merle into playing games of Russian roulette. Merle, the wounded army infantryman goes along, relying on Keys to make decisions for him. Keys fakes his own death, in Saigon, after their escape. This faked death takes place during a game of Russian roulette. Merle remains in Saigon, playing Russian roulette until
he has mentally recovered. He returns to the United States and attempts to bring Keys’s widow some of his winnings. It is then that he discovers that Keys faked his death. Now Merle manipulates keys, coercing him to return to Vietnam for a final game (Suid 353-354). This script, under Michael Cimino’s direction, became what we know as The Deer Hunter. For a full production history see Suid, 352-365. For an explanation of the writing process and an alternative view of the production history of the film see Michael Deeley’s Blade Runners, Deer Hunters and Blowing the Bloody Doors Off: My Life in Cult Movies (2009), especially 162-181. For a discussion of the initial reception of the film, see Robert E. Bourdette Jr.’s essay, “Rereading The Deer Hunter: Michael Cimino’s Deliberate American Epic” in America Rediscovered: Critical Essays on Literature and Film of the Vietnam War (1990). For yet another production and reception history of the film, see War Films (2006) by James Clarke.

16 It should be said that there are no documented cases of Russian roulette having ever been played in Vietnam. As Suid writes: “Ultimately, however, Cimino’s film failed to capture the essence of the American tragedy in Vietnam not only because it distorted or ignored history, but also because its central metaphor, the recurring game of Russian roulette, portrayed a fiction” (357). However, the film gains much of its force from the depictions of Russian roulette, a game of chance which is also the ultimate fiction in the film and which acts as a form not only of control, but as an excellent metaphor for Vietnam. That even the chance game that gives one a sense of control is a total fantasy points to the American people’s feelings of total passivity when it came to the war and its aftermath. For an early defense of The Deer Hunter that delves into the film’s complex portrayal of racism, see Frank Burke’s “In Defense of The Deer Hunter, Or: The Knee Jerk is Quicker than the Eye.” For a discussion of the structural relationship between the deer hunt and Russian roulette see Burke’s “Reading Michael Cimino’s The Deer Hunter: Interpretation as Melting Pot,” especially 253-254.

17 In “The Superman in Vietnam” Leonard Quart argues that in the case of Michael “there are aspects of his character that allow him to be turned into a symbolic figure—part of that American romantic tradition stretching back to James Fenimore Cooper: a mythic figure who carves out his identity in confrontation with nature. Like Cooper’s Natty Bumppo in The Deerslayer and The Last of the Mohicans, Michael is an outsider—chaste, honorable, forbearing, revering the mountains and nature, and given to a purity of purpose embodied in his deer-hunting gospel of the one-shot kill” (160). For a discussion of the deer hunter myth and its reception in early America, see Richard Slotkin’s Regeneration Through Violence: The Mythology of the American Frontier, 1600-1860 (1973), especially his discussions of Cooper. For another discussion of The Deer Hunter and myth see John Hellmann’s essay, “Vietnam and the Hollywood Genre Film: Inversions of American Mythology in The Deer Hunter and Apocalypse Now” in Inventing Vietnam: The War in Film and Television (1991).

18 Richard Slotkin writes in Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth Century America (1992): “Historical events (like the defeat in Vietnam) always call into question the validity of ‘the guiding myth’ (626) and “The return of the last American combat forces from Vietnam in 1973 marked the sudden end of the pre-eminence of the West among the genres of mythic discourse” (627). Quart argues that this mythology is complicated all the more through “The Deer Hunter’s implicitly racist vision of white Russian-Americans as men of integrity and courage (few black soldiers appear in the film) and the Vietnamese as chillingly malevolent figures has the effect of totally distorting the historical and moral reality of the war. The fact that they are Russian-American both frees them from the ethnic stereotypes and audience expectations other ethnic groups carry in Hollywood films and gives the war an even more racial cast. For now the Cold War aspects of Vietnam get lost, Russians being the good guys here fighting as Americans against the barbarism of the alien, yellow-skinned Vietnamese” (Quart 166). For a critique of Slotkin and a complication of his arguments regarding the frontier myth, see Raya Morag’s Defeated Masculinity: Post-Traumatic Cinema in the Aftermath of War (2009), particularly pages 155-159. Morag makes an argument that the mythological structure of The Deer Hunter and other Vietnam films complicates the frontier mythology of the hunt, expressly in the complications of Oedipal structures, eros, and libidinal exchange between soldiers at war.

19 In “Rereading The Deer Hunter” Bourdette argues that “the ‘one shot’ ideal and our involvement in Vietnam illustrates Cimino’s more important point: our belief, rooted in our myths, that as a nation we could solve that complex historical situation by ‘one shot’” (176).
20 In *Cinematic Geopolitics* (2009) Michael J. Shapiro notes that “In *The Deer Hunter*, the mountains are largely a space of reprieve, a space where elemental impulses can be exercised in a less complex environment, one free from the pressured temporal rhythms of everyday life in an industrial city” (140). Shapiro goes on to read Nick’s response to the mountains as purely aesthetic while Michael’s is an iteration of control and industriousness. For a discussion of the use of landscape and myth in the film, see “The Regeneration of America: Uses of Landscape in *The Deer Hunter*” by Don Francis.

21 As early as 1950 *The New York Times* reported that Norman Cousins, the editor of *The Saturday Review of Literature*, “addressed a general assembly of the Institute for Atomic Energy in Education” stating that the world is engaged in a game of “Russian roulette” (“Atomic Odds Described”).

22 For a discussion of Russian roulette as a form of control see Robin Wood’s *Hollywood from Vietnam to Reagan* (1986), especially page 294. For a discussion of Russian roulette as a symbol of national suicide, see Sylvia Shin Huey Chong’s “Restaging the War: *The Deer Hunter* and the Primal Scene of Violence” in which she argues that for the reciprocal nature of the game as not only a version of execution but also as a metaphor for the My Lai Massacre (95).

23 For a discussion of risk and *The Deer Hunter* see “Risk, Las Vegas, and *The Deer Hunter*” by Richard M. Ratzan, MD.

24 In *American Myth and the Legacy of Vietnam* (1986) John Hellmann argues that Vietnam stands for the destruction of Kennedy’s New Frontier (182). He goes on to say, “the point of *The Deer Hunter* “is to determine how a culture proceeds once it has experienced the inversion of its central assumptions about itself” (182). In *Prisoners of Culture: Representing the Vietnam POW* (1993), Elliot Gruner argues against Hellmann’s reading, finding *The Deer Hunter* to be an anomaly in its depiction of the “eroded American self,” while other films, such as the Rambo series attempted to depict a redemptive whole (Gruner 144-145). *The Deer Hunter* depicts the disintegration of the development of American mythology under Kennedy and a shift from a cohesive vision of American identity that began to fragment in the 1960s and the crystallization of this shattered subject post-73. For a discussion of the Rambo films and Kennedy’s New Frontier, see John Hellmann’s essay, “Rambo’s Vietnam and Kennedy’s New Frontier” in *Inventing Vietnam: The War in Film and Television* (1991). For an extension of the inversions of myth and history that *The Deer Hunter* depicts, see Sylvia Shin Huey Chong’s essay “Restaging the War: *The Deer Hunter* and the Primal Scene of Violence.”

25 As we see when Michael attempts to hunt alone after he first returns from Vietnam. He deliberately misses the deer that he is hunting.

26 For an extended discussion of uncertainty in *Gravity’s Rainbow* as well as Pynchon’s other early novels, see *Pynchon: The Voice of Ambiguity* (1981) by Thomas Schaub, especially the introduction, which gives an overview of uncertainty and contingency in his works up to *Gravity’s Rainbow*. For further discussion of uncertainty in *Gravity’s Rainbow* see *Pynchon’s Mythography: An Approach to Gravity’s Rainbow* (1987) by Kathryn Hume, particularly her chapter “Chaos and Cosmos Integrated.” For a more recent study of the overarching representation of paranoia in American literature of the last fifty years see Emily Apter’s “On Oneworldedness: Or Paranoia as a World System.”

27 For a discussion of *Gravity’s Rainbow* and the ways in which the novel treats the reader not as a reader but as one watching a film, see “Moviemaking” by David Marriott. For a study of the novel and its intertextual relationship with film, see “Beyond the theater of War: *Gravity’s Rainbow* as Film” by Scott Simmon. While Simmon’s essay is interested in identifying Pynchon’s allusions and uses of films ranging from those of Godard to Cooper’s *King Kong*, in this chapter I am interested in the way that he uses film elements to set up his and describe his scenes.

28 One of the earliest acknowledgements of this facet of Pynchon’s fiction is discussed in George Levine’s essay “Risking the Moment: Anarchy and Possibility in Pynchon’s Fiction” which was collected in *Mindful Pleasures: Essays on Thomas Pynchon* (1976). Levine writes: “Anticipating such readings, I’m sure, Pynchon made characters
like Herbert Stencil and Oedipa Maas pretty good literary critics themselves. Writing about them thematically is like joining them, and that is part of the irony and experience of reading the books too” (113). More recently Mark McGurl has argued in The Program Era: Postwar Fiction and the Rise of Creative Writing (2009) writes about “how much of an old-fashioned English major [Oedipa] is” (190). McGurl goes on to discuss how The Crying of Lot 49 was written “amidst the long haul of the monumental Gravity’s Rainbow” and ultimately made him “conveniently teachable to undergraduates happily ever after [...] its frequent use as a college textbook produces the novel’s most powerful form of reflexivity. Strictly regulating the commerce between the reader and the third person narrator who might (in theory) have solved the mystery of the Tristero rather than letting it ride, Pynchon aligned the experience of untold thousands of college students who have tried to understand The Crying of Lot 49 with an English major protagonist who is doing much the same thing” (191). Pynchon’s novels are filled with characters that try to read the situation that the book represents as the reader is attempting to read the book itself. This parallel relationship between reader and character bridges the fictional world with that of reality much in the same way that the narrative structure of Dungeons & Dragons bridges fantasy with reality through the act of role-playing. In other words, if one reads Pynchon as if one is a character in a Pynchon novel then the labyrinth will continue to consume the reader. If Pynchon’s novels are read as fictional worlds that are meant to persuade the reader to read against fiction—towards perhaps the strong historicism of Pynchon’s fiction—then this leads not only to a way out of the fictional labyrinth, but perhaps also an understanding of the “real” world. As Daniel Grausam writes in On Endings: American Postmodern Fiction and the Cold War “The novels frequently cut in another direction, exploiting the distinction between their historical setting and the time of their publication and reading. Just as Pynchon’s characters use their knowledge of the past to recognize the significance of events in ways unavailable to any contemporary observer of them, so too is the reader able to grasp realities unavailable to any character” (43). For a discussion of postmodernist reading practices see Marginal Forces/Cultural Centers: Tolson, Pynchon, and the Politics of the Canon (1992) by Michael Bérubé, especially his chapter “Against the Avant: Pynchon’s Products, Pynchon’s Pornographies.”

29 In Ideas of Order in the Novels of Thomas Pynchon (1983) Molly Hite provides a general reading of the novel’s use of the parabola as “a metaphor for control and structure. It represents the kind of conceptual system that human beings use to circumscribe and rationalize their experience in order to take charge of it. [...] The more comprehensive the structure, the more likely it is to look like fate, so that humanity finds itself serving an antihuman Higher Purpose when it is seduced by the clarity and coherence of its own explanations. The implicit model for all totalizing systems is the myth of the providential plan, which purports to account for all aspects of human life by directing history to a predetermined end” (98). Gravity’s Rainbow’s use of the parabola provides a teleological structure that the reader (and the characters, for the most part) clearly want to evade; i.e. no one wants the bomb to land on them, and the novel is very much about the problems one faces when attempting to escape from a predetermined structure—such as a novel or the seeming trajectory of humanity’s relationship to technology and its potential for destruction. As Tony Tanner writes in City of Words: American Fiction 1950-1970 about V. (but is applicable to this discussion of Gravity’s Rainbow), “What Pynchon manages to suggest is that the fantasies we build to help us to live represent, in fact, an infiltration of that death we think we are so eager to postpone. They represent an avoidance of reality, by substituting for it a fetichistic construction” (171). For further discussion of determinism and the representation of an unpredictable universe in scientific terms in Gravity’s Rainbow, see “Science as Metaphor: Thomas Pynchon and Gravity’s Rainbow” by Alan J. Friedman and Manfred Puetz. For a counterargument to Hite’s, see John McClure’s Partial Faiths: Postsecular Fiction in the Age of Pynchon and Morrison, especially pages 34-37.

30 In “Pynchon’s Paranoid History” Scott Sanders gives a reading of this scene as revealing “the key features of Slothrop’s thought throughout the novel: the perception of reality as either governed by chance, and therefore meaningless, or else governed by some hidden powers at once ‘more real’ than chance and more ruthless; and the belief that this order, which is felt to lurk behind the debris of the world, is not merely secret, not just passively mysterious like a remote deity, but ‘systematically hidden from the likes of Slothrop’” (142). My reading of Gravity’s Rainbow is that the encounter with the real that is chance/accident is considered far more ruthless than a paranoid conspiracy due to the fact that the idea that pure chance governs all actions allows for very little agency or ability to understand one’s ontological state in a cold ruthless universe.
31 For a discussion of grace in *Gravity’s Rainbow* see *Partial Faiths* by John McClure, especially pages 40-41. For an explanation of the use of Tarot in *Gravity’s Rainbow* see Steven Weisenburger’s *A Gravity’s Rainbow Companion*.

32 For a reading of this parallel that gives a different interpretation of the relationship between elect and preterite, see Thomas Moore’s *The Style of Connectedness: Gravity’s Rainbow and Thomas Pynchon* (1987), especially pages 133-137.

33 Moore argues, “the ‘grace’ ethic of *Gravity’s Rainbow* perhaps feels itself as some higher power of V.’s “keep cool but care.” In any case, grace is now clearly preterite, not elect, property [sic]” (134). Grace, the free gift, doesn’t seem to have much relation to the mantra “keep cool but care.” To “keep cool but care” means to remain calm without grace, to care despite how hard going things may be. Keeping cool and caring is something certainly associated with Pynchon’s preterite, while their lack of grace, as discussed above, is a kind of grace in that it keeps the characters striving for meaning rather than becoming complacent.

34 See ““Presto Change-o! Tyrone Slothrop’s English Again!’: Puritan Conversion, Imperfect Assurance, Slavific Sloth in *Gravity’s Rainbow*” by Christopher Leise for a reading of this passage that places it in the context of Puritan practice and history.

35 For a discussion of this scene in terms of its depiction of time and as a critique of American history, see “The New Jeremiad: *Gravity’s Rainbow*” by Marcus Smith and Khachig Tololyan, 174-175, and for a further discussion of Puritanism and paranoia in *Gravity’s Rainbow* see “From Puritanism to Paranoia: Trajectories of History in Weber and Pynchon” by Ralph Schroeder.

36 For a reading of the “paranoid” and “anti-paranoid” divide in Pynchon see *Postmodern Sublime: Technology and American Writing from Mailer to Cyberpunk* (1995) by Joseph Tabbi, where he writes: “Neither the straight (paranoid) nor the ironical (anti-paranoid) projection does anything at all to resist whatever power, totalitarian or otherwise, happens to be in place at a given moment. Postmodern irony *changes nothing* (and not in the potentially subversive way that philosophy, for Wittgenstein, ‘changes nothing’ except our conceptual orientation toward the ideological status quo, which leaves open the potential for us to change *everything*). The elaboration of an ironic, self-consciously linguistic universe is the problem in Pynchon, not the solution to fragmentation, uncertainty, and alienation in the technological subject, as novelists and critics of the generation after Pynchon are coming to realize” (77). I think that we should read the anti-paranoid as a sincere representation of the problems of believing that nothing is connected—that there are no causes no effects—and as a critique of paranoid thinking. While certainly the irony of this scene is that Slothrop, in his anti-paranoid state yearns for paranoia, this represents a desire for critical historiography, the kind of sincere engagement with one’s subject that writers from the next generation, such as Wallace—as Tabbi goes on to discuss—yearned for.
Coda

Accident Now, Again

In this dissertation I have argued that representations of accidents in American cultural texts from the past fifty years express a desire for control and authorship to be exerted over contingency. Figures of minor political power—such as University Professors, elevator inspectors, authors, heads of church, soldiers, and scientists—manifest this desire often looking to figures who wield an immense amount of power, from Presidents of the United States to omnipotent gods, to intervene in disaster and make meaning from the accidents that disrupt everyday life. This desire for control over the accident reveals a politics of the accident, in which subjects create fictions, narratives, and thus meaning for events that very often have no meaning, their causes being beyond the understanding of the subjects who experienced their effects. In ascribing meaning to the accident, such subjects rely upon teleology, a meaningful history with a predetermined end, so as to maintain an illusion of control over their own lives.

The desire for an American subject immune to accident, such as those subjects we saw at the end of the last chapter, continues to exist today with individuals who deny accident in everyday life and instead embrace conspiracy theories. I would like to conclude with a brief discussion of how the radical individual of American cultural texts produced since I began writing this dissertation in 2008 blames accident upon the government, going so far as to construct elaborate conspiratorial narratives to provide a teleology and meaning for chance events. Texts such as the television series *Breaking Bad* (2008-2013) and *The Americans* (2013-), and Steve Erickson’s novel *These Dreams of You* (2012), insist upon placing the blame for accidental events or the acts of other radical individuals upon the government of the United States. While the introduction focused upon the Kennedy assassination as an event that shaped
American culture from 1963 forward, and while the first chapter and sections of those that proceeded looked at the influence Ronald Reagan had upon cultural products, I would like to close by looking at more recent history and how the culture has constructed Barack Obama as a figure of blame, a controlling force, and author of conspiracies from before his own birth. I make this my closing gesture in order to demonstrate that, if anything, the politics of the accident are as strong as ever, performed in recent years as an insistence that all events are the products of government authorship.

When read together “737,” “Down,” “Over,” “ABQ,” the titles of four episodes from the second season of the television series *Breaking Bad*, describe the in-air-collision of two 737s over Albuquerque, New Mexico, the aftermath of which is teased in the pre-credits sequences of the aforementioned episodes. Each sequence depicts, in black and white, the front and backyard of the White household—or, the White house. Each sequence implies that some horrible act was perpetrated upon the residents of the home, leading the viewer to believe that enemies in the drug world had finally caught up with Walter “Walt” White (Brian Cranston), a fifty-year old high school chemistry teacher who turned to cooking meth after being diagnosed with terminal lung cancer. Over the course of the thirteen-episode season, these openings present the viewer with pieces of foreshadowing, building suspense and raising the expectation that something Walt and his partner Jesse had done had caught up with them. However, the season finale dispels such foregone conclusions; by the end of “ABQ” Walt stands alone in his backyard while fiery debris and ash rains down upon him, closing the season with a foreboding apocalyptic crash, reminding the viewer and Walt that there are events in the world well beyond anyone’s control.

Yet this sense of control and consequence for one’s actions is taken up in “No Mas,” the premiere of the third season, which indicates that the collision of the two 737s occurred due to a
series of events in which Walt was directly involved. When Walt entered Jesse’s apartment in “ABQ” hoping to help him kick his addiction to heroin he discovered both Jesse (Aaron Paul) and his girlfriend Jane (Krysten Ritter) in a heroin-induced sleep. In an attempt to awaken Jesse, Walt accidentally turns Jane onto her back. She asphyxiates on her own vomit while Walt watches, a passive viewer, until she ceases seizing, then leaves. The viewer discovers in “No Mas” that Jane’s father, Donald (John de Lancie) is an air-traffic controller who returned to work shortly after the his daughter’s death, and it is his distracted state that results in the accidental collision. By the time Jesse—fresh out of rehab—and Walt can discuss what happened, the Federal Aviation Administration has already said that Donald had perhaps returned too early to work. Jesse, trying to make meaning from this accident, blames himself. He asks Walt, “You been following this airplane crash?” and, after Walt reluctantly nods, continues:

Jesse: You know it was Jane’s dad who accidentally crashed them together ‘cause he was so torn up?

Walt: Hey look, let me stop you right there, alright? You are not responsible for this, not in any way shape or form . . . alright? Now I-I am very up to date on this thing—probably far more than you are—and there are . . . there are many factors at play there.

Jesse: Yeah?

Walt: For instance, there’s some sort of collision radar on the jet that may not have been working properly. Now that’s public record, you can look that up. A-And the whole system is run on 1960s technology. No. No, really, I blame the government.

Jesse: You either run from things, or you face them, Mr. White.

Jesse insists that the collision is his fault, and Walt—having not told Jesse that he let Jane die—uncharacteristically says that he blames no one but the government. The above events of
*Breaking Bad* deftly illustrate the calculus of blame. While Walter White holds a PhD in Chemistry from UC Berkeley, at the beginning of the series he works two jobs—one as a high school chemistry teacher and a second at a car wash. The recession—which Obama began dealing with before his election—and his diagnosis of terminal lung cancer, are the impetus for Walt to begin cooking meth. He plans to make enough money to support his family after his death, which includes paying off the mortgage of their home, providing college tuition for his son and unborn daughter, and enough money to pay the bills and allow them to return to being comfortable members of the middle-class. While accidents transpire in *Breaking Bad*, they are only accidents from the perspective of the characters; the viewers are often privy to the causes that lead to seemingly accidental effects. For example, in the pilot episode Walt and Jesse realize that a fire has somehow started outside of the RV in which they are cooking meth. The viewer knows that this fire started because one of the drug dealers who were making them cook, under threat of violence, threw his cigarette from the RV’s window after Walt insisted he put it out. The show turns Walt’s extensive knowledge of chemistry into a trope, making the camera a limited-omniscient narrator in order to demonstrate that while everything happens for a reason at the level of cause and effect and at the level of physics and chemistry, one cannot be aware of all causes.

*Breaking Bad* is not the only acclaimed television show that has something to say about the government’s culpability in vast conspiracies authored from the fragments of chance events. The absence of cause in the fourth episode of *The Americans* (2013-), “In Control,” transfers the aforementioned desire to understand the present as the culmination of a series of plots to past events. This series, drawing upon the Illegals Program from 2010, depicts two KGB agents in deep cover as a married couple, complete with children and a home in the suburbs of
Washington D.C. This episode depicts the fallout of John Hinckley Jr.’s attempted assassination of Ronald Reagan. While the husband, Philip Jennings (Matthew Rhys), believes that this could be the act of a deranged lone gunman, his wife Elizabeth (Keri Russell) believes that it is the beginning of a coup that Secretary of State Alexander Haig has orchestrated. However, Elizabeth’s belief only comes from her understanding the chain of Presidential procession better than Haig himself, whom she watches on television mistakenly say—all true to history—that he “was in control here” due to Vice President Bush being on his way back to Washington D.C. from Texas. Of course, the Speaker of the House would have been the next to take “control,” should Bush not been able to assume the role. However, due to Haig misspeaking, Elizabeth insists that they begin to take the necessary steps in case of a coup, meeting with their handlers and being informed that they are to target for assassination a number of American politicians. The episode turns Haig’s misunderstanding into Elizabeth’s misreading, demonstrating once again the power of reading and misreading to lead to potentially catastrophic circumstances. At the episode’s end Peter and Elizabeth visit the home of their neighbor, FBI Agent Stan Beeman (Noah Emmerich), looking for more clues as to whether a coup has taken place or not. Beeman informs them that Hinckley attempted to assassinate President Reagan in order to impress Jodie Foster—and that, moreover, Hinckley’s motives are inscrutable, the acts of a madman. Hinckley’s unreasonable actions, like an accident, are meaningless.

Herein lies the episode’s inauthentic authenticity. While the fact that our enemies know our ways better than our leaders is intended to stir fear—and may here resound with a paranoid portion of the population—the episode itself, in this final reveal, turns the viewer’s attention to the problems of believing that one lives within the fictional realm of mediated drama. Hinckley, obsessed with the film *Taxi Driver* (1976) and the actress Jodie Foster, embodies a deranged
facet of the political subject of the Reagan administration. In the first chapter I took DeLillo’s Jack Gladney as a representation of the subject of the Reagan administration, an individual obsessed with plots. Yet here we see that Hinckley has taken plotting to an even greater extreme, mixing fiction with reality in order to authenticate himself as a valid partner for Foster. In order to feel real, he had to embody a fiction. Yet while Hinckley was found insane, setting new precedents for the insanity plea, Reagan responded in just as insane a manner to the attempt upon his life. Hinckley fired six shots at Reagan, and each of the bullets missed; the one that hit Reagan ricocheted off of Reagan’s limousine. Reagan was rushed to the hospital as news spread via television, raising for the public memories of the Kennedy assassination (Quindlin). However, Reagan’s response, touted to the media and broadcast and printed for all the country to see, were his words to his wife Nancy: “Honey, I forgot to duck.” This line, which Jack Dempsey said to his wife the night he lost his boxing heavyweight championship to Gene Tunney, invokes not just sport, but the illusion that the event itself was scripted and that Reagan simply forgot his cue. It was all, always, a matter of sticking to the script.

This sense of reality being a script which one either remembers or forgets has become increasingly prevalent in the public consciousness of the United States since the election of Barack Obama. The recent series of mass shootings—from the attempted assassination of Congresswoman Gabrielle Giffords in 2011; the Aurora, Colorado Theater shooting, which transpired during a midnight screening of the superhero film The Dark Knight Rises (2012); and the Sandyhook Elementary School shooting in Newtown, Connecticut in late 2012; to the act of domestic terrorism at the 2013 Boston Marathon—have each been taken by a series of fairly prominent media personalities and a growing number of conspiracy theorists as instances of government conspiracy against the American people, motivated by the United States
government’s purported desire to limit citizen’s rights. This intriguing illogic transforms the federal government into terrorists. While terrorism is used to overwhelm a population and its government to the point the government limits rights to its citizens, removes freedom, so as to defend from outside threats, the conspiracy theorist believes that the government perpetrates atrocities on its own citizens in order to limit their rights. This leads to a form of paranoid reading in which every disaster, tragedy, and accident is part of a larger plot, an “inside job”.

Steve Erickson’s novel *These Dreams of You* (2012) tells the story of the Nordhoc family, comprised of novelist Alexander “Zan,” his wife Vivian, their son Parker, and their adopted daughter, of Ethiopian decent, Sheba. Throughout the novel, which opens with the election of Barack Obama, Zan fixates upon how the new president has inspired madness from many of his fellow countrymen. On his way to Paris from London, within the Chunnel, “Zan reads newspapers scooped up beneath skylights of the station arcade and, from the dispassionate vantage point of foreign shores, realizes that his country has lost its mind” (191). The nation has gone mad. In *These Dreams of You* Obama becomes a figure who inspires reparative as well as paranoid readings. *These Dreams of You* continues:

In the dark of the Chunnel, the train comes abruptly to a halt. As they wait for the train to begin, Zan mulls the article in *The Times* that reports death threats against the new president up four hundred percent. Over the months that have followed his assumption of office, first there have been openly expressed hopes that he’ll fail, then accusations that he’s a radical, then questions whether he was born in the country and really president at all. [. . .] Then he’s accused of hating white people. Then he’s accused of fostering a presidency under which white people will be attacked and beaten. Then it’s claimed he’s setting up death tribunals that will condemn old people to termination. Then he’s
compared to fascist dictators, then people bring guns to events where he speaks, then a widely-read blogger calls for a military coup, then a minister in Arizona calls from the pulpit for the president’s death. A popular website runs a poll asking respondents whether he should be assassinated. (191-192)

The narrative of These Dreams of You accumulates paranoid thoughts about the president. As I discussed in the fourth chapter, the desire to eliminate chance in the religious right often manifests as the transformation of the mundane into the fantastic, such as when a game involving pencil, paper, and the roll of the dice becomes a means of teaching wizardry. For critics of Obama, the president can become the cause of any and all problems, simply due to the fact that he is African American. The desire for him to be a foreign national, and thus not legally president, and part of some larger plot to overthrow the American government, provides an elaborate explanation that erases the fact that an African American was elected president of the United States. These Dreams of You addresses the role of race in the reception of President Obama through weaving into its story of our current political moment one of the late 1960s: the presidential campaign of Robert Kennedy.

We first see RFK in 1966, the night before he flew to South Africa to address students in Capetown. He stands in the rain with Paul McCartney, having accidentally run into him and his manager Jasmine earlier in the night. Neither the politician or the musician recognize one another, and so, anonymous, Kennedy ponders the validity of giving his speech, noting that neither his nor the South African government want him to speak.

“Will I only succeed in giving the white government a, a . . . an excuse to arrest black Africans? Am I only making trouble? Do I become the . . . rationale by which more blacks are oppressed, beaten, brutalized? Is this about my damned ego? Is this one more
test I put myself to, for which other people pay the price, as my brothers paid the price for my father? I keep going over the speech. Taking the anger out. Putting it back in.”

“What is it these students want from you, then?”

For the first time tonight the hair-trigger altar boy becomes all of a piece with his sad burning eyes. “I don’t believe one man changes everything,” he says, “maybe no one man changes anything, least of all me. I’m an accident. But I believe there are times when even men who aren’t great must find a way to try and do great things. People think I’m afraid of nothing when the truth is I’m afraid of everything, and not so long ago I vowed before a God I love and trust a little less than I used to that I would do all the things I’m afraid of, because I do believe anyone can change part of something, and that part of something changes something else, and soon the ripple in the lake is the wave on the beach.” (168-169)

That Robert Kennedy sees himself as an accident places him within the upset narrative of the American century that I discussed in the introduction—had his brother not died, he imagines that he would not feel so compelled to remain in politics. The assassination of his brother was not supposed to happen; when Oswald assassinated John Kennedy, one man altered the narrative that history was supposed to take. However, in admitting that he is an accident, and that in being so he can become the “rationale” of those who wish to rationalize the irrational acts of an oppressive regime, Kennedy rejects the narrative that his brother’s assassination was “the seven seconds that broke the back of the American century”; he instead opens history to radical possibility, insisting that history is not a narrative, but a series of tiny events that coincide and make something so big that mass media can only understand it as narrative. Erickson, in drawing parallels between Robert Kennedy and Barack Obama, brings to the fore the indeterminate
question of how race and politics shape American history. *These Dreams of You* sustains throughout its pages the ambiguous rhetoric that Robert Kennedy deployed in the opening of his speech to the students in Capetown, for throughout the novel we are never told that the just elected president is Barack Obama, nor are we told that history is determinate. Kennedy’s words in South Africa:

> I came here because of my deep interest and affection for a land settled by the Dutch in the mid-seventeenth century, then taken over by the British, and at last independent; a land in which the native inhabitants were at first subdued, but relations with whom remain a problem to this day; a land which defined itself on a hostile frontier; a land which has tamed rich natural resources through the energetic application of modern technology; a land which once imported slaves, and now must struggle to wipe out the last traces of that former bondage. I refer, of course, to the United States of America. (Kennedy)

For Kennedy the United States of America shares a history parallel to that of South Africa, just as *These Dreams of You* constructs Kennedy as parallel in history to Obama; in doing so, each narrative undermines rather than replicates teleological thinking. While we are told, “Following such a linear progression, Zan asks himself in the dark two hundred feet below the surface of the English Channel, what else could be next? Or, put another way, what possibly could *not* be next?” (192). Kennedy’s earlier assertion that he is an accident calls into question the foregone conclusion that, where Obama is concerned, the politics of assassination will return. While Robert fell, like his brother, to an assassin’s bullet, the past does not write the history of the future. Simply because we know the past does not mean that we know the future; simply because we know that Robert Kennedy, for whom the nation held feelings that were not to return until
Barack Obama entered Presidential politics, was assassinated does not mean that our feelings, good or bad, about Barack Obama determine his fate.

What do we learn from those who, in the words of These Dreams of You, “suggest the president is an imposter. They contend he was born in a secret african [sic] veldt and, as a newborn, smuggled into the country under the cover of a false birth certificate and false birth announcement in a hawaiian [sic] newspaper so that forty-seven years later he could seize the presidency. Some propose that this is God’s warning of the end time” (93). The inward turn discussed in the third and fourth chapters of Narrative at Risk in regard to the 1990s remains as vital now as it was then. Fears of apocalypse permeate the culture, the ideologies of evangelical fundamentalism extending well beyond the coterie of glass churches into major news stations and many homes. This belief in teleology has also permeated deeper into the culture, beyond the fundamentalist religions and into everyday secular life. The casual, rational reader of a website such as Gawker finds himself confronted on a near daily basis with articles explaining new conspiracy theories, such as the “#falseflag” phenomenon, without the context of rabid religious belief.

Each of these paranoids share in the denial of accident and attribute intention to a force they consider more powerful than themselves, whether god, president, or a coterie of shadowy individuals. In doing so, they make themselves the protagonists of a plot against America, against their own radical individuality for reasons that lack any reason at all. Yet the only plots against America being authored are the ones they write. I hope that this dissertation has begun the work of writing back, of using the plots of fictional texts to demonstrate that the reality of accident and the open futurity it provides may heal the wounds of paranoid thinking. Though this is no foregone conclusion, it is a conclusion, nonetheless.
Notes

1 Such conspiracy theories have proliferated since the internet has been readily available to Americans. Mainstream news sites and papers frequently pick up and report such theories. For coverage of conspiracy theories relating to Sandy Hook, see Hunter Stuart’s coverage for *The Huffington Post*. For coverage of the conspiracy theories that connect Sandy Hook to the Aurora, Colorado *The Dark Knight Rises* shooting, see Max Read’s coverage for *Gawker*. And for coverage of Boston Marathon Bombing conspiracies, see Amanda Holpuch’s coverage for *The Guardian*.

2 The tile, *These Dreams of You*, comes from a Van Morrison song, but also evokes the title of Barack Obama’s memoir *Dreams of My Father* (1995).
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