READING RISK:
COLLISIONS OF CRISIS IN
CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN LITERATURE

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THESIS ABSTRACT

This thesis examines representations of risk in contemporary American literature, joining a growing body of critical attention to risk and its relevance to literary studies. Framing risk as a matter of perception and therefore a matter of reading, this project explores how the interlocking structure of contemporary crisis both reflects and demands new critical approaches. This inquiry therefore undertakes a comparative study of how different forms and genres articulate and account for risk.

Risk is an analytical tool capacious enough to read across the range, scale, and complexity of contemporary crisis. To focus this expansive archive, this project is grounded at the intersection of two contemporary crises that anchor the modern "risk society": terrorism and environmental destruction (Beck, *Risk Society* 9). These two categories of risk have also shaped American literary studies' engagement with crisis over the last two decades, primarily through the subdisciplines of post-9/11 analysis and ecocriticism. Building connectivity between these bifurcated discourses, this project accounts for risk in contemporary American literature inductively through a study of nine texts. Chapter One explores risk's circulation through the networks of Jonathan Franzen's *Freedom* (2010) and Laila Halaby's *Once in a Promised Land* (2007). Chapter Two investigates rupture and continuity in Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* (2006) and Colson Whitehead's *Zone One* (2011). Chapter Three considers contradictory constructions of risk's universality and particularity in Gayle Brandeis's *Self Storage* (2007), Michael Cunningham's *Specimen Days* (2005), and Ben Lerner's *10:04* (2014). Chapter Four, through the case studies of Dave Eggers's *Zeitoun* (2009) and Mohamedou Ould Slahi's *Guantánamo Diary* (2017 [2015]), explores the tension between risk as exceptional and risk as routine.

Providing a corrective to what we might call "single-issue criticism," this thesis will demonstrate how contemporary literature is already teaching us how to read across risk by making the convergences of crisis visible and offering immanent criticism of the ways risk is plotted and conceptualized.

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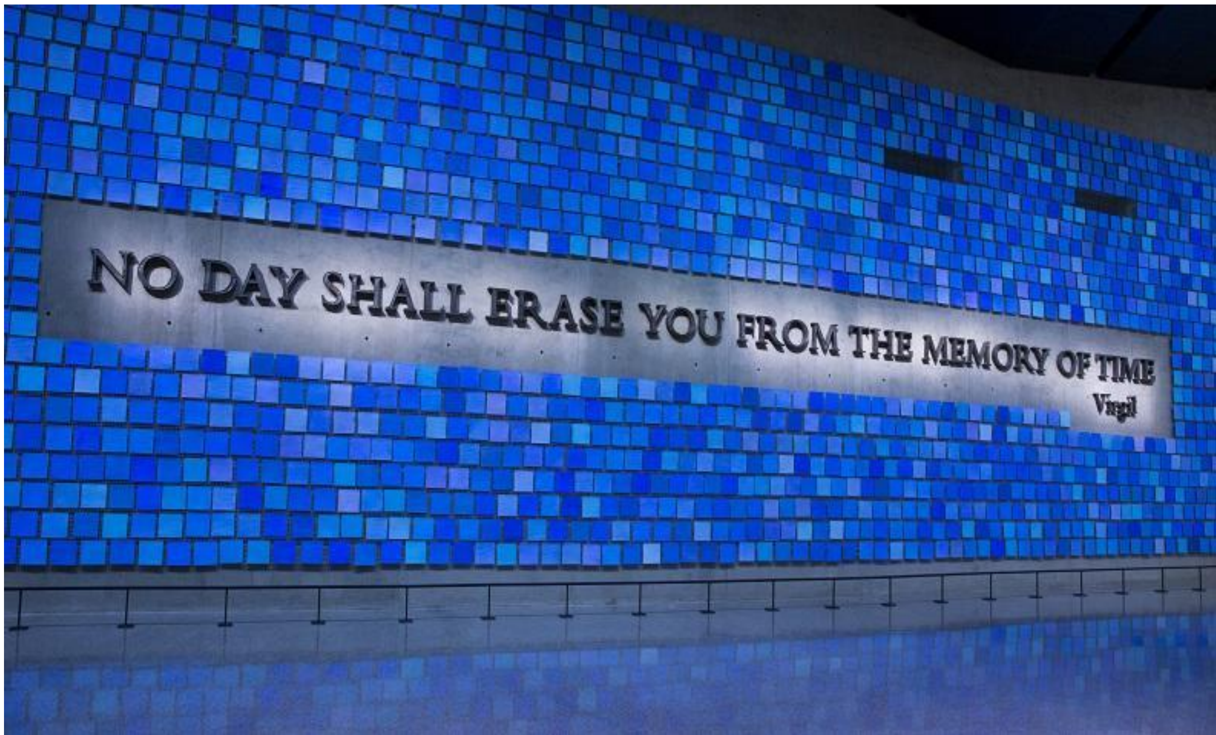

Figure 1: Photograph of Spencer Finch's "Trying to Remember the Color of the Sky on That September Morning" from: www.911memorial.org/connect/blog/look-museums-memorial-hall

INTRODUCTION

The focal point of the National September 11 Memorial and Museum's Memorial Hall is an art installation titled "Trying to Remember the Color of the Sky on That September Morning" (2014), created by Spencer Finch (see Fig. 1). This enormous, forty-foot installation is comprised of 2,983 squares of Fabriano Italian paper, each hand-painted a different shade of blue. Each square corresponds to a victim of the World Trade Center attacks of September 11, 2001 (9/11) and February 26, 1993. The work evokes in part the famously blue skies of that September morning, which meteorologists have referred to as "severe clear" (Kennedy). When I visited the museum in the spring of 2019, the tour guide described her own recollection of 9/11, remarking, "This is what a lot of people remember about this day: there was not a cloud in the sky" (Guided Tour).

The tour guide was not alone in highlighting the clear blue sky within the collective story told about the attacks, in both public discourse and in the novel. The blue sky often stretches across the covers of 9/11 novels, including editions of Frédéric Beigbeder's *Windows on the World* (2003), John Updike's *Terrorist* (2006), Don DeLillo's *Falling Man* (2007), Laila Halaby's *Once in a Promised Land* (2007), and Joseph O'Neill's *Netherland* (2008) (see Fig. 2). The blue sky also features in 9/11 criticism and poetry, most obviously on the covers and in the titles of Kristiaan Versluys's *Out of the Blue: September 11 and the Novel* (2009) and Simon Armitage's commemorative poem "Out of the Blue" (2006)

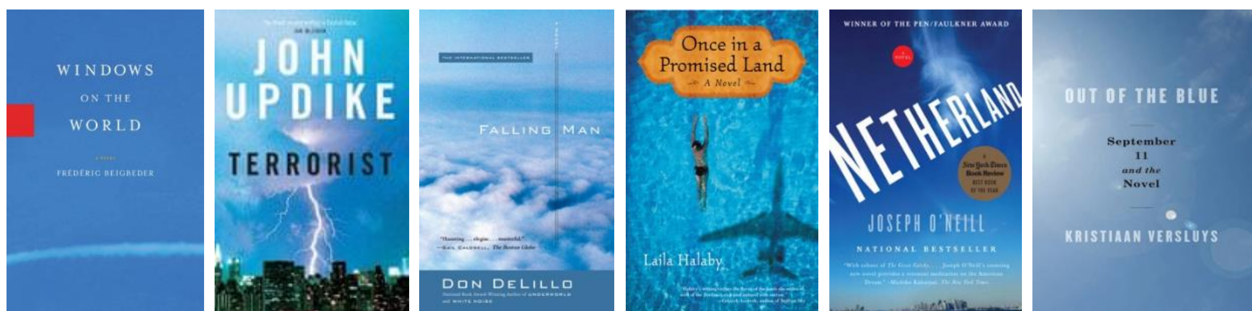

Figure 2: From left to right, the covers of 9/11 novels by Beigbeder, Updike, DeLillo, Halaby, and O'Neill; and a book of criticism by Versluys.

(see DeRosa 157). The meteorological motif of Finch's memorial speaks clearly to the connection between nature and collective memory. Twenty years after 9/11, the blue sky endures as a common reference point for first-hand witnesses and for the millions who watched broadcasts of the attacks around the world. The blue sky also serves, perhaps more significantly, as a symbol of American innocence that already begins to dehistoricize the attacks. The imagery of cloudless blue retroactively foreshadows the marring of the famous New York City skyline, contrasting the pristine blue sky of American innocence with the risk of foreign intrusion. The implications of this meteorological imagery point in many directions—toward naivete, for example, yet also toward the anticipation of its ruin—reflecting the suggestive ambivalence so often built into ecological tropes.

Upon visiting the museum, my interest in the blue sky of 9/11 emerged from my perception of an underexplored green strain in the so-called 9/11 novel. The two texts this project's first chapter will explore, Jonathan Franzen's *Freedom* (2010) and Laila Halaby's *Once in a Promised Land* (2007), are widely categorized as 9/11 novels, and often appear in surveys of post-9/11 literature. From their very first pages, however, both texts also introduce themes of ecological crisis. Franzen's opening paragraph contains the line, "it seemed strange that Walter, who was greener than Greenpeace and whose own roots were rural, should be in trouble now for conniving with the coal industry and mistreating country people" (3). Meanwhile, the opening page of Halaby's prologue describes, "It was a time when Man's throat was parched and dry, the earth's rivers too narrow and dirty to quench him, its lakes overflowing or drier than the bones from which his flesh hung" and sets the story "in the provincial American town of Tucson, Arizona, a locale with weather and potential (and very little water)" (vii). Why were environmentalist protagonists showing up in these 9/11 novels, and what work was ecological thinking performing in these texts?

Once I noticed this strain of green within the "second wave" of the provisional canon of 9/11 literature, I began to see ecology everywhere.[1] Yet I struggled to find preexisting critical vocabulary to describe the intersection of these different forms of risk in the novel. What was clear was that attention to ecology and the climate crisis productively denatured the category of 9/11 literature that had predetermined my way of reading. There were many stories to tell about the post-9/11 American novel—stories of climate crisis, ecological destruction, racism, and (late) capitalism—all of which were interconnected, and none of which seemed to fit strictly under 9/11 literature's umbrella. Nor did these crises fit within 9/11's largely ahistorical frame. The interposition of long-brewing social, ecological, and political crises interrupted 9/11's function as a "calendrical ground zero," reframing the 9/11 novel not as a rupture, but as a junction in modern literary history (Miller 3). Despite the tendency of issue-based categories to regulate how we read, a complex landscape of interconnected risks was being negotiated within the contemporary novel's pages, inviting new forms of reading.

In the first two decades of the twenty-first century, *risk* is a keyword that demands critical attention. Multiple risks have converged throughout the writing of this very manuscript: as I complete this thesis, the Covid-19 pandemic is ongoing, having already claimed the lives of over four million people worldwide (WHO). Simultaneously, this era has been marked by social and political upheaval, all while 2020 has been recorded as the hottest year in the earth's history (NASA). Though as Julian Barnes reminds us in *The Sense of an Ending* (2011), a sense of "great unrest" is neither new nor specific to the contemporary period, the perception endures that today's crises are unprecedented (5). Risk criticism—a body of interdisciplinary scholarship emerging from German sociologist Ulrich Beck's

[1] See Georgiana Banita's "Race, Risk, and Fiction" (2010) for a discussion of the "second wave" of 9/11 literature (242).

concept of the "risk society"—has identified several of the key features that contribute to the perceived exceptionality of today's panorama of crisis (*Risk Society* 9). Within the field of literary studies, Paul Crosthwaite emphasizes the unique diversity and the global reach of contemporary crisis. In *Criticism, Crisis, and Contemporary Narrative* (2011), he describes, "financial and economic crises, environmental crises, geopolitical crises, terrorist crises, and public health crises all jostle for prominence in the media and in public awareness" (3). Today's crises thus span a remarkable scope, as well as a remarkable scale: even "crisis-events precisely located in time and space, such as the September 11 terrorist attacks, are nonetheless able, via the real-time networks of the contemporary media, to assume global proportions instantaneously […]. Climate change, meanwhile, poses a threat to the very biosphere itself" (3). Here, Crosthwaite mentions in notably quick succession 9/11 and environmental destruction, two crises that will anchor this project's inquiry.

A key feature of contemporary risk often absent from discussions such as Crosthwaite's is the overlapping nature of contemporary crisis: a diverse array of crises is occurring not merely concurrently, but also conjunctively. The past year alone has lent new analytic urgency to crises' overlaps and interlinkages, producing headlines such as "Pandemic, Recession, Unrest: 2020 and the Confluence of Crises" (*U.S. News & World Report*), "2020: The Year of the Converging Crises" (*Rolling Stone*), "Humanity Under Threat from the Perfect Storm of Crises" (*The Guardian*), and "Scientists Warn Multiple Overlapping Crises Could Trigger 'Global System Collapse'" (*Science Alert*) (see Milligan, Heglar, F. Harvey, and Hood). The ideological work of such headlines echoes Christian Parenti's writing on what he calls "the catastrophic convergence" (7). In *The Tropic of Chaos* (2011), he writes:

> Climate change arrives in a world primed for crisis. The current and impending dislocations of climate change intersect with the already-existing crises of poverty and violence. I call this collision of political, economic, and environmental disasters *the catastrophic convergence.* By catastrophic convergence, I do not merely mean that several disasters happen simultaneously, one problem atop another. Rather, I argue that problems compound and amplify each other, one expressing itself through another. (7)

Parenti and other writers argue that the convergence of crisis describes an empirically new reality, in which one threat amplifies and multiplies another in new ways. This empirical question is an important line of inquiry, and one best explored by other fields. This project does not seek to litigate the actual frequency or severity of crises in the world, but rather to engage perceptions of risk: in other words, questions of reading. As John Barth famously writes in 1967, "if enough writers and critics *feel* apocalyptical about it [the death of the novel], their feeling becomes a considerable cultural fact, like *feeling* that Western civilization, or the world, is going to end rather soon" (72). This cultural fact also places particular pressures on the novel as a cultural form to represent and respond to a vast array of contemporary risks.

What exactly does risk evoke, and where might a discursive approach to risk lead us? In response to this question, it is essential to confront the definitional problematics of this thesis itself: the amplitude of "risk" as a term, as well as the slippage between "risk" and "crisis." Scholars have yet to arrive at a singular definition of the term "risk," and its interdisciplinary nature invites a wide array of interpretive apparatuses (see Furedi 17 and Slovic 284). Further, critics often mobilize the terms "risk" and "crisis" in inconsistent and even interchangeable ways. While the division between these terms within this project may slip from time to time in dialogue with other critics and texts, for the sake of my argument, the primary distinction this project maintains between "risk" and "crisis" is the discursiveness of risk, in contrast to the "eventness" of crisis. Throughout this thesis, the term "risk" will draw out not so much empirical realities, but rather, following Crosthwaite, "possibilities, potentialities, projections, predictions, speculations, fictions, fantasies, myths" (*Criticism* 4). Risk evokes exposure, danger, possibility, and hazard, as well as luck, potentiality, and good fortune; in contrast, crisis evokes emergencies, disasters, turning points, and decisions.

While the difference between "risk" and "crisis" is important to acknowledge up front, there is, of course, significant overlap between these terms, particularly in the context of the risk society.

Beck defines the risk society as "a systematic way of dealing with hazards and insecurities induced and introduced by modernization itself" (*Risk Society* 21). A fellow key writer in the field of risk studies, the British sociologist Anthony Giddens, attributes the risk society to a preoccupation with futurity: "[it is] a society increasingly preoccupied with the future (and also with safety), which generates the notion of risk," he writes ("Risk" 3). Here, Beck and Giddens emphasize the risk society as a "system" and as a "generate[d]" notion, underlining the discursive nature of risk. To say risk is discursive is not to say risks do not really exist: of course, the events and processes around which risk and crisis coalesce are very real. Further, perceptions of risk produce their own new realities, with real material consequences. I emphasize the discursive nature of risk here to emphasize that risk is always about perception, and in this way, always about reading. As such, as Crosthwaite points out, "risks—like crises—invite the sensitivity to the symbolic field that characterizes literary and cultural criticism" (it is worth noting Crosthwaite's own movement between risk and crisis here) (*Criticism* 4). Mobilizing the tools of literary analysis, this project explores how the interlocking structure of contemporary risks both reflects and produces a new mode of reading, with consequences for the novel and for literary studies.

The novel is a fictional world in which everything is always already connected. Narrative sequence makes the interlocking structure of risk and crisis hyper-visible as the dominos of plot inevitably fall through the machinations of cause and effect: as Jesse Molesworth writes, risk is "implicated in the very notion of plot" (116). While novels have long made visible the convergence of crises, novels animating the contemporary risk society often do so explicitly and self-reflexively, presenting complex landscapes of risk. These landscapes of risk, I will show, contain immanent criticism of the risk society and the ways we conceptualize risk. As Beck describes, "without techniques of visualization, without symbolic forms, without mass media, etc., risks are nothing at all" ("Living" 332). If, as Julia Hoydis suggests, "risks only become real through [and] as fictions," then Beck's is a

particularly interesting claim to take up within the field of literary studies. Many scholars have already begun extending the analytical framework of risk to the form of the novel. For example, in *Sense of Place and Sense of Planet* (2008), Ursula Heise suggests that "implicitly or explicitly, accounts of risk tend to invoke different genre models" and vice versa: that "Narrative genres [...] provide important cultural tools for organizing information about risks into intelligible and meaningful stories" (139). Following this relationship between risk and genre, Heise elsewhere argues that "a consideration of risk and the kind of narrative articulation it requires has potentially important implications for the analysis of narrative form" ("Toxins" 747).

While the contemporary novel is already bringing to life complex landscapes of risk, literary criticism has often struggled to keep apace. Discursive and disciplinary boundaries within the humanities, while useful organizing heuristics, can structurally foil the act of reading into intersections both social and material by overregulating the ways we read. To concretize this observation, I arrive at two of the crises that anchor this project: 9/11 and climate change. These crises constitute two of the three major axes of conflict in Beck's vision of the contemporary world risk society: environmental risk, global financial risk, and terrorism risk (see Beck, "Critical Theory" 13). Over the past two decades, terrorism and climate change have often been written about in tandem within risk studies, yet the same cannot be said for literary studies. Rather, readings of these crises have been bifurcated, and institutionalized into the discourse of "9/11 literature," which discusses the "9/11 novel"; and the discourses of "ecocriticism" and the "environmental humanities," which often discuss "climate-fiction." Throughout this project, I will use "9/11 literature" as shorthand for literature concerned not only with 9/11 as a singular event, but also with the war on terror more broadly, including United States (US) military interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan, and the shoring up of the military industrial complex. I will also use terms such as "global warming," "climate change," "climate crisis," and "the Anthropocene"—though certainly not interchangeably—to draw out a larger

constellation of ecological concerns within literary studies. The terms of both critical camps this project engages have undeniably uneven valences, yet I also note that these designations often serve more as nods to distinct critical norms and discourses than as descriptions of discrete objects of analysis. In uniting these two fields, it will be necessary to let go of some granularity in order read across the surface of these terms.

That such robust discourses have converged around the unifocal lenses of 9/11 and climate change, which we might think of as parallel discourses within literary studies over the past twenty years, reflects the increasing attention to crisis within literary studies. Just as parallel lines will never cross, academic discourse has rarely attended to the intersection of 9/11 and climate change in the contemporary American novel. In this sense, the distinctness of these discourses evades the convergence of crisis as an essential feature of modern inquiries into risk. As climate justice writer Mary Annaïse Heglar describes, "We live today in the age of crisis conglomeration," and therefore "It is no longer useful or honest or even smart to look at any of them through a single lens […]. We are either looking at all of it, or we're looking at none of it" (n.p.). While fully taking on Heglar's entreaty to look at "all of it" would be overly ambitious, this project attempts to bring an awareness of the collisions between crises to literary studies by uniting the analytic tools of post-9/11 analysis and ecocriticism. As Crosthwaite describes, "the heterogeneity and scale of contemporary crisis present intellectual challenges that demand a wide variety of critical approaches" (*Criticism* 4). This project aims to provide a corrective to "single-issue" criticism by reading across crises. In searching for an analytical tool capacious enough to read across different forms of crisis, risk studies emerges as a lens ready-made to combine critical approaches and look at crisis in a mode of multiplicity rather than singularity. Attunement to risk, which cuts across interpretive and disciplinary boundaries, productively destabilizes the fixity of our own critical reference points. Further, the novel presents a

rich object of study for this inquiry, as the lenses of multiplicity and alertness to multiple forms of risk often absent from criticism are already visible within the pages of contemporary novels themselves.

While risk is a useful analytical tool for reading across crises, the language of the "risk society" itself, however influential, has been plagued since its first coinage by the unevenness of risk's distribution. As Hoydis writes, "Beck's risk society fails to account for the reality that modernization and 'global' risks affect different people differently and refuse sweeping homogenization into unilateral process or grand narratives such as the risk society" (11). The risk society as a conceptual framework often belies an imagination of risk as universal and global. For example, in warning us of "global system collapse," *Science Alert*'s doomsaying rhetoric portrays risk as an omnipresent feature of contemporary life (Hood n.p.). Beck doubles down on risk's ubiquity in his insistence that "being at global risk is the human condition at the beginning of the twenty-first-century" (*World at Risk* 330). While this condition of being-at-risk may seem pessimistic if not apocalyptic, for Beck, the concept of the world risk society appeals—however paradoxically—not to a sense of fearmongering, but to a sense of cosmopolitanism. According to Beck's vision of a "globally shared collective future crisis," attunement to risk organizes new forms of community around the common goal of survival ("The Cosmopolitan Society" 27). In this sense, as Hoydis identifies, Beck's vision contains "a somewhat utopian kernel" (9). While to be fair, Beck is at times reflective about the cracks in this utopian vision, such reflection is inconsistent, and his analysis is generally wanting when it comes to issues of gender, race, class, and nation. Notwithstanding his admission that "poverty is hierarchic," Beck concludes that risks generally "display an equalizing effect" (*Risk Society* 49, 35). As he describes it, "the earth has become an ejector seat that no longer recognizes any distinctions between rich and poor, black and white, north and south or east and west" (36). While climate change is indeed occurring on a planetary scale, the consequences of these changes are always experienced unevenly on the ground, as the environmental justice movement has long insisted.

The tension in Beck's own corpus around the generalizability of risk corresponds to the challenges contemporary writers face in navigating the pervasive sense of risk's ubiquity and the particular ways risk alights on the individual. Through an exploration of nine texts at the intersection of the crises of 9/11 and climate change—a methodology whose details and motivations I will detail shortly in full—this project will explore contemporary American literature's productive ambivalence around the category of risk. This ambivalence takes a different shape in each text, and each chapter will work through a particular tension, contradiction, or disjuncture relevant to risk criticism and literary studies more broadly. In Chapter One, which explores Jonathan Franzen's *Freedom* (2010) and Laila Halaby's *Once in a Promised Land* (2007), a tension emerges between discursive assessments of risk and the narrative engines of the realist novel, articulated through the supposed opposition between the form of the domestic and the form of the global network. Chapter Two, which engages Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* (2006) and Colson Whitehead's *Zone One* (2011), explores the contradictory vision of risk as a uniquely contemporary phenomenon and as a continuous history, articulated through narratives of apocalyptic rupture that struggle to manage implications of continuity. Chapter Three takes up three poetry-inflected novels—Gayle Brandeis's *Self Storage* (2007), Michael Cunningham's *Specimen Days* (2005), and Ben Lerner's *10:04* (2014)—to explore the tension between risk as universal and risk as particular, as played out through intertextual dialogues with Walt Whitman: ultimately, these texts struggle to reconcile this tension without disengaging from risk altogether. Chapter Four, through the case studies of Dave Eggers's *Zeitoun* (2009) and Mohamedou Ould Slahi's *Guantánamo Diary* (2017 [2015]), takes up the tension between risk as exceptional and risk as routine, as articulated through the form of the testimonial narrative, which pins structural critiques of risk on the individual and exceptional life.

METHODOLOGY

The scope of these chapters is wide-ranging by design: each examines a different formal experiment in how contemporary writers articulate the risk society, and each examines a different theme relevant to risk criticism. These themes—the domestic and the global, continuity and discontinuity, the particular and the universal, and the exceptional and the routine—are also at the heart of debates within the fields of post-9/11 analysis and ecocriticism. The archive of risk is clearly capacious—potentially infinite—which can lead dangerously into a sort of methodological paranoia, as crises endlessly proliferate. This project is therefore grounded at the intersection of two contemporary crises often held up as central pillars of the modern risk society: terrorism and environmental destruction. Certainly, these are not the only risks that will be explored within the pages of this thesis: the crises of 9/11 and climate change are inextricably linked to the crisis of racial capitalism, poverty, and over-consumption, for example. Nevertheless, this project is anchored in the center of an imagined Venn diagram between the 9/11 novel and climate fiction. All of the texts might be categorized as 9/11 literature: all were published after 2001, and either deal explicitly with the events of 9/11 and their aftermath, or, in the case of Chapter Two's apocalyptic fictions, were received as allegories for these events. Climate change, while lacking the "eventness" of 9/11, emerges in these novels through a variety of ecological themes and modes: through environmentalist protagonists in Chapter One, post-apocalyptic landscapes in Chapter Two, fantasies of nature's unifying potential in Chapter Three, and the real-world consequences of Hurricane Katrina in Chapter Four. This project resists reading these primary sources according to the overdetermined categories of *either* the post-9/11 novel *or* the climate change novel for both prescriptive and descriptive reasons, as the texts in question explicitly invite more capacious readings.

The texts under consideration are intentionally not the most representative cases of 9/11 literature nor of climate fiction, and often approach these crises more obliquely than their more

canonized counterparts. Rather, following Pieter Vermeulen's observation that 9/11 is now a "less compulsive intertext for postmillennial literature than it seemed only a few years ago," the classification of many of these texts within the canon of post-9/11 literature seems to paper over their engagement with a remarkable range of contemporary reference points, climate change included (14). The process of reading across a range of risks productively expands and reshapes dominant conceptions of both 9/11 and ecology within twenty-first-century American literature. The location of this project at the intersection of two crises whose grouping may seem unusual lends several affordances to this thesis. First, it usefully narrows the scope of the ever-accumulating archive of risk, allowing for a comparative analysis of two contrasting crises. Second, it enables a discussion of the gap between the contemporary novel, which as each chapter will show, has already made the interconnections between these crises visible, and its attendant criticism, which remains restrictively bifurcated. Third, ecological thinking offers this project's study of American literature—the nine texts this project explores were written within US territories, and primarily marketed to American audiences—a framework beyond the nation, reminding us that what we call American literature is often a useful shorthand for a much more complicated web of relations. The texts in question often visibly grapple with both the significance of national (and imperial) frameworks and the planet's disregard for such borders.

The divergent representational challenges of 9/11 and climate change afford a rich discussion within the field of literary studies, engaging questions of the formal tools available to animate overlapping yet disjunctive forms of risk and crisis within a unified fictional world. These opposing representational challenges are already well-rehearsed within the critical camps of ecocriticism and post-9/11 analysis. I retrace them briefly here, with an emphasis on reading across crises, and using one to bring the other into relief. While many contemporary American novels stage the question of "Where were you on 9/11?" writers like Amitav Ghosh, Rob Nixon, and Zadie Smith have deployed

this question contrapuntally to highlight the struggles of the novel (in particular, the realist novel) to represent climate change. In *The Great Derangement* (2016), Ghosh discusses "the stories that congeal around questions like, 'Where were you when the Berlin Wall fell?' or 'Where were you on 9/11?'" and asks, "Will it ever be possible to ask, in the same vein, 'Where were you at 400 ppm [parts per million]?' or 'Where were you when the Larsen B ice shelf broke up?'" (129). The novel's commitments to representing the rhythms of individual lives challenge the Anthropocene's call to view humans as a geologic agglomeration and according to the duration of geologic time. As Timothy Clark writes, the scale effects of climate change defy "sensuous representation or any plot confined, say, to human-to-human dramas and intentions" (80). While it may be easier to ask, "Where were you on 9/11," critics have largely agreed upon the limitations of this question. The post-9/11 novel, particularly in its early iterations, was widely accused of a "retreat into domestic detail": in a pivotal essay, Richard Gray condemns the tendency of post-9/11 writing to "simply assimilate the unfamiliar into familiar structures," such that "the crisis is, in every sense of the word, domesticated" ("Open Doors" 134). Responding to Gray, Michael Rothberg deplores American writers' "failure of the imagination" in turning inward, neglecting to address the "prosthetic reach of that [American] empire into other worlds" (153). Thus, for different and indeed opposing reasons, critics in the fields of 9/11 literature and ecocriticism have lamented the struggle of these crises to find expression in the novel.

Notwithstanding accusations of its domestication, 9/11's out-of-the-blue spectacle clearly contrasts with climate change's often invisible "slow violence," which Nixon describes as "a violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all" (2). Further, Nixon indicates not only a suggestive contrast, but a directly causal relationship between the spectacle of 9/11 and the slow violence of climate change. He writes:

> Efforts to make forms of slow violence more urgently visible suffered a setback in the United States in the aftermath of 9/11, which reinforced a spectacular, immediately sensational, and

> instantly hyper-visible image of what constitutes a violent threat. The fiery spectacle of the collapsing towers was burned into the national psyche as *the* definitive image of violence, setting back by years attempts to rally public sentiment against climate change, a threat that is incremental, exponential, and far less sensationally visible. (13)

The opposing representational challenges of these two contemporary crises tell an important story about the privileging of the visible, spectacular, and sensational over the invisible and incremental, a story with not merely representational but also political implications. As Nixon writes, "Politically and emotionally, different kinds of disasters possess unequal heft" (3). Further, within the realm of literary studies, the representational and political challenges of different forms of crisis raise questions around the genres that might regulate and enable risk's expression in the contemporary novel. While terrorism and environmental destruction have struggled in different ways to take shape in the novel, we might also reframe this story of opposition by identifying a common problem of scale: the contemporary novel has often failed to confront the global scale of geopolitical unrest, as well as the scales (and speeds) of slow violence and geologic time. The texts explored within the following chapters will enlarge 9/11 to the scale of great national tragedy and reduce it to a minor inconvenience, and will enlarge climate change to the scale of total planetary extinction and reduce it to a question of individual reproduction.

In light of these opposing representational challenges and common problems of scale, the texts surveyed within this project provide productive critical territory for exploring how the novel thinks across multiple forms of risk: across different scales, speeds, temporalities, agencies, and geographies. As Dipesh Chakrabarty writes of the era of neoliberal capitalism:

> the current conjuncture of globalization and global warming leaves us with the challenge of having to think of human agency over multiple and incommensurable scales at once […]. Any effort to contemplate the human condition today—after colonialism, globalization, and global warming—on political and ethical registers encounters the necessity of thinking disjunctively about the human, through moves that in their simultaneity appear contradictory. (1-2)

This project will make the case that contemporary novels are already teaching us how to think disjunctively by reading across multiple and incommensurable forms of risk.

The notion of incommensurable risk merits closer attention due to a potential contradiction in terms. Traditional risk frameworks stem from modern notions of prediction and calculability (see Reddy 237): if risks become calculable, they also become fungible, constructing all risks as commensurable, sharing a common standard of measurement. This fungibility is perhaps best exemplified through the World Economic Forum's Risk Response Network, which has compiled and assessed fifty global risks, including climate change and terrorism (see Steinberg n.p.). Such statistical methods of reading flatten different forms of risk into comparable instances. In response, I note that while the multiple risks discussed in this project are highly interconnected, they also operate along fundamentally different axes that are uneasily analogized. Therefore, this project holds onto the granularity of separate crises—from climate change and the war on terror to racism, misogyny, and Islamophobia—while also reading them together. These multiple modes of risk are disjunctive rather than hierarchical: one does not overthrow the other. Simultaneously, I will attend to instances where authors trade on analogies between crises, or use one crisis as a yardstick against which to measure or represent another, and will explore the formal and political consequences of these false equivalences.

While the assumed calculability—and therefore, the fungibility—of risk marks one important point of departure from risk criticism for this project, another point of departure concerns the frequent association (and even conflation) of risk with hazard and danger. Such equations obscure the generative potential of risk, abandoning the "utopian kernel" presented (however unconvincingly) in Beck's vision. While modern notions of risk are often synonymous with danger, crises are such generative objects of study because they are also moments for new futures to be forged, pointing to the connection between emergency and emergence. As Deborah Lupton writes, "It is important to emphasize the 'always becoming' and transitory nature of risk" (10). The possibilities that inhere in the revelation of uncertain and alternative futures often exceed the constraints of risk discourses. All of the texts in question explore the potentiality of risk, the realization of which can lead to both harm

and good. Further, a comparative approach to these texts demonstrates that the consequences of risk—whether positive or negative—always arrive unevenly, revealing how "blanket proclamations of 'crisis' obscure subtle gradations of protection and exposure, calibrated to hierarchies of power, wealth, and mobility" (Crosthwaite, *Criticism* 4). Thus, beyond questions of risk's distribution, and its simultaneously unifying and divisive potential, yet another axis of these texts' ambivalence around the category of risk centers on the double meaning of risk as both danger and as opportunity, and the politics of precarity and security surrounding this double meaning.

Chapter Outline

I now turn to the particulars of this project's organization. The four chapters that constitute this thesis are organized along lines of theme, form, and authorship. The themes in question arise from debates at the heart of both 9/11 literature and climate fiction: the domestic and the global, continuity and discontinuity, the particular and the universal, and the exceptional and the routine. The forms under consideration, in turn, emerge from questions of how the novel confronts and encodes risk through its genre models and their attendant plots. Each form under consideration, I suggest, marks an entry point into a particular mode of reading risk: in Chapter One, the networked novel facilitates the circulation, arrival, and deferral of risk; in Chapter Two, the apocalyptic novel stages and manages a scenario of totalizing risk; in Chapter Three, intertextual dialogues with Walt Whitman's poetry become a guide for navigating the contemporary risk society; and in Chapter Four, which departs from the novel, testimonial narratives document the consequences of misreading risk, and attempt to disarm assumptions of the risks their subjects pose. Turning finally to authorship, each chapter will draw texts into productively uncommon groupings to generate dialogues around literariness and cultural capital.

Chapter One hews most closely to the canon of post-9/11 literature, examining the entanglement of domestic, environmental, and political crisis in two networked novels: Jonathan Franzen's *Freedom* (2010) and Laila Halaby's *Once in a Promised Land* (2007). Problematizing the so-called "domestic turn" in post-9/11 literature, this chapter highlights both novels' co-constitution of domestic and planetary crisis. Reading the networked novel as a form uniquely suited for appraising risk, this chapter provides a methodological starting place for bridging post-9/11 literary criticism and ecocriticism, and highlights the generative potential of reading into the interconnections of contemporary crises. Finally, this chapter draws out the tension between discursive assessments of risk and the narrative structures of the realist novel, outlining crucial gaps between ideological and narratological risk.

Responding to the representational challenges of realism posed in Chapter One, Chapter Two turns to speculative fiction via Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* (2006) and Colson Whitehead's *Zone One* (2011), two apocalyptic novels received as allegories of 9/11 and climate change alike. Both novels use environmental themes to construct the apocalyptic binaries of "us" and "them," and "before" and "after." Yet intrusive histories of racism and environmental harm disestablish the rupture constitutive of apocalypse. This chapter addresses the challenges and affordances of rereading 9/11 allegories as climate change allegories—and vice versa—due to these crises' uneven scales, temporalities, and agencies. This chapter's conclusion considers deep time as a narrative escape route for the paranoia of risk management, and explores how allegory's ambiguity risks conflating the end of America and the end of the world.

Chapter Three explores three intertextual novels that invoke Walt Whitman to comment on the post-9/11, globally warmed era: Gayle Brandeis's *Self Storage* (2007), Michael Cunningham's *Specimen Days* (2005), and Ben Lerner's *10:04* (2014). Thinking alongside Whitman's famous vision of grass as a "uniform hieroglyphic," this chapter analyzes how these novels use suspicion, ecology, and

literary form to construct landscapes of seemingly evenly-distributed risk ("Song of Myself" 6.10). Yet each novel ultimately stages the failures of such universalizing gestures. Beyond using Whitman to read these novels, this chapter also uses these novels to read Whitman. Whitman appears not only through conventional intertextual apparatuses, but also through staged moments of reading that lead characters to embrace the transformative potential of risk. This chapter's conclusion returns to questions of scale, exploring the relationship between Whitman and nationalism, and the costs of dialoguing with the "American Bard."

Chapter Four departs from the novel to turn toward post-9/11 life-writing, exploring the real-world imbrication of terror and ecology through Dave Eggers's *Zeitoun* (2009) and Mohamedou Ould Slahi's *Guantánamo Diary* (2017 [2015]). Through the case studies of Abdulrahman Zeitoun and Slahi, two Muslim and Arab men detained in the aftermath of 9/11 and Hurricane Katrina, this chapter examines the material implications of the war on terror and climate change's collision, extending an analysis of intersecting risks from fiction to the world. This final chapter engages the real-world consequences of suspicious reading in an era of racial profiling and surveillance, creating a dialogue around plotting and the "perfect storm" across the novel and the testimonial. Building connectivity between the exceptional individual, the state of exception, and American exceptionalism, this chapter explores the relationship between guilt, innocence, and literary form.

1. "HEADING FOR CATASTROPHE": RISK AND RESOLUTION IN THE NETWORKED NOVEL JONATHAN FRANZEN'S *FREEDOM* (2010) AND LAILA HALABY'S *ONCE IN A PROMISED LAND* (2007)

"Forget spills, fall-outs, leakages. It's the things around you in your own house that'll get you sooner or later."
- DON DELILLO*, White Noise*

"When we try to pick out anything by itself, we find it hitched to everything else in the universe."
- JOHN MUIR, *My First Summer in the Sierra*

Twenty-first-century literary studies has witnessed a burgeoning debate over global risk and its representation in the novel. Ulrich Beck writes of the contemporary moment, "The nation state is increasingly besieged and permeated by a planetary network of interdependencies, by ecological, economic and terrorist risks" (*Cosmopolitan* 48). Returning to Ursula Heise's suggestion that "implicitly or explicitly, accounts of risks tend to invoke different genre models," what genre models might Beck's vision of a "planetary network of interdependencies [and] risks" invoke (*Sense of Place* 139)? The networked novel emerges as one of the primary genre models mobilized by the contemporary risk society, and this chapter reads the networked novel as a form uniquely suited for representing and appraising risk. In one sense, the novel has always been networked, conjuring complex assemblages of interrelated people, places, and things. As Adam Trexler argues, "[b]y its nature the novel assembles heterogeneous characters and things into a narrative sequence" (14). Caroline Edwards's account of the contemporary networked novel, which "knits together a disparate set of temporal (and frequently disjunct spatial) locations that are interconnected at the level of narrative structure, as well as being thematically interlaced," in this sense hardly points to a new form (15).

But if the novel and the network have perhaps always been interlinked, contemporary networked novels face unique challenges in representing the new scales, scopes, and speeds of political, economic, and social networks. In an era of global interconnectedness facilitated by globalization,

global capitalism, and the World Wide Web, a renewed interest in the trope of the network in the novel responds to heightened attention to networks in the world. The novels Edwards surveys animate the form of the network with new intensities and through the new contexts of globalization and the realm of the digital. Often strangely absent from literary critics' accounts of contemporary forces of interconnection, however, is the underlying network of the planet itself. Environmentalists and ecocritics have long been theorizing networks and the representational challenges of planetary networks in particular. Rob Nixon lays out this task in asking, "how can we imaginatively and strategically render visible vast force fields of interconnectedness against the attenuating effects of temporal and geographical distance?" (38).

Networked novels often render visible the "vast force fields of interconnectedness" Nixon calls for, revealing how risk circulates across disparate spaces and times, and exposing unexpected chains of cause and effect. The two novels this chapter explores—Jonathan Franzen's *Freedom* (2010) and Laila Halaby's *Once in a Promised Land* (2007)—are structured around various forms of complex networks. *Freedom* is structured around the transnational circulation of oil, truck parts, and body armor, as well as migratory birds, while *Once in a Promised Land* is structured around the global networks of water systems and immigration. Both novels also feature more localized networks, including the family itself, the rumor mill of neighborhood gossip, and webs of intelligence gathering. In addition to their thematizations of the network, both texts are also formally networked, told from the perspectives of multiple interlinked characters across disparate locations. *Freedom*'s primary vehicle for exploring the network is the family, offering an intergenerational account of the Berglund family that travels from Minnesota and New York to Argentina and Paraguay. *Once in a Promised Land* features a cast of characters woven together by coincidence rather than blood, and travels between Arizona and Jordan. Through these novels' networked form and content, the arrival of crisis in one node of the network

never remains in isolation. Rather, each crisis sets off chain reactions made visible through these novels' plots, exposing the webs of interrelation that connect domestic, national, and global crisis.

Emphasizing these novels' global networks may seem at odds with their simultaneously domestic plots. Both feature stories of marriage, divorce, childrearing, miscarriage, and infidelity that align with accounts of the domestic retreat in post-9/11 literature. Both novels are also situated in the aftermath of 9/11 and commonly feature in surveys of post-9/11 American literature, though they approach the attacks more obliquely than many earlier literary responses. In condemning the tendency of post-9/11 writing to domesticate crisis, scholars like Richard Gray, Michael Rothberg, and Pankaj Mishra imply an opposition between the risk of public crisis and the safety of private domesticity. If the network creates risk through the vulnerabilities of interconnectedness and the domestic provides refuge from such risks, then to domesticate crisis is to *de-risk* risk. Departing from the false binary between the safety of domesticity and the risks of the network, my reading of *Freedom* and *Once in a Promised Land* considers how both novels undermine the presuppositions of the domestic critique in accounts of post-9/11 literature. Exploring these novels' visions of risk reveals assumptions about how risk is distributed and actualized; and highlights where binaries between risk and safety break down, and where they are re-entrenched.

This chapter's argument is made in four parts. First, I will suggest that *Freedom* and *Once in a Promised Land*'s ecological themes collapse the scales of domestic, national, and global crisis: attending to these ecological themes complicates dominant accounts of post-9/11 literature, and repoliticizes domestic space. Second, I will propose that both novels attempt to teach us a new way of reading risk through a comparative analysis of the risks of terrorism and climate change. While uniting post-9/11 and ecocritical understandings of risk remains a challenging maneuver within literary studies, Franzen and Halaby's novels call for reading these crises alongside each other, creating a diptych on the gap between real and perceived risk in the post-9/11, globally warmed era. Third, I will read the

(infra)structural risks of climate change and 9/11 alongside the narrative structures of these novels themselves: while both texts reevaluate risk perceptions discursively, they ultimately fail to integrate such correctives into their narrative structures, frustrating the ambitions of their internal risk criticism. The risks that comprise these novels' vision of the so-called "bigger picture"—the existential threats of global water shortages and overpopulation—ultimately fail to power their plots, which instead resort to the narrative engines of the affair, the accident, and the coincidence, revealing a crucial gap between ideological and narratological risk. While the tangled webs of global capitalism, global ecosystems, and global terrorism indeed power the "plots," so to speak, of our lives, the realist novel struggles to give shape to the interplay between domestic, national, and global risk without resorting to didacticism, apocalypticism, or contrivance.

Finally, I will compare how risk is realized or managed out of each novel's plot: while *Freedom*'s domestic reconciliation subsumes its espoused politics, *Once in a Promised Land*'s characters cannot escape the web of risks they encounter, and Halaby's novel provides no refuge from despair. The domestic retreat's fundamental unavailability to Halaby's Arab American protagonists problematizes the widespread domestic critique in post-9/11 literary criticism. As seen through the networked novel's account of risk, the domestic is not only the site of refuge, as is so often assumed in the post-9/11 literary debate, but also the site of risk's realization and embodiment. This chapter's conclusion engages the divergent receptions of these novels, which betray the gendered and racialized undercurrents of the domestic critique itself. Reading across categories of risk productively reveals inconsistent patterns of legitimacy in authorial commentary on the home, the nation, and the world, belying the arbitrariness of the ways the domestic critique is levied.

THE BULLDOZER & THE LIVING ROOM

Departing from the frequent setting of the post-9/11 novel in New York, *Freedom* and *Once in a Promised Land* turn to the midwestern and southwestern suburbs of St. Paul, Minnesota in Franzen's case and Tucson, Arizona in Halaby's. *Once in a Promised Land* begins on September 11, 2001 itself, engaging with the surge of post-9/11 racial profiling and Islamophobia that threatens the novel's Jordanian American protagonists, while *Freedom* spans from the 1990s to 9/11 to the early Obama years. The openings of *Freedom* and *Once in a Promised Land* frame the stories that will follow as cautionary tales, attuning readers to the risks always already lurking within the domestic sphere. Halaby's preface opens, "Our story takes place in the provincial American town of Tuscon, Arizona […] Our main characters are Salwa and Jassim. […] of course they have nothing to do with what happened at the World Trade Center. Nothing and everything" (vii). From the outset, the narrator establishes a contrast between the periphery of suburban Tucson and the center that will become New York City's World Trade Center. Franzen's novel begins with the same quality of omniscience and foreshadowing. The narrative opens, "The news about Walter Berglund wasn't picked up locally […]. It seemed strange that Walter, who was greener than Greenpeace and whose own roots were rural, should be in trouble now for conniving with the coal industry and mistreating country people. Then again, there had always been something not quite right about the Berglunds" (3). These novels' proleptic openings attune readers to the risks the suburban idyll might conceal: crisis is already prophesied, the origins of which both novels will unravel.

Just as crisis is already prophesied, both novels introduce their suburban idylls as already on the verge of ruin. Franzen and Halaby turn to the suburbs to orchestrate a fall from grace: suburban domesticity serves as a pedestal from which their characters will later fall. Kathy Knapp has described the suburb as "a suitable stage for a glittering master narrative of American prosperity built around the care, feeding, and sheltering of the fetishized nuclear family" (xvi). The site of the good life's

attainment simultaneously contains the threat of its demise, as even the symbolic white picket fence will fail to keep risk at bay. As Robert Beuka comments, the suburb has come to reflect not only an iteration of the American dream, but also "the phobias and insecurities of American culture" (19). Looking beyond the broader associations of the suburbs with upward mobility, Franzen sets *Freedom* in the Ramsey Hill neighborhood of St. Paul, Minnesota. The Midwest has long been considered the "American heartland," a backdrop against which to explore "the tragic version of contemporary American life" (Poole 263, 265). Further, St. Paul carries particular literary significance as the birthplace and home of F. Scott Fitzgerald: his childhood street, Summit Avenue, is even mentioned in *Freedom*'s opening paragraph (3). Thus, *Freedom*'s setting on multiple levels invokes the perils of the American dream, around which Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* (1925) is arguably the most famous cautionary tale. *Freedom*'s geography draws parallels between the midwestern figures of Nick Carraway and Walter Berglund that evoke the tragic downfall of the self-made man.

Halaby's novel establishes suburban domesticity as a site of risk by emphasizing its human and environmental history. Jassim reflects on the history of the term "family room": "Perhaps it was an American attempt to create a thicker illusion of family, in much the same way that *living room* came to be used after the 1918 Spanish flu epidemic killed so many people and their bodies were laid out in what was then called the *parlor*. […] the term *living room* [was] a way to express that this was a room in which people lived, not died" (19). Jassim's attention to etymology restores a morbid history to the domestic sphere, and frames fantasies of domesticity as an "illusion" to be thickened and thinned. The porosity between risk and the domestic sphere is a common trope explored through ecocriticism's attention to "toxic discourses," which according to Lawrence Buell, express "an anxiety arising from perceived threat of environmental hazard due to chemical modification by human agency […]. Disenchantment from the illusion of the green oasis is accompanied or precipitated by totalizing images of a world without refuge from toxic penetration" (*Writing* 31, 38). Don DeLillo encapsulates

such toxicity in *White Noise* (1985), writing, "Forget spills, fall-outs, leakages. It's the things around you in your own house that'll get you sooner or later" (174-75). Jassim's attention to the repressed violence of the living room emphasizes this toxicity, and takes on particular significance in relationship to his environmentalism. As Adam Rome writes in his account of suburban sprawl, "the bulldozer was never far from the living room" (6). At the level of environmental history, ambitions of homeownership and the white picket fence have long concealed the environmental devastation of suburbia itself. Franzen's description of Walter and Patty as "the young pioneers of Ramsey Hill" evokes similar resonances between suburbia and environmental destruction: in both novels, the suburban idyll not only conceals risk, but also poses material risks to the environment (3).

Compromising the barriers between the individual and their surroundings, and between private and public space, the networks of *Freedom* and *Once in a Promised Land* facilitate the crucial arrival of risk to the domestic. While the post-9/11 novel has often been accused of a domestic retreat, *Freedom* and *Once in a Promised Land*'s domestic details are intertwined with political and ecological crisis. Through the affordances of the network, both novels' visions of risk are played out through the family. While Walter and Jassim's environmental concerns add to the globalism that offsets these novels' domestic plots, even the expressions of their environmentalism are filtered through rather facile oppositions between husband and wife. Both *Freedom* and *Once in a Promised Land* construct clear "types" (see Lukács 6) in which men stand for purity and women stand for excess (though as I will explore later, this opposition hardly holds). Domestic crisis and global environmental crisis are thus co-constructed.

Collapsing the scales of overpopulation, water shortages, and war with the scales of marriage, infidelity, and familial disharmony, both novels entwine global environmental crisis and marital crisis at the level of character and the level of language. In *Once in a Promised Land*, Salwa personifies consumerist excess: with an insatiable appetite for silky, lacy pajamas, Jassim declares that Salwa could

"probably clothe an entire village in underwear" (Halaby 48). The pajamas are not merely a symbol of pleasure, but a symbol of class: "it was the act of wearing pajamas such as these and what it symbolized to her: leisure. Women who wore these pajamas were rich, either in their own right or in someone else's," Salwa describes (47). In contrast to Jassim's hyperrationality and environmental stewardship, Salwa is prone to "extravagant lapses" like forgetting to "turn down the air-conditioning" or forgetting about "running a bath for herself" and subsequently "soaking their room in two inches of water" (23). The Haddads' domestic idyll allows her to forget, in Jassim's words, that "for God's sake, we live in a desert," as their class obscures the infrastructure—the roads, water pipelines, sewage treatment systems, and electrical grids—that bring water to the Tucson foothills (89). In contrast to Salwa, the "Queen of Pajamas," Jassim is deemed the "Father of Water Preservation," a hyperrational scientist whose "righteousness had no boundaries" (239, 3, 41). Jassim's obsession with water conservation is motivated by fear of "walking with his desiccated family over parched earth, refugees, because all the water had been squandered by foolish humans" (41). While Jassim's righteousness reflects the shallow opposition between his moralism and Salwa's frivolity, it is also informed by the precarities of global politics, confounding the novel's scales of the personal and the political.

At the level of language, Halaby turns to ecological discourses to describe the steady collapse of Jassim and Salwa's domestic refuge. As early as the preface, Halaby's narrator describes the Haddads' marriage as "parched around the edges," and Halaby often uses hydrological metaphors to connect personal and national crisis (vii). While crying after accidentally killing a boy in a car crash, Jassim wonders, "Why was the American expression *a river of tears* when it should be an ocean, since the water was salty? Perhaps the Americans […] were simply thinking of the long narrowness a river has, something akin to what a lot of tears streaming down the face looks like. The River Jordan on the earth's face" (218). The tears streaming down Jassim's face become a stand-in for the River Jordan, blurring the scales of the personal and the global. Later, Salwa's regrets over her affair are also narrated

through the symbolism of water: "The drops [of Salwa's tears] puddled at their feet, moved across oceans, and splashed into Lake Tiberias, threatening a flood over the banks of the Jordan, to make up, perhaps, with the tears of one woman for all that had been stolen" (288). Salwa's tears, like Jassim's, connect a personal crisis to the crisis of Palestinian displacement. The water of her tears becomes a switch point between personal, national, and international tragedy.

Extending this analysis to *Freedom*, the Berglunds' familial strife also stems from political and environmental conflict. While Walter is "an avowed feminist and an annually renewing Student-level member of Zero Population Growth," Patty "was no great progressive and certainly no feminist [...] and seemed altogether allergic to politics" (Franzen 119, 7). Patty's wish to "live in a bigger and better and more interesting house than anybody else in her family" and "pop out the babies" may seem incompatible with Walter's obsession with population control, yet Walter "embraced her entire domestic program without reservation, because she really *was* exactly what he wanted in a woman" (119). Their discordant politics set the stage for domestic discord.

As the fractures in the Berglunds' marriage widen, the collapse of their relationship is articulated through the language of environmental collapse. After a *New York Times* story about Walter's involvement in a mountaintop removal scheme breaks, Walter and Patty have the following exchange:

> "You think we should be burning more coal. Making it easier to burn more coal. In spite of global warming."
> He slid his hand down over his eyes and pressed them until they hurt. "You want me to explain the reason? Should I do that?"
> "If you want to."
> "We're heading for catastrophe, Patty. We are heading for a total collapse."
> "Well, and, frankly, I don't know about you, but that's starting to sound like kind of a relief to me."
> "I'm not talking about us!" (405-06)

The discourses of marital and planetary collapse are at this point so entangled as to confuse even the characters themselves. Earthly catastrophe becomes indistinguishable from domestic catastrophe,

reflecting the many scales contained by the "We" that is collapsing. Walter elsewhere reflects on "the long-term toxicity they were creating with their fights. He could feel it pooling in their marriage like the coal-sludge ponds in Appalachian valleys. […] You could try dumping the poison back down into abandoned underground mines, but it had a way of seeping into the water table and ending up in drinking water" (333). Here, toxic discourses articulate the irreversible contamination of Walter and Patty's marriage. Just as coal-sludge, a byproduct of coal mining, is an externality that will never truly disappear, the consequences of their fights can be deferred, but not evaded. Walter's staunch environmentalism lays the groundwork for tension not only with Patty, but also with his increasingly neoconservative son, Joey, who speculates that "he and his dad had each chosen their politics for the sole purpose of hating the other" (404). Rather than the political shaping the personal, Joey suggests that the personal may in fact shape the political, undermining the supposed triviality of the domestic in relation to a wider political context. Through the entanglement of crises of seemingly mismatched gravity, both novels grapple self-reflexively with questions of scale, at the level of both language and plot. In all of these cases, the domestic is recast not as shelter from toxicity, but as its source.

RISK ASSESSMENT & THE BIGGER PICTURE

Within the framing of the cautionary tale and against the backdrop of the suburban idyll, *Freedom* and *Once in a Promised Land*'s networked forms facilitate the intertwining of domestic, political, and environmental crisis. The networked novel emerges as a form uniquely suited for representing risk as Franzen and Halaby's central characters become explicitly concerned with appraising the risks posed by their surrounding networks, generating suggestive commentary on real and perceived risk in the post-9/11, globally warmed era. In particular, *Freedom* and *Once in a Promised Land* overtly thematize various environmental crises, employing (male) environmentalist protagonists to develop their ecological themes. Franzen's Walter Berglund takes up the cause of curbing overpopulation, while

Halaby's Jassim Haddad addresses water shortages as a hydrologist. Primarily through the characters of Joey and Jassim, both novels evaluate the perceived risk of 9/11 as overblown relative to its actual risk, while through the characters of Jassim and Walter, they express the converse regarding the environment. In this sense, both novels might be read as attempts to correct what Amitav Ghosh calls the "great derangement"—our "imaginative and cultural failure" to grapple with climate change—and to subsequently rearrange our imagination of risk (8).

In Halaby's novel, Jassim functions as an ideal mouthpiece for risk assessment due to his hyperrationality and scientism, which serves as a foil to the dangerous and irrational ways risks can be distorted, particularly in moments of crisis. At a young age, Jassim's uncle and mentor, Abu-Jalal, instills in him the global determinism of water: Abu-Jalal tells Jassim, referring to "what happened to Palestine," "All these fools, so worked up over land and rights and they don't see the greater picture. [...] With all of our advancements, we have become stupid [...]. Mark my words: shortage of water is what will doom the occupants of this earth, and they are fools not to know that" (40-41). Later, as a professor of hydrology, Jassim promotes a similar ideology. He declares in a lecture at the University of Jordan, "Suppose you are flying in a tiny plane and it crashes in the desert. You are reduced to your most basic existence. It doesn't matter if you have a nice car or suit or watch. [...] there is only one thing that will keep you alive. Not land. Not oil. Water" (246). Jassim articulates water as a lifeforce that transcends anthropological difference, rendering hallmarks of human distinction meaningless. He here presents a vision of water as a universal necessity, suggesting that the risk of a global water shortage might unite, rather than divide, the "occupants of this earth" (41).

Despite Jassim's warning that "a nice car or suit or watch" cannot save you after a plane crash in the desert, after the plane crash of 9/11, it is in fact his own "glinty Mercedes" and his "nestled-in-the-hills home" that emerge as hollow amulets of protection, unable to defuse his perception as a threat (246, 22). While exceptionally able to grapple with the risks of water shortages, Jassim initially

refuses to reassess his own landscape of risk in the wake of 9/11. When Salwa tells Jassim that their Lebanese American friend "is worried about her kids, thinks someone might try to hurt them," Jassim responds, "Why would anyone hurt Randa's kids? People are not so ignorant as to take revenge on a Lebanese family for the act of a few extremist Saudis who destroyed those buildings" (21). Halaby's narrator describes, "He had promptly been proved wrong when a Sikh gas station attendant in Phoenix was killed *in retaliation*" (21). Beyond Jassim's rationality, his wealth also prevents him from taking seriously the dangers of the racial profiling that will eventually prove his downfall. He refuses to place an American flag decal on his car in part because "to imagine placing a seventy-five-cent decal on his $50,000 car [...] was amusing" (55). While Jassim's unwillingness to perform patriotism needs no justification, this detail is significant for its staging of a collision between the safety of wealth and the risk of racial profiling. Yet as race, class, and patriotism collide, neither faith in reason nor wealth can save Jassim. In the end, it is not the actuality, but rather the perception of threat that assigns riskiness. While the particularities of identity might not save us from drought, they can save us from each other. Within *Once in a Promised Land*'s staging of a post-9/11 culture of paranoia fueled by racist and Islamophobic fears, Jassim is marked as a threat and by extension, as threatened.

In *Freedom,* the risk of 9/11 is minimized as a "really serious glitch" in the upward trajectory of golden boy Joey Berglund's life (Franzen 232). Despite the attacks' incontrovertible hailing as a national trauma, Joey's reaction is one of "*personal* resentment" (326). Franzen's narrator describes:

> Later, as his troubles began to mount, it would seem to him as if his very good luck, which his childhood had taught him to consider his birthright, had been trumped by a stroke of higher-order bad luck so wrong as not even to be real [...]. The culprit, in hindsight, seemed almost like bin Laden, but not quite. The culprit was something deeper, something not political, something structurally malicious, like the bump in a sidewalk that trips you and lands you on your face when you're out innocently walking. [...] Joey just wanted normal life to return as fast as possible. He felt as if he'd bumped his old Discman against a wall and knocked its laser out of a track he'd been enjoying and into a track he didn't recognize or like and also couldn't make stop playing. (233)

Here, 9/11 is cast as an interruption to a trajectory of entitlement for a spoiled boy. In flattening the scales of 9/11 and a "bump in a sidewalk" or a malfunctioning Discman, *Freedom* plays boldly and self-consciously with incommensurate crises. While this description of 9/11 is clearly intended to mock Joey's callousness and self-absorption, we might also read his flippancy as an extreme (and even meta-critical) echo of Gray's critique of the 9/11 novel's domestication of crisis, in which "cataclysmic public events are measured purely and simply in terms of their impact on the emotional entanglements of their protagonists" ("Open Doors" 134). In the passage above, 9/11 is assimilated into a petty narrative of personal gains and losses.

Yet if we can look past its characteristic irony, *Freedom* compellingly appraises perceptions of risk in public discourse in the wake of 9/11. The narrator describes:

> In the days after 9/11, everything suddenly seemed extremely stupid to Joey. It was stupid that a "Vigil of Concern" was held for no conceivable practical reason. A stupidly big fuss was made about the students who'd lost relatives or family friends in the attacks, as if the other kinds of horrible death that were constantly occurring in the world mattered less. […] Before long, he was so lonely and isolated and hungry for familiar things that he made the rather serious mistake of giving Connie Monaghan permission to take a Greyhound bus to visit him in Charlottesville, thereby undoing a summer's worth of spadework to prepare her for their inevitable breakup. (233)

On one hand, we might read this passage as the harnessing of a national trauma to fuel the plot of Joey's adolescent romance, yet another example of Franzen's flattening the incommensurate scales of the personal, the national, and the global. Yet setting aside his pettiness, Joey raises worthy questions of the arbitrariness of forms of public grief and mourning. Similar sentiments have been voiced by critics like Fredric Jameson, who has called for the public "to deny that it is natural and self-explanatory for masses of people to be devastated by a catastrophe in which they have lost no one they know, in a place in which they have no particular connections" (298). Here, Jameson attempts to denaturalize 9/11's disruption of "normal life," to use Joey's words. The particular kind of "normal life" that *Freedom* witnesses disrupted—the life of a privileged boy—reflects what Judith Butler has articulated as the "loss of […] First Worldism as a result of the events of September 11 and its aftermath," or in

other words "the loss of the prerogative, only and always to be the one who transgresses the sovereign boundaries of other states, but never to be in the position of having one's own boundaries transgressed" (39). Thus, Joey's framing of 9/11 as the "higher-order bad luck" that interrupts his "birthright" might be read as an uncomfortable rearticulation of Butler's description of what exactly has been lost after 9/11, scaled down to fit within the novel's focus on the individual. At the heart of Joey's complaint is the sense that 9/11's riskiness has been misperceived: it is the public reaction to the attacks, rather than the attacks themselves, that derail his course. While Joey and Jassim are affected by 9/11 in vastly different ways, the attacks in both cases disrupt a sense of good fortune—the flipside of risk, as I will discuss at greater length in Chapter Three—and illuminate widespread "stupid[ity]" (in Joey's words) and "ignoran[ce]" (in Jassim's) in the face of perceived risk (Franzen 233, Halaby 22).

These novels' suggestive juxtaposition of disjunctive forms of crisis compellingly brings together ecocritical and post-9/11 understandings of risk within the world of the novel. As in *Once in a Promised Land*, *Freedom*'s assessment of 9/11's risk runs counter to its assessments of environmental risks: while Jassim cautions against taking water infrastructures for granted, Walter bemoans human foolishness in the face of overpopulation, denouncing "the feeling that nobody else in the country was giving even five seconds' thought to what it meant to be packing another 13,000,000 large primates onto the world's limited surface every month. The unclouded serenity of his countrymen's indifference made him wild with anger" (Franzen 314). Walter reframes the drive for limitless growth as "a cancer," warning, "we're going to kill the planet. We're going to choke on our own multiplication" (122). Walter's prophecy echoes Abu-Jalal's conviction, handed down to Jassim, that "shortage of water is what will doom the occupants of this earth" (Halaby 41). In both cases, environmental discourses emerge as a mode of risk perception, and even doomsaying. By taking a panoramic view of the many networks in which the individual is entangled, both novels call for a reappraisal of risk, urging readers to "look at the bigger picture," in Franzen's words, and to "see the greater picture," in

Halaby's (Franzen 339, Halaby 40). Both novels call for a critical rereading of risk as a corrective to the perceptual challenges encapsulated by Ghosh's "great derangement." In theory, these calls might be answered by the form of the networked novel, as both novels share the ambition of illustrating the "bigger picture" of the many forces shaping their characters' lives.

PLOTTING RISK

As this chapter has thus far shown, *Freedom* and *Once in a Promised Land*'s collocation of risks suggestively insinuates that the crisis of 9/11 has been wrongly magnified, and environmental crisis wrongly minimized. This proposition remains noteworthy and even radical in an era bearing witness to such divergent responses to the fundamental uncertainty of risk itself: while the "unknown unknowns" of former US Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld's infamous post-9/11 formulation became the case for preemption, the unknowns of climate change remain the case for inaction ("Press Conference" n.p.). Yet while both *Freedom* and *Once in a Promised Land* productively call to reevaluate risk and focus on the "bigger picture," these novels' internal visions of risk struggle to become convincing within their actual plots. Thus, although both novels productively advocate for a reevaluation of risk, they fail to correct the very derangements they expose. In this sense, both novels frustrate their own ambitions, as environmental risks—supposedly "the bigger picture"—are largely relegated to discourse, rather than being integrated into chains of cause and effect.

Several critics, most notably Margaret Gram, have pointed out the incongruity between *Freedom*'s treatment of political problems like the war on terror and its treatment of environmental concerns like overpopulation. In considering emplotment, Gram follows Gérard Genette's distinction between narrative and story, suggesting that speech and dialogue have "a different ontological status" than "the main events of the story": "discourse" and "didactic discourse" can thus be separated from "story" and "plot" (296). Extending this distinction to *Freedom*, Gram notes reviewers' consensus that

"there was something weirdly interruptive about [*Freedom*'s] eco-politics," which arrive "via passages of monologue or dialogue or thought," as opposed to arriving via plot (295-96). Indeed, Franzen largely relegates *Freedom*'s environmentalism to Walter's rambling misanthropic monologues. In Walter's college years, the narrator describes, he organized "symposia" on overpopulation that "hardly any students had attended," wrote "editorials," and "grappled philosophically with his fellow students' habit of putting three times too much milk on their cold cereal and then leaving brimming bowls of soiled milk on their trays: did they somehow think milk was a free and infinite commodity like water, with no environmental strings attached?" (Franzen 109, 110). The exhausting syntax of these rants reflects Walter's exhausting didacticism, warranting his description as a "moralistic irritant," and echoing Halaby's description of Jassim, whose "righteousness had no boundaries" (Franzen 349, Halaby 41). If overpopulation and limitless growth are some of *Freedom*'s largest concerns, why are they so disconnected from the machinery of the plot? Drawing on the case study of Franzen's novel, several roadblocks emerge: obstacles of politics, obstacles of temporality and scale, and obstacles of values.

To attend first to politics, we might read Walter's obsession with curbing growth, expressed through his rants and later channeled into his "Free Space" overpopulation initiative, as a metacommentary on the challenges of communicating environmental concerns. Nixon writes of the difficulties of conveying the urgency of processes of slow violence like climate change, "The representational challenges are acute, requiring creative ways of drawing public attention to catastrophic acts that are low in instant spectacle but high in long-term effects" (10). Seemingly taking a cue from Nixon, a Free Space brainstorming session articulates the challenges of communicating an antigrowth politics. Walter describes curbing growth as "total political poison" and complains, "we sound like elitists if we try to tell poor people and uneducated people not to have so many babies" (122, 361). (I will return more fully to the Malthusian underpinnings of Walter's environmental visions.)

Richard Katz, Walter's best friend, describes their challenge in the following way, drawing upon years of absorbing Walter's philosophizing:

> […] talking about fewer babies means talking about limits to growth. And growth isn't some side issue in free-market ideology. It's the entire essence. Right? In free-market economic theory, you have to leave stuff like the environment out of the equation. What was that word you [Walter] used to love? 'Externalities'? […] Capitalism can't handle talking about limits, because the whole point of capitalism is the restless growth of capital. If you want to be heard in the capitalist media, and communicate in a capitalist culture, overpopulation can't make any sense. It's literally nonsense. And that's your real problem. (361)

The Free Space crusaders struggle to make their message legible within the landscape of capitalist media, and struggle to make their politics irresistible. While limiting growth may be "literally nonsense" in the general landscape of capitalist media, it also struggles to take shape in Franzen's realist novel. As Gram writes, "*Freedom* […] is preoccupied with the possibility that an antigrowth politics might be incompatible with the affective engines that drive narrative fiction in general" (296). Thus, Free Space's struggle is also Franzen's, as a truly antigrowth politics may run counter to the marketability of Franzen's own fiction.

Freedom's concerns over overpopulation not only run into the political challenge of "communicat[ing] in a capitalist culture," but also generic challenges (361). Returning to Ghosh's question about the representational challenges of climate change—"Will it ever be possible to ask […] 'Where were you at 400 ppm?'"—Franzen's realist fiction is ultimately ill-equipped to stage the answer to such questions, as the necessary tools appear unavailable to this particular genre (129). The time-to-come that will supposedly manifest Walter's apocalyptic vision of growth-obsessed humans "destroying the planet and letting everybody starve to death or kill each other" does not and cannot arrive within the scope of Franzen's realist novel (121). Unlike speculative fictions like Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* and Colson Whitehead's *Zone One* (see Chapter Two), which project readers into a disastrous future in which the existential destruction of excess has already come to pass, Franzen's novel is left with only didacticism to forecast the comeuppance of human multiplication. *Freedom* thus

points to a fundamental divergence between antigrowth politics and realist narrative, revealing the formal challenges of narrating environmental catastrophe.

In the absence of their passions' ability to power the plot, Walter and Jassim are left mainly with didacticism, which is consistent with the fact that they are both professional lecturers (both novels dedicate several pages to the full text of their lectures). While Jassim is an actual professor of hydrology, Walter has his own speaking tour and even thinks to himself, "I should have been a college professor" (493). Thus, Walter and Jassim might also be labeled discursive in the sense that—to use a colloquialism—they are "all talk." Their politics lose the plots not only of their novels, but also of their fictional lives. To illustrate, Franzen's narrator describes Walter "suffer[ing] through perusal of the menu" at a West Virginian restaurant, considering the most ethical options:

> Between the horrors of bovine methane, the lakes of watershed-devastating excrement generated by pig and chicken farms, the catastrophic overfishing of the oceans, the ecological nightmare of farmed shrimp and salmon, the antibiotic orgy of dairy-cow factories, and the fuel squandered by the globalization of produce, there was little he could ever order in good conscience besides potatoes, beans, and freshwater-farmed tilapia.
> "Fuck it," he said, closing the menu. "I'm going to have the rib eye." (306)

While the humor of this passage is apparent, we might also pause here on the metafictional question of why readers must suffer through so many pages of Walter's moralizing lectures if he is always, in the end, going to have the rib eye.

Like Walter, Jassim has set aside his environmentalism in favor of a comfortable suburban life. In a flashback sequence, a friend introduces Jassim before his hydrology lecture at the University of Jordan, describing, "He has been temporarily wooed by the seductive swish of America's broad hips, but he promises that he will return to us one day soon to fix our water problems" (Halaby 65). Yet years later, Jassim has not returned: from the comforts of American suburbia, he receives deliveries of "the purest spring water money could buy, delivered biweekly up the hills by a gigantic complaining truck he never saw" (24). The infrastructures of water extraction and distribution that impassioned him in his idealistic youth have now become invisible to him. Environmentalism's relegation to

discourse thus reflects not only a challenge of representation, but also a challenge of values. Extending this discussion to literature more broadly, the novel, at a formal level, is always already "all talk": though certainly not all novels are equally didactic, we might read the impotence of the lecturer as a commentary on the impotence of language itself to address the greatest risks of our times.

Before turning to questions of what—if not the seemingly grave risks of terrorism and climate change—actually powers these novels' plots, one final problem with both novels' environmental visions must be confronted: the problem of Malthus and western environmental discourses themselves. This particular strain of environmentalist discourse is articulated through Halaby's Jassim and Franzen's Walter, as well as Lalitha, Walter's Bengali American assistant who becomes his love interest after the revelation of Patty and Richard's affair. Franzen clearly attempts to contrast Walter's "abstract and misanthropic" commitment to fighting overpopulation with Lalitha's "practical and humanitarian" one, and yet there is also something distinctly non-humanitarian about her vision (491). Lalitha's environmental awakening occurred on a family trip back to West Bengal as a teenager, where she was "not merely saddened and horrified but *disgusted* by the density and suffering and squalor of human life in Calcutta. Her disgust had pushed her, on her return to the States, into vegetarianism and environmental studies, with a focus, in college, on women's issues in developing nations" (315). This passage soundly resonates with the opening of Paul R. Ehrlich and Anne Ehrlich's *The Population Bomb* (1968). (Franzen is surely familiar with this text, and even references Ehrlich elsewhere in *Freedom*).[2] In a widely-criticized passage registering revulsion at Delhi, Ehrlich writes, "We entered a crowded slum area. The streets seemed alive with people. People eating, people washing, people sleeping.

[2] Walter reflects on his early environmentalism, "I guess I was part of a larger cultural shift that was happening in the eighties and nineties. Over-population was definitely part of the public conversation in the seventies, with Paul Ehrlich, and the Club of Rome, and ZPG [Zero Population Growth]. And then suddenly it was gone" (246).

People visiting, arguing and screaming. People thrusting their hands through the taxi window begging. People defecating and urinating […] Since that night I've known the feel of overpopulation" (15-16).

Remarkable parallels emerge not only between Franzen and Ehrlich, but also between Lalitha and Jassim, whose remembrances of Jordan echo Lalitha's descriptions of India. When Jassim enters a Walmart, he feels that "in one breath he was in the souq in Amman, a place he couldn't stand […]: too many poor people, too many people squish-squashing their overworked, coughing selves together" (278). The similarities between Lalitha and Jassim's environmental motivations are suggestive, raising questions of the particular environmental perspectives of American immigrants from the so-called "global south." Yet both characters' perspectives on overcrowding are underpinned by the same emotion: disgust. While Jassim and Lalitha's disgust might be persuasively read as a classist betrayal of home, Walter's disgust—and by extension, Franzen's—approaches not just classism, but also racism.

My suggestion here relies upon the long and problematic entanglement of environmentalism and population control. This history reaches back to Thomas Malthus's *An Essay on the Principle of Population* (1798), in which he argues, "A man […] if he cannot get subsistence from his parents […], and if the society do not want his labour, has no claim of right to the smallest portion of food, and, in fact, has no business to be where he is. At nature's mighty feast there is no vacant cover for him" (249). Reflecting on Franzen and Halaby's novels, the problems with overpopulation discourses are not merely problems of marketing—of "sound[ing] like elitists," as Walter greatly understates—but problems of real violence closely linked to histories of eugenics, colonization, forced-sterilization, and xenophobia (Franzen 361). Such lines of thinking, espoused by Malthus and Ehrlich, not only blame the global poor for their own and the world's problems, but also misread the actual causes of

environmental catastrophe.[3] As Fred Pearce documents, "The poorest three billion or so people on the planet (roughly 45 percent in total) are currently responsible for only 7 percent of emissions, while the richest 7 percent (about half a billion people) are responsible for 50 percent of emissions" (242). While the poorest populations drive climate change proportionately little, they receive a disproportionate share of its harms (see M. Allen et al. 51). Eleanor Penny therefore identifies the problem with Malthus as follows: "In a time of climate breakdown, it would be easy to call Malthus a prophet […]. But Malthus isn't wrong because his sums don't add up, or because his hypothesis has been disproved by fresh evidence. He's wrong because he recast a political problem of production and distribution as a biological problem of reproduction and consumption—distracting from its causes, exculpating its architects and obscuring possible solutions" (n.p.).

Returning to *Freedom* and *Once in a Promised Land* with this context in mind, Jassim and Lalitha's disdain for overcrowding speaks more to a sense of taste than a sense of environmental harm. While Halaby explicitly suggests that Jassim has betrayed his country by moving to America, breaking his promise to fix Jordan's water problems in favor of the comforts of his wealthy suburban life, Franzen seemingly deploys Lalitha's disgust to more pernicious ends. I do not assume that *Freedom*'s characters' ideas about overpopulation are Franzen's own (though interviews suggest more similarities than differences), nor do I assume that immigrants, fictional or real, have any obligation to aid or defend their countries of origin.[4] Even so, Franzen's creation of an Indian character to bolster Walter's corrupt environmental vision merits suspicion, both in light of the particular historical invocation of

[3] While still largely defensive of *The Population Bomb,* Paul Ehrlich recently conceded several of the book's limitations, advocating for wealth redistribution and admitting, "Its weaknesses were not enough on overconsumption and equity issues. It needed more on women's rights, and explicit countering of racism" (qtd. in Carrington n.p.).

[4] As Franzen describes in an interview in which he claims that "it's hard to drive in bumper-to-bumper traffic in the exurbs of this country [the US] and not feel, you know, maybe it would be better to have less people," talking about overpopulation makes "everyone look bad" (qtd. in Schulz n.p.). Here, it is difficult to distinguish Franzen's voice from Walter's.

Indian cities as apotheoses of squalor in white western environmentalist discourses, and in light of Franzen's necessary ventriloquism as a white author writing an Indian character who exists solely in relation to a white character (Walter). While Halaby directly confronts Jassim's disgust, I cannot help but wonder whether Franzen filters Walter's overpopulation rhetoric through Lalitha to distract from the racism with which such language is so often associated, lending Walter's antigrowth program a non-white seal of approval. Lalitha's status as hardly even a minor character suggests that her race may be a kind of cover allowing Franzen to voice racist and regressive views about third-world overcrowding. Lalitha's narrative life seems troublingly utilitarian, and as I will suggest in this chapter's next section, so too does her narrative death.

POWERING THE PLOT, CONNECTING THE DOTS

Despite the complex networks of risk and crisis charted by *Freedom* and *Once in a Promised Land*, the large-scale risks of terrorism and planetary collapse fail to power their plots. In this sense, the risks that actually arrive in these novels undermine their calls to reevaluate risk and focus on the "bigger picture." Rather, what ultimately drives these narratives forward are the building blocks of so many domestic novels: the miscarriage, the affair, the coincidence, and the accident. Both novels rely on fatal car accidents to advance their plots, bringing crisis to a head and paving the way for narrative resolution: Jassim accidentally kills a teenage boy, while Lalitha is killed in a car accident. The car accident adds another layer to this chapter's discussion of risk, environmentalism, and myths of American freedom. Cars have long been considered a symbol of independence within American culture. Simultaneously, cars are intimately linked to the material and geographic histories of westward expansion, suburban sprawl, and, of course, oil. Walter observes that American SUV drivers are complicit in the Iraq War by increasing dependence on foreign oil (Franzen 220). At the risk of overstating, of course cars also wreak environmental damage, and Stephanie LeMenager describes

how the automobile often serves as a "fetish-scapegoat" for environmentalists (26). Cars loom large not only in the landscape of environmental risk, but also human risk, causing more deaths per day than any other non-medical risk factor (see Ritchie and Roser n.p.). The car accident thus highlights the risks we pose to each other. Whereas processes of slow violence like climate change pose representational challenges for the novel, car accidents are their perfect antithesis: risk is localized and immediate, as opposed to diffuse and deferred, and therefore fits more easily within the novel.

While the risks of the bigger picture are forecast but never actually arrive, the car accident allows Franzen and Halaby's narratives to finally "crash," precipitating the "post" of "post-crisis." The automobile functions as not only a literal vehicle, but also a vehicle for plot, a narrative accelerator bringing latent risks to a head. Beginning with *Freedom*, I here pick up my argument that Lalitha's death is merely instrumental, offering two readings of her narrative ending. First, her death permits the abandonment of the novel's environmental ambitions. Late in the novel, a neighbor describes Walter, "He'd apparently founded a radical environmental group that had shut down after the death of its co-founder, a strangely named young woman who clearly hadn't been the mother of his children" (Franzen 544). As environmental ideals pose a stumbling block for Franzen's plot, it seems the very representation of such ideals must be sacrificed (literally, killed off) to move the plot forward. While Franzen's overpopulation plotline can never be resolved within his realist novel's pages, Lalitha's death and Free Space's ensuing shutdown provides a way out of this unsolvable dilemma. Beyond sidelining environmentalism, Lalitha's death also facilitates the reunion of Walter and Patty, a violent shortcut through which a woman of color is needlessly sacrificed to facilitate a white couple's domestic reunion.[5] Franzen, seemingly anticipating accusations of Lalitha's convenient elimination, writes that,

[5] Heise has critiqued "the portrayal of multicultural and sometimes transnational nuclear families as the narrative solution to environmental and political problems" (*Ecocriticism* 383). Walter and Lalitha's multicultural romance may stand in for eco-political solutions, though their mixed-race reproductive future is foreclosed.

in Patty's eyes, Lalitha's death secures her and Walter's separation, as opposed to enabling their reunion: "As long as Lalitha was alive, there'd been a chance that Walter would tire of her, but once she died there was no hope at all for Patty" (509). And yet, of course, hope remains.

Though Lalitha's death supposedly "end[s] Walter's life," readers are hardly encouraged to receive her death as a tragedy on its own terms (551). In fact, her death is never directly depicted, but merely narrated from the aftermath. In a chapter told from Walter's point of view, the narrator describes:

> The woman he loved loved him. He knew this for certain, but it was all he knew for certain, then or ever; the other vital facts remained unknown. Whether she did, in fact, drive carefully. Whether she was or wasn't rushing on the rain-slick county highway back up to the goat farm the next morning, whether she was or wasn't rounding the blind mountain curves dangerously fast. Whether a coal truck had come flying around one of these curves and done what a coal truck did somewhere in West Virginia every week. Or whether somebody in a high-clearance 4x4, maybe somebody whose barn had been defaced with the words free space or cancer on THE PLANET, saw a dark-skinned young woman driving a compact Korean-made rental car and veered into her lane or tailgated her or passed her too narrowly or even deliberately forced her off the shoulderless road.
>
> Whatever did happen exactly, around 7:45 a.m., five miles south of the farm, her car went down a long and very steep embankment and crushed itself against a hickory tree. (500-01)

In a further echo between *Freedom* and *The Great Gatsby*, Franzen's narrator speculates on Lalitha's death after it has already occurred, just as Fitzgerald's narrator describes only the aftermath of Myrtle's death. Paul Crosthwaite delineates this retrospective mode of narrating the accident as characteristic of modernist depictions of systemic risk. Analyzing *The Great Gatsby* as well as Joseph Conrad's *The Secret Agent* (1907), Crosthwaite describes, "The effect is of the future having somehow spun loose of its position in the temporal continuum and collapsed into the present […]. They issue an ominous appeal to the future that lies beyond the moment of their composition, projecting as their referent a crisis that will be accidental and contingent, but also, at a structural level, foreordained" ("Anticipations" 344).

Extending this analysis to *Freedom*, the car accident ably invokes both the contingent and the foreordained by mobilizing the many meanings of the word "crash." As Crosthwaite points out, the crash becomes an allegory for "the acceleration of an economic way of life towards some devastating calamity" (340-41). Both *Freedom* and *Once in a Promised Land* deploy their own crashes to realize the systemic risks within their fictional worlds. As Jesús Ángel González writes of *Freedom*, it is "no wonder that their dream, flawed from the start, becomes a nightmare of political corruption, ethnic bias, radicalism, and death […]. Lalitha's death in a car crash, as a probable victim of racial prejudice, seems like the only possible ending for such an ill-designed dream" (24). The racial motivations hovering around Lalitha's death point to a fundamental problem with *Freedom*'s deployment of the car accident: the accident of race here disavows its structural dimensions. As Georgiana Banita describes, many post-9/11 authors "tend to display an inchoate awareness of race as a major component of the war on terror; their fictions are not in full control of their subject, occasionally obfuscating or marginalizing it" (235). In plotting Lalitha's death as accidental while simultaneously raising questions of its racial motivations, Franzen evades responsibility for the role of race in his novel.

In *Once in a Promised Land,* Jassim's car accident marks one of many instances of peripeteia within the plot, joining a series of disruptions to the normalcy of Jassim and Salwa's life. The day of the accident, Jassim's daily swim routine is interrupted, Salwa reveals her miscarriage, and Salwa faces discrimination at work (Halaby 110, 108, 113). According to the networked anatomy of Halaby's plot, one crisis spills over into another. "Once a day has shifted off-kilter as badly as this one had, there is almost no way to get it back, not even by retracing exactly the steps taken, unraveling and reraveling […] the knotted yarn," the narrator forewarns (106). As the Haddads' American dream steadily unravels, disaster is at this point inescapable. While the post-9/11 context of fear, paranoia, and racial profiling sets the stage for Jassim's downfall, it is only through the car accident that this downfall is set into motion.

Beyond turning to the car accident to focalize risk, both novels also rely on a series of facile coincidences to contain the sprawling webs of their networked forms. Seemingly, having cast out too many threads, Franzen and Halaby must resort to contrivance to reel in their tangled lines. *Freedom* peddles in conspiracy as it bears out the connections between oil, the war on terror, and environmentalism. In an attempt to emplot these complex forces, Walter becomes caught up in a deal to exchange the rights to mountaintop removal for a future bird reserve for the cerulean warbler, his favorite American songbird. In the process, he joins forces with energy baron Vin Haven and "oilfield-services giant" LBI (Franzen 300).[6] Walter recounts, "the vice president, during that same week in 2001 [the week of 9/11], had privately mentioned to Vin Haven that the president intended to make certain regulatory and tax-code changes to render natural-gas extraction economically feasible in the Appalachians" (215). Capitalizing on this context, LBI brokers a deal with the help of Walter's greenwashing, and offers local residents lifelong employment manufacturing military body armor as restitution for their displacement. *Freedom* thus makes visible the links between 9/11 and fossil fuels not only abroad, but also domestically. When Walter defects from LBI in a painkiller-induced diatribe that later goes viral, he exposes this squalid network, ranting, "The reason this country needs so much body armor is that certain people in certain parts of the world don't want us stealing all their oil to run your vehicles. And so the more you drive your vehicles, the more secure your jobs at this body-armor plant are going to be! Isn't that perfect?" (484).

It seems the only answer to Walter's rhetorical question—"Isn't that perfect?"—is that indeed, it is a little too perfect. The connections between terrorism and territory are underexplored and politically charged. Emily Apter writes of the post-9/11 moment, "we have been exhorted by

[6] J. A. González and others have pointed out that LBI is likely code for Halliburton, the Texas oil company associated with the Iraq war and the Bush administration, though in Franzen's novel the fictionalized LBI is described as Halliburton's "archrival" (300).

Washington to connect the dots, to posit connections between weapons of mass destruction in Iraq and the World Trade Center attacks" (369). Yet as Michael Maguire has elsewhere pointed out, we have been "simultaneously admonished against connecting other dots, say between the Iraq War and that nation's oil deposits" (105). Thus, the question of which dots are connected, and which networks are made visible, is certainly worthy of exploration. Yet *Freedom'*s connection of these dots nonetheless fails to land. In the world of the novel, Walter's betrayal of LBI is received as heroic, catapulting him to internet fame. Yet in the world of the reader, Walter's conspiratorial ranting fails to read as revelatory, as these connections have already been laid bare by Franzen's omniscient narrator. As Heise writes of Richard Powers's novel *Gain* (1998), offering analysis that is clarifying for *Freedom* as well, "shock, surprise, and disorientation […] are absorbed […] through a mode of narration that consistently restores context, control, and orientation to the reader; narrative collage is reabsorbed into orderly progression" ("Toxins" 770).

The inevitable absorption and management of risk through narrative reveals a critical challenge for the networked novel, which often sets about to reveal the connections between seemingly unconnected people, places, events, and processes: every plot is always already a sort of conspiracy. Inherently preplanned, there is neither real accident nor coincidence, though of course both can be represented. We might even say that the very form of the networked novel is fundamentally as paranoid as Walter becomes through his drug-addled rantings, undermining his revelation that nothing is random and everything is connected. As Ghosh writes, "the calculus of probability that is deployed within the imaginary world of a novel is not the same as that which obtains outside it; this is why it is commonly said, 'If this were in a novel, no one would believe it'" (23-24). Extending this distinction to *Freedom,* Franzen struggles to persuasively reveal the interconnections of his realist novel despite the reality of such connections in the world. While Kathy Knapp has argued that "Walter's ranting perhaps seeks to keep in play the sense of contingency that we are inclined to suppress," it seems

crucial here to distinguish between contingency in the world and representations of contingency in the novel (68). The infrastructures of the war on terror and the planetary ecosystem are indeed materially linked, yet *Freedom* goes so far as to connect them within one family, flattening these complex assemblages to fit within the aperture of his novel. In this sense, the convergence of these forces within the lives of Franzen's central characters appears too "perfect."

Halaby encounters a similar problem in trying to wrangle the various strands of her narrative: toward her novel's end, the plot becomes a sort of conspiracy. In some ways, this conspiring is apt, as Jassim indeed becomes caught up in an FBI "witch hunt" (Halaby 224). Yet the conspiracy is also fueled by a series of facile coincidences, through which the disparate pieces of Jassim's life seem to plot against him. *Once in a Promised Land* reveals—first to the reader, and then to the characters—that Evan, the boy Jassim hits with his car, is the same character who earlier buys drugs from Jake, who later has an affair with Salwa. The novel's seemingly separate threads become increasingly knotted together. The FBI, tipped off by a member of Jassim's fitness club, launches an inquiry into Jassim, putting pressure on Marcus, who is his best friend and also his boss. A network of coincidence is recast as implication. Perhaps most significantly for this discussion of the network, the accident, and the coincidence, the FBI agents show Jassim a photograph of Evan's skateboard and ask, "Were you aware of his views? […] About Arabs" (231). They tell Jassim to look closely at the photo, where he spots the "Terrorist Hunting License" sticker (which readers are already aware of), prompting the following exchange:

> "When did you first see this sticker?" asked Agent Fletcher.
> "This moment."
> "Mr. Haddad, are you saying that you never saw this sticker before?"
> "Yes, that is what I am saying."
> "And you are also saying that it is a coincidence that the boy you killed hated Arabs?"
> "[…] yes, it is a coincidence that the boy I killed hated Arabs." (231)

This exchange reveals the dangers of coincidence in a post-9/11 moment of racial profiling, and the suspicion that no coincidence is innocent (the implications of which will be fully explored in Chapter Four). Through the form of the procedural, the risks surrounding Jassim become apparent to him, just as they have already become apparent to readers through the novel's networked form. Jassim reflects, "Amazing how having one tiny bit of information was the key to the whole puzzle. How it suddenly gave you the ability to put all those other misplaced pieces in their appropriate spots" (110). As the network of Halaby's plot becomes visible to both Jassim and to readers, the novel reveals how each of its pieces fit together. As Ghosh writes, "the concealment of its scaffolding of events continues to be essential to [the modern novel's] functioning. […] Here, then, is the irony of the 'realist' novel: the very gestures with which it conjures up reality are actually a concealment of the real" (23). Yet the scaffolding of events both in *Once in a Promised Land* and in *Freedom* does not remain concealed. As Jassim awakens to the web surrounding him, "the stories of the past few months […] ricocheting through his head, popping up with no obvious connection to one another," he must confront the simultaneous improbability and reality of the network of risk in which he finds himself implicated (312).

Franzen and Halaby's deployment of coincidence to resolve their networked plots suggests implications for the form of the novel and its limitations, as well as for reading practices. Before succumbing to suspicion, Marcus describes, "Our government is at a loss, so they're grasping at straws. Jassim is a straw" (269). Yet these straws are laid out, ultimately, by Halaby. Considering that narrative coincidence is inherently paradoxical, can Halaby fully criticize the web of suspicion surrounding Jassim, even as she weaves this very web? Extending Walter's exasperated question, "isn't that perfect?" is it too perfect that Evan openly hated Arabs (Franzen 484)? I raise this question not to reproach the shallowness of Halaby's storyline, but to examine what it means to encourage suspicious readings in a time already marked by an overdose of suspicion. As readers, we know that according to

the structure of the networked novel, seemingly separate narrative threads will never remain separate, and therefore wait with suspicion for their true connections to be revealed. While the risks created by the network may be global in scale, the realist plot makes its connections visible at the local level. Further, each time the novel enters the procedural mode of the detective story, as when Jassim recounts his accident to the police and undergoes an FBI interrogation, the text aligns our gaze with the investigator's, reinforcing the very ways of thinking about risk it attempts to protest. How, then, can Halaby's novel resist conspiring against Jassim? Reading *Freedom* and *Once in a Promised Land* alongside one another raises questions of whether the networked novel can represent the paranoia of total interconnection without reinforcing paranoid modes of reading. This paranoid mode not only impacts the ways we read literature, but also impacts the ways we read each other in an era of racial profiling and surveillance, as Chapter Four will discuss in full.

LOOSE ENDS

Despite the entanglement of domestic, national, and global crisis in *Freedom* and *Once in a Promised Land*, the endings of these novels disentangle the webs of their networks for the sake of narrative resolution. *Freedom*'s final chapters resolve nearly all of its loose ends, and redeem its characters' loose morals: domestic resolutions seem to stand in for political solutions. Despite the impending sense of doom throughout the novel—best summed up by Walter's insistence, "We're heading for catastrophe, Patty"—the novel's political crises are deferred, and its familial crises overcome (Franzen 405). Walter finally reckons with the moral bankruptcy of his mountaintop removal arrangement, while Patty rediscovers her love of young children and cares for her ailing father: "She could almost physically feel her emotional organs rearranging themselves, bringing her self-pity plainly into view at last, in its full obscenity, like a hideous purple-red growth in her that needed to be cut out," Franzen writes (513). While the novel never resolves its antigrowth plotline, which frames

humans as a "CANCER ON THE PLANET," it seems that excising the cancer of personal resentment—its own form of unfettered growth—must serve as a proxy for structural change (484).

Even Joey, perhaps the worst of the Berglunds, finds redemption. After sending "arrantly near-worthless crap to American forces trying to win a tough unconventional war," Joey suddenly "develop[s] a conscience" (437). After seeing CNN footage of an ambush outside Fallujah, Iraq, in which several American trucks break down, "leaving their contract drivers to be butchered by insurgents," Joey comes clean to Walter, righting his wrongs by writing his father a check to support Free Space (442). Joey thus begins and ends as the golden boy (and even, eventually, an ethical one), entering the shade-grown coffee market "at exactly the moment when fortunes could be made in it" and "get[ting] rich almost effortlessly" (533). In sum, in an almost Victorian fashion, all of *Freedom*'s loose ends are tied up, not least of all with Walter and Patty's reunion after a six-year estrangement. As Nina Martyris argues, "Franzen pulls his characters back from the abyss (except for poor Lalitha)" (n.p.).

What does it mean for *Freedom*'s loose ends to be so neatly tied in a text that insists on the entanglement of the domestic, the national, and the global? While *Freedom*'s domestic plots are resolved, its political plots remain unresolved and even forgotten. For example, it is easy to read Joey as a stand-in for Bush era political attitudes, representing post-9/11 entitlement and vengefulness (see Kirsch n.p.). Yet the individual progress narrative of Joey's moral awakening, leading him from military contractor to shade-grown coffee grower, obscures the remaining structures of the war machine: what happens to the "rust-rimmed trucks" Joey sells to the military (Franzen 435)? For a novel so conceptually obsessed with "externalities," the externalities of Franzen's own plotlines disappear surprisingly easily. Admittedly, narrative closure poses a critical challenge for representations of crises like the war on terror and climate change, crises with no foreseeable ends. Yet *Freedom*'s neat resolution

obscures not only the answers to these questions, but also their asking, leading Martyris to aptly deem the novel "a toothless cautionary tale" (n.p.).

While Martyris's critique of *Freedom*'s toothlessness usefully highlights Franzen's redemption of his central characters, she also considers an even more cynical reading: "That in the world of Halliburton wars, there are no consequences, just happy endings all around" (n.p.). This second reading frames *Freedom*'s domestic resolutions not as compensation for its unresolved political problems, but as an admittance that such problems cannot be solved. Of her quest for redemption, Patty reflects, "There was nothing she could do now about having wrecked Walter's life, and so, she thought, she might as well try to save her own" (508). In forgiving her mother, she similarly reasons, "In retrospect, Patty saw something poignant or even admirable in Joyce's determination to absent herself […] and thereby save herself" (528). Franzen's novel must turn away from the network to achieve its "happy ending," clinging instead to individual safety. While Lalitha's sincere mission of "saving the planet" appears hopeless, the Berglunds' narrative arc sends a darker message: if you can't save the planet, save yourself (207).

In this sense, cynical insularity becomes the answer to the questions of scale posed by the novel's environmental discourses. Earlier in the novel, Walter laments, "I wasn't accomplishing anything systemic in Minnesota. We were just gathering little bits of disconnected prettiness" (218). Yet when he abandons his bird reserve campaign, turning instead to the systemic issue of overpopulation, he becomes similarly discouraged. He tells Lalitha, "I saved a hundred square miles in West Virginia […]. Even more than that in Columbia. That was good work, with real results. Why didn't I keep doing it?" She replies, "Because you knew it's not enough" (494-95). These environmental discourses offer a larger commentary on the problem of scale, and questions of what (and whom) can be saved.

When Walter and Patty reconcile, they prepare to move to New York, the city of so many new beginnings, and Walter turns his property into a bird sanctuary. Narrated in the all-knowing voice of the neighborhood, the novel ends, "To this day, free access to the preserve is granted only to birds and to residents of Canterbridge Estates, through a gate whose lock combination is known to them, beneath a small ceramic sign with a picture of the pretty young dark-skinned girl after whom the preserve is named" (562). That the novel ends with Lalitha, long killed off in service of the white couple's reunion, feels at this point like an epitaph that can only be disingenuous, small recompense for her utilitarian narrative death: that she is not even named here adds insult to injury, as it seems it is only Lalitha's difference ("dark-skinned girl") that constitutes her character (562). It is suggestive that a novel purported to tackle the state of the nation, and perhaps even the world, ends once again with the home. This time, it is a home destroyed—the Berglund home is literally gutted—allowing narrative closure through a domestic place rewilded, transformed into "a haven for owls or swallows" (562). Despite *Freedom*'s transnational networks, and its investments in "the bigger picture," it ultimately ends with an actual sanctuary: in other words, a place for retreat. While Walter expresses earlier in the novel the meaninglessness of sanctuary in the absence of scalability—"Any little things we might do now […] are going to get overwhelmed by the sheer numbers"—he ultimately withdraws from systems thinking (220). *Freedom*'s ending thus offers readers our own bit of "disconnected prettiness" that can only be read as dissatisfying according to the novel's internal vision.

While *Freedom*'s neat resolution suggests either the hollowness of its cautionary framing or the sense that consequences no longer exist, Halaby's novel offers the rejoinder that there are indeed grave consequences in the world of Halliburton wars. In contrast to *Freedom*'s sanctuary, a term whose origins evoke immunity from arrest, Halaby's novel does not insulate its characters from risk nor from the consequences their surrounding networks mobilize. The accruing aftershocks of domestic, national, and accidental crises begin to unravel the Haddads' life. Salwa describes, "Everything was

spinning wildly away from her, and she didn't know how to grab it, to stop it," while Jassim echoes, "Salwa, I feel as though I have lost control of my life" (Halaby 265, 301). In the face of this derailment, Salwa conceals buying a one-way plane ticket to Jordan, while Jassim conceals losing his job. Toward the novel's end, Salwa goes to say goodbye to her lover, Jake. After hearing of her travel plans, he attacks her verbally and physically, yelling, "So you're running back to the pigsty" and "Bitch! Goddamn fucking Arab bitch!" (320, 322). As crisis mounts, the Haddads' marriage becomes not the source of redemption it is for the Berglunds, but rather the original accident precipitating their downfall. As she lays injured, Salwa thinks, "at that moment she would have given the world to have found the rewind button. […] she would never have said yes to Dr. Haddad" (323). Jassim similarly realizes, "He loved Salwa because in her he saw home […]. Because he needed her. Quite possibly she had married him for need as well" (325). While Jassim kisses his new love interest, his phone registering missed calls from the Tucson Police Department, Halaby's narrator describes, "above their heads there floated a kite with a slashed sail and a missing string" (325). Here, Halaby sends a clear message of severance, highlighting "snipped, untangled" strings (323). While in *Freedom*, risks become obstacles for the Berglunds to overcome, ultimately mending their severed ties, *Once in a Promised Land* offers its characters neither redemption nor reunion. Rather, their ties to each other are cut, Jassim has lost his job, and Salwa's life is at stake.

Bookending the prologue entitled "Before," *Once in a Promised Land* concludes with a chapter entitled "After," which ends with the lines:

> *There's no "they lived happily ever after"?*
> "Happily ever after" happens only in American fairy tales.
> *Wasn't this an American fairy tale?*
> It was and it wasn't. (335)

The contrasting endings of *Freedom* and *Once in a Promised Land* productively speak back to the critiques of the domestic with which this chapter began. If such critiques rest on the assumption that the domestic is too safe to be political, Halaby reflects in her novel what we already know to be true in

the world: for so many, American domesticity has always been risky. Halaby's line "'Happily ever after' happens only in American fairy tales," in the context of the Haddads' unhappy ending, exposes the empty promises of the "Promised Land" (335). The domestic retreat is fundamentally unavailable to Halaby's Arab American protagonists, who reveal such myths as either exclusionary or fictitious. Franzen's novel also lends support to this narrative, as indeed Lalitha, the only non-white and non-American-born character, is the only character denied a happy ending. This pattern raises questions of whether accusations of the domestic retreat in post-9/11 literary criticism are rather misarticulated accusations of whitewashing.

Halaby's novel undercuts the binary of the network as the source of risk and the domestic as the source of safety, as the risks that eventually consume the Haddads arrive not through external threats but through harm done by their own lovers, best friends, and fellow swimmers. Domestic space becomes the very site of risk's arrival. As Bernice Murphy points out in her account of the "Suburban Gothic," "one is almost always in more danger from the people in the house next door, or one's own family, than from an external threat" (2). In a moment when the externalized threat of terrorists captivates the public imagination, Halaby reveals the internal threats posed by friends, family, and neighbors, reminding us that the domestic is never merely domestic.

SCALES OF AUTHORSHIP: AN EPILOGUE

As this chapter has illustrated, reading across landscapes of risk in *Freedom* and *Once in a Promised Land* productively troubles criticism that assumes an opposition between the site of the domestic and the site of risk. To conclude this chapter, I want to suggest another avenue for repoliticizing the category of the domestic by turning to the divergent receptions of Franzen and Halaby's novels. If the domestic retreat itself is not to be trusted, then neither are the uneven ways we levy such critiques. Despite Franzen's endless mockery of the scales of the personal and the (inter)national, and despite

Freedom being most centrally concerned with the domestic situation of a single family, it nonetheless earned Franzen the title "Great American Novelist," splashed across the front cover of *Time* magazine in August 2010. The *New York Times* titled its review of *The Corrections* (2001) "A Family Portrait as Metaphor for the 90's" (see Kakutani), and *Freedom* was similarly received, leading Lev Grossman to write that Franzen "remains a devotee of the wide shot, the all-embracing, way-we-live-now novel" (n.p.). If Franzen is indeed a "Great American Novelist" whose homes always already serve as microcosms of the nation, then we cannot help but read *Freedom*'s ending as a call for nativism.

While Franzen is acclaimed for documenting the "state of the union" and the "way we live now," families remain at the center of his oeuvre. The flap copy of his forthcoming novel *Crossroads* (October 2021) even goes so far as to proclaim, "Universally recognized as the leading novelist of his generation, Jonathan Franzen is often described as a teller of family stories. Only now, though, in *Crossroads*, has he given us a novel in which a family, in all the intricacy of its workings, is truly at the center" ("Crossroads" n.p.). While these words may not have been penned by Franzen himself, they surely received his approval. This description, through the phrasing "Only now," belies the contradiction between Franzen's oeuvre and his novels' reception. He is at once "a teller of family stories" and someone who "only now" delivers a novel about the family. The source of this contradiction might be located in the gendered politics of the domestic category and its accompanying criticism. As Pankaj Mishra contends, "Novels about suburban families are more likely to be greeted as microcosmic explorations of the human condition if they are by male writers; their female counterparts are rarely allowed to transcend the category of domestic fiction" ("The End" n.p.). We might observe an isomorphic trend in so-called "ethnic fiction," a point I will return to shortly in detail.

Unpacking the uneven valences of *Freedom* and *Once in a Promised Land*'s receptions is particularly consequential considering Franzen's own public history of misogyny. Franzen infamously withdrew *The Corrections* from Oprah's Book Club, disparaging her choices as "schmaltzy" and "one-dimensional," and even suggesting his novel might be "a hard book for that audience" (qtd. in Schindehette 84). The gendered undertones of these complaints crystallized when Franzen admitted in a *National Public Radio* interview that Oprah's endorsement had foiled "hope of actually reaching a male audience," as male readers might presume that "those books are for women" (qtd. in Gross n.p.). While Franzen eventually backtracked on these sentiments, this commentary nonetheless hovers over questions of how his domestic fiction has evaded reception as "retreat[ing] into domestic detail" (Gray, "Open Doors" 134).

The assumed representativeness of Franzen's fiction remains contested. Specifying the "we" in Grossman's "way-we-live-now" takes on particular urgency in light of his widely-cited review of *Freedom*, in which he argues that "*Freedom* isn't about a subculture; it's about the culture. It's not a microcosm; it's a cosm" (n.p.). While Grossman almost certainly uses "the culture" as shorthand for American culture, an erasure in its own right, the homogeny of his "cosm" struggles to escape hegemony. In contrast, Georgia Letten argues, "Franzen has indeed captured a voice, but it is the voice of a privileged subset of society, rather than a generation," while Banita has attempted to "dislodge Franzen from his alleged position as unworthy flag-bearer of the novel of globalization" (Letten 53; Banita, "Writing Energy Security" 187). Regardless of Franzen's success in representing a generation or a nation, the arc of his career seems to support Tim Adams's declaration that "There comes a time in the mid-life of every male American writer when he feels compelled to make his big statement about the state of the union" (318).[7] This compulsion may take on additional potency in the

[7] Here, Adams is writing about Ethan Canin's *America America* (2008), but his comments might be extended to Franzen, as well.

wake of crises like 9/11, when the pressures on the novel's capacities for representativeness and responsiveness are perhaps at their greatest. Yet the aim of representativeness itself merits closer attention. The search for national allegories in a time of crisis often presents a singular story of risk whose representativeness must always be founded upon erasure. Further, in an era of globalization, it is also worth considering whether statements about the union are indeed big enough, or even big at all.

In contrast to Franzen's hailing as national spokesman, Halaby's novel, which offers its own state of the nation, has received no such descriptions. The post-9/11 moment has witnessed a call for literary representations of the so-called other (see Mishra, "The End" n.p. and Gray, *After the Fall* 32). As Daniel O'Gorman has outlined, this increased interest is both "productive" and "*re*ductive," expanding the platform of the literary marketplace, yet also suggesting a conditional fascination with difference (286). Halaby's literary career bears the traces of this conditional fascination, and her work, alongside the work of many immigrant women of color, has often been relegated to the categories of ethnic fiction and immigrant fiction. Her first novel, *West of the Jordan*, a coming-of-age story centered on four Palestinian girls, was originally rejected by various publishers. After 9/11, Halaby, who was herself born in Beirut to a Jordanian father and an American mother, reattempted to publish her manuscript, and was taken on by Beacon Press (Regan n.p.). Halaby's own publication history, as well as *West of the Jordan*'s winning of the PEN Beyond Margins Award, suggests a newly piqued interest in writing from the so-called margins, as well as an increased demand for writing about Muslim and Arab life. The motivations behind this appetite for expanded representation in post-9/11 writing have raised concerns: Aaron DeRosa has questioned how cries for "counter-narratives" risk reinforcing the very binaries of "us" and "them" they try to disrupt, while Nadine Naber cautions that 9/11 must be read as "a turning point, as opposed to the starting point, of histories of anti-Arab racism in the United States" (DeRosa 158-59, Naber 4).

Comparing the receptions of *Freedom* and *Once in a Promised Land* serves not to essentialize these novels as representative or not, but rather to highlight the politics behind such classifications and how they inform the ways we read. While *Once in a Promised Land* also takes a wide view of contemporary American life through the story of a single family, no critics have called Halaby's novel a "state of the nation novel" or a tale of "how we live now," nor have critics extended to Halaby's novel the labels of "Victorian" and "Dickensian" visited upon Franzen's (Grossman n.p., Morley 728). Are we unable to project such labels—however arbitrary—onto Halaby's Arab American protagonists? Alternately, are we unable to locate an Arab American woman author within the literary tradition of the domestic novel as national allegory? While these questions cannot be fully answered in these pages, their asking tells us something about the kinds of novel(ist)s who can speak for the nation, and respond to moments of crisis.

2. Risk and Rupture in the Apocalyptic Novel
Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* (2006) and Colson Whitehead's *Zone One* (2011)

"The question of the novel's future becomes one with that of the future of the total swarm. How are the generations to face, at all, the monstrous multiplications?"
- Henry James, *The Future of The Novel*

This is what you must remember: the ending of one story is just the beginning of another. […]
When we say "the world has ended," it's usually a lie, because *the planet* is just fine.
But this is the way the world ends.
This is the way the world ends.
This is the way the world ends.
For the last time.
- N. K. Jemisin, *The Fifth Season*

Just as the form of the network mobilizes risk in the contemporary American novel, so too do narratives of apocalypse. As Tina Pippin has observed, "Globalization, 9/11, wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, global warming, etc. all have heightened apocalyptic dreaming and speaking" (40.2). Such apocalyptic dreaming and speaking often manifest through the hallmark dualisms of apocalypse, demarcating "before" and "after" and separating "us" from "them." Apocalyptic rhetoric has gained increasing prominence around the crises of both 9/11 and climate change. As John Hall describes, "the image of apocalypse gained a new currency" post-9/11, particularly in the United States (267). Meanwhile, ecocritic Lawrence Buell describes apocalypse as "the single most powerful master metaphor that the contemporary environmental imagination has at its disposal" (*Environmental Imagination* 285). This chapter will read apocalyptic binaries as a form of narrative risk-management, whereby risk is regulated, disciplined, and securitized.

In seeking to unite ecocritical and post-9/11 understandings of risk, apocalypse is one site where such understandings have already converged. Questions of continuity and discontinuity, which the rupture of apocalypse seemingly resolves, have animated debates around both 9/11 and climate change. Despite the facile apocalyptic binaries of "us and them," and "before and after," such divisions nevertheless fail to resolve a series of contradictions visible in public discourse after the 9/11 attacks.

9/11 was both ahistoricized through the "out of the blue" narrative and read as "the end of the American holiday from history" (Sözalan xi). To put these events in conversation with Francis Fukuyama's thesis, 9/11 has often been read as representing the end of "the end of history" (4).[8] After the realization of catastrophic crisis on US soil, apocalyptic discourse performed the work of risk-management, generating Manichaean allegories to cope with the threat to American empire. Jürgen Habermas describes the Twin Towers themselves as "a powerful embodiment of economic strength and *projection toward the future,*" a symbol of capitalist growth and American expansion (qtd. in Borradori 28). The collapse of the towers threatened this projection toward the future, breaking what Susan Faludi describes as "the dead bolt on our protective myth, the illusion that we are masters of our security" (15).

While apocalyptic rhetoric was reinvigorated after 9/11, imaginations of ecological apocalypse have also flourished in the past several decades. The rhetoric of ecological apocalypse has become a common language among writers, filmmakers, scientists, activists, and politicians. In his 2007 address to the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), the former United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon stated that the scenarios outlined in the 2007 IPCC report, "are as frightening as a science fiction movie. But they are even more terrifying, because they are real" (n.p.). Within the realm of literature, a wave of novels engaging themes of ecological apocalypse has crystallized into new subcategories within the genre of climate fiction, including "eco-disaster," "eco-catastrophe," and "eco-apocalypse" (Bulfin 141).

[8] At the end of the Cold War, Fukuyama describes, "What we may be witnessing is not just the end of the Cold War, or the passing of a particular period of postwar history, but the end of history as such: that is, the end point of mankind's ideological evolution and the universalization of Western liberal democracy as the final form of human government" (4).

Following Ursula Heise's proposition that "accounts of risk tend to invoke different genre models," Chapter One explored the challenges of the realist novel to capture the scales and temporalities of planetary risks without scaling these risks down to the point of their own denaturing (*Sense of Place* 139). As scholars like Rob Nixon and Amitav Ghosh suggest, the slow violence of climate change struggles to take shape in the stories we tell about ourselves in novels. This chapter will turn to a different genre model, that of speculative fiction, to explore whether the novel can write its way into a different answer to this question. By scaling up our imaginations, perhaps speculative fiction can provide a corrective to what Ghosh calls our "great derangement," accounting for risk in a more capacious way (8). Unlike the realist novel, speculative fiction allows us to imagine where we might be "at 400 ppm," where we might be "when the Larsen B ice shelf" breaks up, and to project ourselves into a risky future (Ghosh 129). The two apocalyptic novels this chapter explores—Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* (2006) and Colson Whitehead's *Zone One* (2011)—project us into speculative futures where enormous risks have already come to pass: in McCarthy's case, an unidentified mass extinction event, and in Whitehead's, a zombie plague. The unspecified nature of *The Road's* catastrophe and the total devastation left in its wake make the novel ready-made for allegorical readings. In turn, zombies are widely considered one of popular culture's most versatile metaphors, standing in "for just about any and all form of catastrophic, paradigm-changing global disaster" (Murphy, "The Dead" 39). In 2011, for example, the Center for Disease Control (CDC) encouraged disaster preparedness by asking citizens to imagine the possibility of a "zombie apocalypse" (qtd. in Uncertain Commons 52). The zombie now "lurks at the very center of global mass culture," a catch-all for the contemporary risk society (Canavan 431). In part, zombies take so easily to allegory because they are often considered "nothing but surface" (Hurley, "History" 315). Lacking a soul and brain, their flatness invites us to wonder what they mean "on another level" (McGurl n.p.).

The Road and *Zone One* take easily to allegorical readings, and in keeping with the tendency for criticism to orient around singular rather than multiple reference points, both novels have been received as allegories for *either* 9/11 *or* climate change, depending on the critic, yet never both at the same time. In the face of the cleavage between critical attunement to 9/11 and climate change, however, these novels' anchoring of a plurality of allegorical interpretations constructs a bridge for reading across divergent imaginations of risk. This chapter will thus mobilize apocalypse as a link between multiple forms of risk, departing from the "single-issue criticism" characteristic of these novels' receptions. It is worth noting that the grouping of these two novels is perhaps uncomfortable: *The Road* and *Zone One* have rarely been written about in tandem (see Dorson for an exception), likely due to their generic and tonal inconsistencies, as well as the gap between their authors' oeuvres and cultural positions. While both are post-apocalyptic novels that imagine the end of the world, *Zone One* is a tongue-in-cheek zombie novel, in contrast to the high seriousness of *The Road*. Throughout this chapter, I will treat both novels as speculative fiction, a category broad enough to read across McCarthy and Whitehead's non-realist fictions. The category of speculative fiction also evokes useful links between risk and speculation.[9] In its breadth, however, this category also lacks some specificity, and I will therefore largely focus on these novels as apocalyptic fictions, a speculative fiction subgenre that productively draws out *The Road* and *Zone One*'s primary similarity.

I here survey the interpretive landscape surrounding these novels in order to highlight the aforementioned single-issue criticism that has overregulated these novels' receptions and in the process neglected opportunities for reading across different forms of risk. *The Road*'s reception as a

[9] See the Uncertain Commons' chapter "Prospects" in *Speculate This!* (2013) for a discussion of the institutionalization of risk-pooling and risk-underwriting, and for a discussion of how "speculation as a form of knowledge has been hijacked in its economic materialization" (10). Ultimately, these authors suggest that "The calculative rationality of risk emerged to manage global connections between historically disparate systems, bringing them within the same enclosure" and "transforming human potentials into financial assets" (11).

climate change novel in one sense responds to its marketing. The novel was blurbed by Andrew O'Hagan of BBC Radio 4, who describes *The Road* as "The first great masterpiece of the globally warmed generation"; as well as British writer and activist George Monbiot, who deems *The Road* "the most important environmental book ever written" (n.p.). While such blurbs should be read with appropriate skepticism, the positioning of *The Road* as a climate change allegory has undoubtedly shaped how the novel has been read and received.[10] Critical responses to *The Road* have been preoccupied with an almost forensic investigation of the novel's unspecified disaster, scouring the novel for clues and landing on hypotheses ranging from asteroid strikes and nuclear winters (see Grindley, Ashford, and Christman) to divine reckoning (see Carlson, Gallivan, Josephs, Juge, Vanderheide, and Wielenberg). Others, including McCarthy himself, have argued that the specifics of the disaster's cause are unimportant. In an interview with the *Wall Street Journal*, McCarthy said of the disaster's origins, "I don't have an opinion. At the Santa Fe Institute I'm with scientists of all disciplines, and some of them in geology said it looked like a meteor to them. But it could be anything—volcanic activity or it could be nuclear war. It is not really important" (qtd. in Jurgensen n.p.). While this chapter will not join this diagnostic pile-on, my reading of *The Road* will focus on the articulation of disaster through ecological tropes, themes, and imagery. As Adeline Johns-Putra writes, "*The Road* may not be a climate-change novel, but it owes much of its cultural impact to climate change, at least to the anxieties that have accompanied it" (520).

[10] McCarthy is also embedded in actual scientific institutions (an extraliterary quality that Franzen also shares) such as the Santa Fe Institute (SFI). While this embedment falls outside the scope of this chapter, the mutual credibility traded between McCarthy and SFI is notable. For example, SFI captions its operating principles, which McCarthy drafted, "Cormac McCarthy is a Pulitzer Prize-winning author, playwright, and SFI Trustee" ("Cormac McCarthy's SFI").

Though the horror of McCarthy's novel is filtered through climate-change discourse, many of the anxieties it allegorizes might also be traced back to 9/11. Despite the novel's lack of direct reference to 9/11, *The Road* has been positioned against the backdrop of post-9/11 conceptions of risk. Tim Edwards contextualizes the novel, "a storyline that just a few short years ago would have seemed more naturally suited to the Cold War era has taken on a greater urgency in a post-9/11 world" (59). John Cant similarly argues that the novel's "apocalyptic tone reflects the mood of America following the destruction of the World Trade Centre" (266). The sense of vulnerability accompanying climate change, then, is difficult to separate from a general sense of crisis and vulnerability post-9/11. McCarthy's autobiographical reflections on the novel's genesis have also suggested 9/11's influence on his writing. In an interview with Oprah Winfrey, McCarthy describes checking into an El Paso hotel with his young son not long after 9/11.[11] Looking over the city, McCarthy dreamed of what it "might look like in fifty or a hundred years," and explains, "I just had this image of these fires up on the hill and everything being laid waste and I thought a lot about my little boy. And so I wrote those pages and that was the end of it" (qtd. in "Interview" n.p.).

Although *Zone One* has been met with less critical attention than *The Road,* it has sparked similar questions of what exactly this zombie allegory allegorizes. Such debates have centered around 9/11 and climate change, as well as racism and capitalism. Whitehead, a New Yorker himself, acknowledged in a 2011 *Publishers Weekly* interview that his novel is "tinged with 9/11": "Since 9/11, I've had a heightened sense of insecurity and anxiety, and I think that definitely plays out [in *Zone One*]," he describes (qtd. in Schulman n.p.). Beyond capturing the setting and apocalyptic mood of 9/11, Whitehead's novel also makes several direct references to the attacks. Protagonist Mark Spitz refers to the lower Manhattan military headquarters as "ground zero," and while patrolling "The old World

[11] *The Road*, like Franzen's *The Corrections,* was selected for Oprah's Book Club in 2007.

Trade Center [subway] station," he thinks to himself, "That was a long time ago, but he remembered" (Whitehead 201, 264). *Zone One* also draws parallels between zombie apocalypse and ecological apocalypse. Whitehead refers to the earth as an "asphyxiated planet," and narrates the zombie takeover at the novel's end through the rising tide of global warming (243).

The multiple reference points for these novels' imaginations of risk generate a variety of allegorical implications. In particular, this chapter draws out these novels' contrasting orientations to themes of continuity and discontinuity, both in their reception as allegories for 9/11 and climate change, and in the implications of their own apocalyptic visions. Staying with this first point momentarily, the sorting of these novels' receptions into 9/11 allegories and climate change allegories obscures the productive tension between the long and gradual arc of geologic time (the source of slow violence's slowness) and the suddenness evoked by the term "9/11" itself: a singular date whose very articulation becomes a marker of apocalyptic rupture. 9/11 thus becomes what Kristine Miller describes as a "calendrical ground zero," evoking a specific kind of temporal imagination (3). Wai Chee Dimock has similarly linked the work of the shorthand "9/11" to an American obsession with executive dates, which serve as misleading markers of arbitrary divisions: she writes, "These putative beginnings [e.g. 1620, 1776], monumentalized and held up like so many bulwarks against the long histories of other continents and the long history of America as a Native American habitat, cannot in fact fulfill their insulating function. The nation, as a segmenting device, is vulnerable for just that reason. It is constantly stretched, punctured, and infiltrated" (*Through Other Continents* 4). In the context of *Zone One* and *The Road*'s stories of apocalypse, ecological themes trouble the segmenting function of apocalyptic rhetoric itself by drawing attention to continuities that link "us" and "them," and "before" and "after."

This chapter explores *The Road* and *Zone One*'s contradictory visions of risk as the product of apocalyptic rupture and as the product of historical continuity. While both novels deploy apocalyptic tropes to manage these contradictions, the regulatory work of risk management ultimately fails: at the level of genre, these novels eventually cannibalize their own models of apocalypse; and at the level of plot, post-apocalyptic vigilance fails to maintain the barriers staving off existential threats, and both novels' endings trade security for exposure. This chapter first explores both novels' investments in the apocalyptic binaries of "us" and "them," and "before" and "after." This section reads the genre hero as risk manager and explores the articulation of apocalypse both through environmental themes and through the symbolism of the child, both of which express anxieties around futurity. The second section argues that intrusive histories of racism, over-consumption, and environmental harm disestablish the rupture constitutive of apocalypse by revealing the apocalypse as an intensifier, rather than a breach, of pre-apocalyptic life. The third section engages the formal challenges of narrating the end of the world, suggesting that both narratives self-cannibalize to evade the impossibility of writing a human account of an extinction event. The chapter's conclusion considers deep time as a corrective to the paranoia of risk management, and returns to questions of scale by exploring how allegorical readings risk conflating the end of America, and the end of the world.

RISK & APOCALYPTIC RUPTURE

In accordance with post-apocalyptic genre conventions, both *The Road* and *Zone One* manage risk by establishing a split within their fictional worlds between "us" and "them," and between "before" and "after." *Zone One* tells the story of antihero Mark Spitz, a survivor of a recent zombie apocalypse (called "the ruin") who works with a paramilitary group of "sweepers" to rid Manhattan of zombies and maintain its surrounding barricade (Whitehead 7, 12). For the surviving humans, the zombies represent the clear other: "There was a single Us now, reviling a single Them," Whitehead writes (231).

While *Zone One* stages the boundaries between "us" and "them" at the level of the species—the undead represent an existential threat to the living—*The Road* stages these boundaries at the level of the nuclear family. McCarthy's novel tells the story of a father and son's journey across post-apocalyptic America after an unspecified catastrophe. Carrying scavenged provisions in a shopping cart, the man and the boy are described as "each other's world entire," framing themselves as "good guys" who are "carrying the fire" (McCarthy 4, 81, 77). As they narrowly escape thieves, murderers, and cannibals, anyone not with them is framed as being against them, and thus as a threat. Naomi Morgenstern therefore reads *The Road*'s "psychopolitical terrain" as insisting on "what one could only call a primitive and insistent opposition between the good and the bad" (34). This schism between good and evil, however primitive, is a familiar trope in apocalyptic narrative that speaks to the connection between apocalyptic narrative and risk scenarios. As Heise writes, "Apocalyptic narrative […] can appropriately be understood as a form of risk perception" in the sense that the rupture of apocalypse itself is a generic template that "make[s] risk scenarios intelligible to the reader" (and, I would add, to the characters within apocalyptic fictions) (*Sense of Place* 139). Building on Heise's suggestion that "Narrative genres […] provide important cultural tools for organizing information about risks into intelligible and meaningful stories," I propose that apocalyptic narratives do not merely organize information about risk, but serve as tools of risk management (139).

The above proposition plays out in the novels in question, as McCarthy and Whitehead's protagonists derive their (genre) heroism through their exceptional competence as risk managers. Both novels initially heroize the hypervigilance characteristic of the risk society, as their protagonists are constantly attuned to the threats surrounding them. In *Zone One*, Mark Spitz explains the key to his survival, "[i]f you weren't concentrating on how to survive the next five minutes, you wouldn't survive them" (Whitehead 26). Pre-apocalypse, Mark Spitz "had led a mediocre life exceptional only in the magnitude of its unexceptionality […]. [He] kept his eyes open and watched his environment for cues,

a survivalist even at a tender age. There was a code in every interaction, and he tuned in" (9). His pre-apocalyptic attunement to risk allows him to transcend ordinariness when the zombies arrive: "A part of him thrived on the end of the world. How else to explain it: He had a knack for apocalypse," Whitehead writes (197).

Like Mark Spitz, McCarthy's unnamed protagonist also has a knack for apocalypse. Taking the risk society's demands of disaster preparedness to the extreme, *The Road*'s protagonist will stop at nothing to ensure his son's survival: the narrator describes, "the boy was all that stood between him and death" (McCarthy 29). The man's "survivalist insularity" is initially heroized, as he eliminates all threats to himself and his family (Gwinner 153). After killing a man on the road who threatens his child, the father describes, "My job is to take care of you. I was appointed to do that by God. I will kill anyone who touches you" (McCarthy 80). The father's hypervigilance is initially glorified as the key to his family's survival: echoing Mark Spitz's concentration on "the next five minutes," the father believes, "If trouble comes when you least expect it then maybe one thing to do is to always expect it" (Whitehead 26, McCarthy 160). Both characters' attunement to risk transforms risk as uncertainty into risk as certainty, allowing them to survive the next five minutes and beyond.

In addition to managing risk by maintaining the boundaries between "us" and "them," *The Road* and *Zone One* also feature the temporality of apocalypse, marked by the rupture between "before" and "after," and the "eternal present" of emergency. This eternal present is perhaps most famously captured by George Orwell's classic dystopian novel, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949): the protagonist describes, "Do you realize that the past, starting from yesterday, has actually been abolished? […] History has stopped. Nothing exists except an endless present" (137). These words find their echo in *The Road*: "The day providential to itself. The hour. There is no later. This is later" (McCarthy 56). Similarly, Whitehead writes, "You never heard Mark Spitz say 'When this is all over' or 'Once things get back to normal' or other sentiments of that brand, because he refused them" (26). Returning to

Anthony Giddens's commentary that "[it is] a society increasingly preoccupied with the future [...] which generates the notion of risk," both protagonists withstand the risks of the present by refusing thoughts of the future ("Risk" 3).

The irreversible break between the past and the future fundamentally alters both protagonists' identities. They must let go of not only the pre-apocalyptic world, but also their pre-apocalyptic selves in order to adapt to their new landscapes of risk. Both novels stage the loss of the old world through the symbolism of the wallet, finding unexpected echoes in each other. McCarthy describes the man parting with his wallet:

> He'd carried his billfold about till it wore a cornershaped hole in his trousers. Then one day he sat by the roadside and took it out and went through the contents. Some money, credit cards. His driver's license. A picture of his wife. He spread everything out on the blacktop. Like gaming cards. He pitched the sweatblackened piece of leather into the woods and sat holding the photograph. Then he laid it down in the road also and then he stood and they went on. (53)

After the apocalypse, the man has no conceivable need for these artifacts of the old world. The wallet's promise of identification, individuality, and access to consumption loses all meaning in an environment of sheer survival and bare life. As Morgenstern asks, notwithstanding her flippancy, "What is a man without his wallet?" (40). In *Zone One*, Mark Spitz describes the "ID collection" stage of the zombie extermination process, which involves searching through the personal effects of the undead (Whitehead 50). The narrator explains, "Too much of the dead world floating in there. The detritus that passed for identity, the particulate remains of twenty-first-century existence, fluttered down to settle at the bottoms of wallets and clutches and messenger bags. [...] The fossil evidence that there had once been other types of people besides survivors" (50-51). These signifiers are an uncanny reminder of the bygone pre-apocalyptic world, and serve to uncomfortably humanize the living-dead. The final line of this passage suggests that there are now no "other types of people besides survivors": in the face of existential risk, the distinctions of the pre-apocalyptic world have become "detritus," and in this sense empty signifiers (50-51).

Herein lies the "utopian kernel" of the risk society raised in this project's introduction: if risk becomes ubiquitous, it might also become unifying. This unifying potential sheds light on the ideological work the apocalyptic binary of "us" versus "them" performs by excluding "them" to construct a singular "us." Both novels stage this imagination of unity in the face of risk through the elimination of old markers of difference. In this sense, they reveal the end stages of Jassim's speculative prophecy as articulated in *Once in a Promised Land*: "Suppose you are flying in a tiny plane and it crashes in the desert. You are reduced to your most basic existence. It doesn't matter if you have a nice car or suit or watch. […] there is only one thing that will keep you alive. Not land. Not oil. Water" (Halaby 246). Though they depart from hydrology in particular, *The Road* and *Zone One* stage the meaninglessness of markers of status in the face of Whitehead's zombie pandemic and McCarthy's extinction event. As Whitehead describes, while once Mark Spitz had wanted "to have some sort of kick-ass job or unspecified achievement under his belt before he moved to Manhattan," "Today a rusty machete and bag of almonds made you a person of substance" (131). Yet as this chapter will argue in its latter half, the utopian kernel of the risk society never fully comes to fruition.

RISK & FUTURITY

If apocalyptic narratives are a way of managing risk, then the break between "before" and "after" articulates anxieties over futurity, including both nostalgia for the past and what Aaron DeRosa calls "nostalgia for the future" (89). While these forms of longing may seem to point in opposite directions, Evan Calder Williams's description of the promise of late capitalism clarifies their connection: that is, "the guaranteed promise of the future as the site of *more of the same*" (2). Whitehead's zombies perfectly dramatize the future as an endless repetition of the past. One category of zombies, a seemingly harmless group called "stragglers," are described as "a succession of imponderable tableaux," "an army of mannequins," doomed to an endless repetition of the past that will eventually

consume them (48). Their "lives had been an interminable loop of repeated gestures; now their existences were winnowed to this discrete and eternal moment" (50). The future as a site of more of the same is imagined not only by Whitehead's zombies, but also by the living, many of whom are afflicted with "PASD, or Post-Apocalyptic Stress Disorder" (54). The futures of survivors and zombies alike are thus doomed to consumption by the past.

Whereas the American Phoenix, *Zone One*'s provisional post-apocalyptic government, markets the future as the reconstruction of the past, Mark Spitz shuns the distractions of "[a]ll that pheenie bullshit" (26).[12] His wariness over pheenie optimism might be read as a wariness over a particular mode of futurity. As Peter Bernstein reminds us, "Risk and time are opposite sides of the same coin, for if there were no tomorrow there would be no risk," a relationship channeled in *Zone One* through the American Phoenix slogan, "We Make Tomorrow" (Bernstein 15, Whitehead 24). In contrast to this slogan, Mark Spitz refers to the Reconstruction's futurism as a "pandemic of pheenie optimism that was inescapable nowadays and made it hard to breathe, a contagion in its own right" (Whitehead 13). He identifies a parallel between the contagion of optimism and the zombie contagion, and rejects the cruel and viral optimism of a return to normalcy, a satirical vision of post-apocalyptic rebuilding that draws historical heft in evoking the Reconstruction era of the United States after the Civil War.

The many crises that anchor allegorical interpretations of *The Road* and *Zone One* are already steeped in anxieties over history and futurity. The future as a site of more of the same thus emerges as a crucial point of connection for post-9/11 and ecocritical understandings of risk: this question not only underlies discourses of late capitalism and consumption, but also discourses of sustainability. Within environmentalist discourses, sustainability has been framed as an ethic of care for the future. The United Nations' Brundtland Commission (1987) defines sustainable development as "meet[ing]

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[12] Throughout the novel, Whitehead uses the term "pheenie" as a pejorative shorthand for subscribers to the future-oriented optimism of the American Phoenix.

the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" (Brundtland 43). This definition departs from common models of capitalist development based on future discounting, whereby the more delayed into the future a debt or reward, the less it is valued ("Discounting the Future" n.p.). Appeals to future generations are not only affectively persuasive within environmentalist rhetoric, but also speak to the real fear that climate change will make the earth uninhabitable for future humans. Concerns for future generations and for children in particular are a mainstay of environmental rhetoric: NASA (National Aeronautics and Space Administration) climate scientist James Hansen, often called the "father of global warming," titled his book *Storms of My Grandchildren* (2009), while former US Vice President Al Gore ends his famous polemical movie, *An Inconvenient Truth* (2006), with the warning, "Future generations may well have occasion to ask themselves, 'What were our parents thinking? Why didn't they wake up when they had the chance?'" (Salter n.p., Gore n.p.). At the heart of such appeals is the symbolism of the child as "shorthand for the future" (Johns-Putra 520).

Nigel Clark has argued that "the event of bringing new life into being can be a flashpoint for what are otherwise more abstract, and deferrable, concerns" (158). The child, like the car accident discussed in Chapter One, becomes a narrative vehicle around which a variety of risks converge. The child orients questions of stewardship for the planet and for each other, and becomes the vehicle of shame for the inevitably negative answer to the question of whether we have cared enough. While the child is a touchstone in environmental discourses, the theme of parent-child relations has played a similar role in post-9/11 literature despite the characteristic bifurcation of these subdisciplines. The critique of the domestic turn in 9/11 literature, with its connotations of the small scale, the personal, and even the trivial, seems to foreclose symbolic readings of the child as the future. In his aforementioned description of *The Road*'s creative origins, McCarthy appeals to both ecological and

post-9/11 understandings of the child as the future: "I just had this image of these fires up on the hill and everything being laid waste and I thought a lot about my little boy" (qtd. in "Interview" n.p.).

Heeding the entanglement of questions of the earth's future and the future of humanity, both *The Road* and *Zone One* play out themes of risk and futurity through the symbolism of the child as an appeal to future generations and through the symbolism of nature as the site of future regeneration. In both novels, the natural environment physicalizes a landscape of risk that cannot be redeemed. Johns-Putra and many others have noted that the "break between past and present is a mainstay of eco-apocalyptic rhetoric," creating a barrier between "pastoral then" and "wasteland now" (25). Both novels envision this "wasteland now" through attention to the weather, which becomes not merely an aspect of setting, but an omnipresent character. In both *The Road* and *Zone One*, attention to fictional weather patterns reflects the concerns of environmentalists like Bill McKibben, who writes in *The End of Nature* (1989), which is often described as the first mainstream climate change publication, "We have changed the atmosphere and thus we are changing the weather. By changing the weather, we make every spot on earth man-made and artificial. We have deprived nature of its independence, and this is fatal to its meaning. Nature's independence *is its meaning*—without it there is nothing but us" (58).

In *Zone One*, the steady flow of zombie incineration realizes McKibben's vision of a changed atmosphere that changes the weather. Zombies are burned and chemically transformed into a "geyser of white smoke and ash," which in turn produces "a localized atmosphere" called "dead weather" (Whitehead 187, 189). In keeping with Mark Spitz's exceptional attunement to risk, he is unusually attentive to this weather pattern. Whitehead describes, "It could not be said the others in Zone One shared Mark Spitz's perception of the ash […]. But for Mark Spitz it was everywhere. In every raindrop on his skin and the pavement, sullying every edifice and muting the blue sky: the dust of the dead. It was in his lungs, becoming assimilated into his body, and he despised it" (187). While others may

ignore the steady corruption of the blue sky, Mark Spitz sees the ubiquity of the risks surrounding him, and the inevitability of risk's arrival: in becoming the air he breathes, the zombies are assimilated into the survivors, and the dead into the living. The dust and ash produced by the burning of the zombies echo McCarthy's characterizations of *The Road*'s landscape—"Dust and ash everywhere"—as well as accounts of the dust, ash, and debris that clouded the blue sky after 9/11, as explored in this project's introduction (5).[13] Further, this zombie weather enacts a form of biopolitical integration similar to that of Walt Whitman's ecopoetics, as Chapter Three will explore. We might even think of the dead being "assimilated into his [Mark Spitz's] body" as a macabre restaging of Whitman's famous line "every atom that belongs to me as good belongs to you," breaking down the barriers between the living and the dead (Whitehead 187; Whitman, "Song of Myself" 1.3).

The Road similarly explores the interrelated risk and survival of the human and natural world. Nels Anchor Christensen has pointed out that "more than fleeing the bloodcults and roadagents, the primary motivation compelling them down the road is, ultimately, the weather" (198). Indeed, the driving force for the man and the boy's journey is described as follows: "They were moving south. There'd be no surviving another winter here" (McCarthy 2). *The Road* consistently emphasizes the death of nature: just as Mark Spitz is surrounded by the "the dust of the dead," McCarthy describes, "The ashes of the late world carried on the bleak and temporal winds to and fro in the void" (Whitehead 187, McCarthy 10). In contrast to tropes of the natural world's regenerative potential, *The Road* represents the post-apocalyptic earth as performing a "cold relentless circling" within "the crushing black vacuum of the universe" (McCarthy 138). The landscape of *The Road* is empty,

[13] The resonance between *Zone One*'s zombie extermination and the 9/11 attacks is strengthened by Whitehead's description of skel bodies falling out of windows, with clear echoes of 9/11's "falling man." *The Falling Man,* a famous photograph taken by Richard Drew of the Associated Press, depicts a man falling from the World Trade Center during the 9/11 attacks, which Don DeLillo's *Falling Man* (2007) also evokes.

described by Rune Graulund as "a desert that never ends nor begins, a landscape as devoid of difference as it is of life" (61). While the road narrative is traditionally redemptive, recalling Chapter One's discussion of the association between cars and myths of American freedom, *The Road*'s journey ultimately leads nowhere and offers no relief. When the man and the boy at last reach the ocean, the end point of their voyage southward, they find only more of the same coldness, deadness, and grayness. Rather than serving as the symbolic life-giving source, the ocean has been reduced to "a slowly heaving vat of slag," the beach strewn with "the ribs of fishes in their millions stretching along the shore as far as the eye could see like an isocline of death" (McCarthy 230, 237). Just as *Zone One*'s New York City no longer offers Mark Spitz the possibility of reinvention, *The Road*'s landscape no longer offers the possibility of renewal, thwarting its generic promises.

As David Huebert points out in relation to *The Road*, "The antifantasy of a lifeless ocean is of course one of the most acute fears of environmentalist discourse […] this landscape represents the cadaver of the earth itself" (75-76). McCarthy's novel has widely been received as an elegy for nature, and an expression of grief for the death of our planet. According to Louis Palmer, *The Road* expands "the object of grief to an unthinkable level […] what is a world without nature?" (63). Yet the question of *The Road*'s object of grief merits closer attention. What exactly does McCarthy ask us to grieve for: the loss of nature itself, or nature as a symbol for the lost human world? Inger-Anne Søfting argues that the contrast between *The Road*'s lifeless, brutal setting and the tenderness between father and son is the novel's "most striking feature," suggesting that "the opposition between the land and the two main characters is the novel's discursive locus geni" (705). This contrast emerges from the novel's opening lines, "When he woke in the woods in the dark and the cold of the night he'd reach out to touch the child sleeping beside him. Nights dark beyond darkness and the days more gray each one than what had gone before" (McCarthy 1).

On one hand, we might read the dead landscape as a backdrop against which to render legible the life-giving properties of human love: specifically, parenting, and more specifically, fatherhood. This reading would reveal an intractable anthropocentrism at the heart of "the most important environmental book ever written" (Monbiot n.p.). On the other hand, the novel rightly suggests that there can be no future for humans without a future for nature, suggesting it is nature that allows us to be not only human, but humane. McCarthy straddles these two possibilities (at times uneasily), reflecting the overlapping symbolism of the child and the natural world as shorthand for the future. Michael Chabon creates connectivity between these symbols by describing *The Road* as "a testament to the abyss of a parent's greatest fears […]. And, above all, the fear of knowing—as every parent fears—that you have left your children a world more damaged, more poisoned, more base and violent and cheerless and toxic, more doomed, than the one you inherited" (n.p.). The discourses of toxic ecology express the ways in which we have already put future generations at risk, leaving behind a "damaged," "poisoned," and "toxic" world. The greatest fear becomes not only harm to the child, but our own agency and complicity in this harm.

The Road's sense of apocalyptic doom is confronted by questions of whether the man and the boy are prolonging inevitable death on an infertile earth. Many scholars have pointed out that the future in McCarthy's novel is unsustainable: despite the man's heroic efforts to manage risk, his survivalism is, as Arielle Zibrak notes, "unfounded in any real hope for the boy's future" (109). The boy himself picks up on the unlikely terms of their survival, and asks his father, "What are our long term goals?" The man can only deflect his question, asking "Where did you hear that [phrase]?" before finally admitting he does not know (McCarthy 170). The boy's question is fundamentally one of sustainability, and though the father says he does not know, the boy himself becomes the implied answer to this question. If this reading seems circular, there is indeed a circular logic to the child as shorthand for the future. As Sorensen describes, the child is a "common hedge against the narrative

closure suggested by apocalypticism" (588). The child can thus stage the question of "what are our own long term goals?" as well as become the affirmative answer to the question of whether such goals exist. While the father claims he does not know what his "long term goals" are, he has in fact already told us: "My job is to take care of you. I was appointed to do that by God" (McCarthy 80). *The Road* thus plays out responsibility for the future through responsibility for the child, engaging the question of whether the apocalypse has a future, and in particular, a future for children. Sorensen describes this proposition as the "oxymoronic premise" of many post-apocalyptic narratives (563). An existential question operating at the level of the species is thus played out through the future of one particular child. Just as Walter Berglund's salvaging of "little bits of disconnected prettiness" fails to resolve a problem of scalability in *Freedom*, the survival of McCarthy's unnamed child fails to resolve a problem of sustainability in *The Road* (Franzen 218). While the symbols of the child and the natural world are overlapping, they often point, as they do here, in multiple directions, and operate across disjunctive scales.

Notwithstanding the divergent tones of *The Road*'s elegy and *Zone One*'s satire, Whitehead's novel also engages children as symbols of sustainability, constructing children as false symbols of hope in a futureless world with nowhere to grow. In *Zone One*, Mark Spitz takes issue with the child's function as an insurance policy for a future that does not exist. At one point in the novel, three babies, dubbed the "Tromanhauser Triplets," become a branding opportunity for the American Phoenix: Whitehead writes, "New life in the midst of devastation. Corn, babies. […] To pheenies, these babies were localized hope, and they needed the Triplets to pull through. Buffalo could announce a vaccine tomorrow, or a process for reversing the tortures of the plague, and they'd still be talking Tromanhauser Triplets" (41-42). Babies are framed as just another cash crop, temporary sustenance in a world inevitably incapable of sustaining human life. The juxtaposition of "localized hope" and a "vaccine" suggests that children are themselves a form of local anesthetic, temporarily numbing

pheenies to the realities of their futurelessness. Still another layer of commentary emerges around the detail of the Triplets' birth in the vault of a "respectable international bank" (41). Their mother did not survive their delivery, and the triplets were initially at risk due to "bank literature being devoid of nutrients essential to prenatal development" (41). The emergence of these infants out of the womb and into the bank vault suggests a fungibility between biological and economic reproduction, as well as a critique of capitalist unsustainability: the triplets embody the fact that money ultimately cannot feed us, begging the question of how we will sustain ourselves on a ruined earth.

Mark Spitz—and *Zone One* more broadly—resists equating children with hope, recognizing the futility of appeals to future generations in a futureless world. In other words, he takes issue with the "oxymoronic premise" of post-apocalyptic rhetoric itself (Sorensen 563). Reading across McCarthy and Whitehead's apocalyptic fictions, we might read Mark Spitz's attitude toward children as an alternative answer to the boy's question, "What are our long term goals?" (McCarthy 170). Mark Spitz acknowledges they have no long-term goals, begging the question of what happens to the symbol of the child when there is no future. Or, conversely, what happens to the apocalypse in the presence of the child who symbolizes the future? According to *Zone One*'s vision, which confronts the contradictions at the heart of these questions, the child can only become a cynical marketing tactic and even a cruel joke.

In keeping with Mark Spitz's framing of the child as just another pheenie marketing tactic is his own refusal of reproductive futurism.[14] The narrator describes Spitz's romance with Mim, with whom he sought temporary refuge in a toy store in the early days of the zombie apocalypse:

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[14] In *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (2004), Lee Edelman defines "reproductive futurism" as "terms that impose an ideological limit on political discourse as such, preserving in the process the absolute privilege of heteronormativity by rendering un-thinkable, by casting outside the political domain, the possibility of a queer resistance to this organizing principle of communal relations" (3). *Zone One* is alert to the ways in which politics become wrapped up in better futures for our children.

> They passed the time, made the nights as lovely as they could. When they discovered they were out of condoms, she told him to pull out and they came otherwise. "Enough babies," she said. Before the plague, he'd always thought it weird when people said that, as they croaked about overpopulation, the millions of kids in want of a good home, ever-shrinking planetary resources of manifold aspect. Now Mark Spitz understood plainly what they had meant by "What kind of person would bring a child into this world" and then recited statistics about polluted water tables on the other side of the world, the asphyxiated ecosphere. The answer was, "Only a monster would bring a child into this world." (197)

Spitz's description of post-apocalyptic non-reproduction is wrapped up with themes of ecology—"shrinking planetary resources," "polluted water tables," and "the asphyxiated ecosphere"—as if the zombie apocalypse has made real the environmental nightmares that once seemed exaggerated. In other words, the zombies bring slow violence into fast focus, fulfilling the fearful fantasies of do-gooders whose "croak[ing]" could easily be mistaken for Walter Berglund's. Gerry Canavan has called the question of whether "to 'bring a child into' a zombie-ridden world" one of the "most ubiquitous and most central ethical clichés" of the zombie subgenre (444). Heeding zombies' allegorical potential, this question also dangerously veers into ecofascism. To take cues from queer theory, what kind of futures can we imagine that are not based on expansion: that is, on the future as the site of more of the same?

In both *The Road* and *Zone One,* the juxtaposition of parental care and environmental death invites easy correlations between child neglect and earthly neglect, revealing apocalyptic allegory as a transit lane for different forms of risk. As Johns-Putra describes of *The Road* in commentary that might also be extended to *Zone One, The Road* "trades, uneasily and not always logically, on contemporary collective guilt and anxiety that any care extended by this current generation to future generations is not enough, nor is it likely to endure" (531). The intersecting crises of environmental destruction, human survival, and parental care generate questions around the way we care for our children and the way we care for our earth, and even suggest that by killing the earth, we are killing our children. Environmental themes, as well as the figure of the child, thus become a productive staging ground for exploring humans' troubled relationship to risk and futurity in this moment of contemporary crisis.

APOCALYPTIC CONTINUITY

Whitehead's aforementioned comparison between the plague and the "asphyxiated ecosphere" merits closer attention for its revelation of what is at first glance a contradiction in terms: apocalyptic continuity. According to this framing, there is something isomorphic about the zombie apocalypse and global warming. Continuity thus invades, undercutting the rupture constitutive of apocalypse. Reading the apocalyptic binaries of "us" and "them," and "before" and "after" as forms of disciplining risk, as this chapter's first section has, generates productive discussions around risk and futurity. In this chapter's second section, I turn to the ultimate failure of these binaries, and thus the failure of risk management. In what follows, I will argue that the binaries of "us" and "them," and "before" and "after" are constructed only to be torn down. While the rupture of apocalypse ordinarily fractures the narrative arc of humanity within a fictional world, in *The Road* and *Zone One,* intrusive continuities reveal the apocalypse as an intensifier and accelerator of pre-apocalyptic life. In this sense, the apocalypse serves as the answer to a problem of scale: the post-apocalyptic world is revealed to be different from the pre-apocalyptic world in degree rather than in kind.

Through the intertwined themes of race, capitalism, and ecological destruction, both novels suggest an apocalyptic continuity that complicates the intrinsic rupture of apocalypse. Whitehead often draws parallels between the zombie plague and forms of monstrosity that long predate the ruin. For example, *Zone One* invites our attention to pre-apocalyptic monstrosity even at the level of architecture. Whitehead describes the "Bas-reliefs of gryphons, sea serpents, and chimaeras coil[ing] the length of the monumental old buildings, indicators of another era's idea […] of what monsters might look like" (77). *Zone One* reminds us that monsters are always already lurking within the quotidian, a monstrosity that stems from the monstrous appetites of late capitalist modernity. As Annalee Newitz writes, capitalist monsters "embody the contradictions of a culture where making a living often feels like dying" (2). Pre-apocalypse, Mark Spitz worked as a sales representative for a coffee company, where

making a living metaphorically zombified him: "When he saw meat, he pounced," Whitehead writes of his hunt for new customers (150).

More generally, New York City was trying to devour Mark Spitz long before the apocalypse, raising questions of whether the city itself, a hub of capitalist consumption, has always been a zombie form. In a flashback to Mark Spitz's first trip to New York, the narrator describes the strangers who "tried to puncture his eyeballs with their umbrella spokes and render him defenseless so they could devour him" (206). We might call this the "eat or be eaten" mantra of the megacity, revealing the flimsy boundary between past and present. Whitehead recasts New York City's associations with immigration and reinvention as symbols of death and abjection. He writes:

> The city required people to make it go. When citizens flee or die, others must replace them. As it expanded its magnificence, out over landfill or up in its multifarious and towering honeycombs, it required bodies to fill the vacancies. When the sweepers finished their mission, who would be the new residents of the island, bellies up to the boat rail, gaping as expectantly as those other immigrants who had come to the harbor, that first fodder? (59)

Here, the city is framed as a zombie with insatiable appetites, requiring the fuel of human bodies to "make it go." The logics of expansion and growth, foundational to the city and to the American doctrine of manifest destiny more broadly, are here recast as monstrous. As Sorensen writes, "The Manhattan melting pot was always an all-consuming maw" (586). New York City itself thus becomes the answer to a problem of scale. The narrator declares, "There was no other entity like New York City […]. Sure, there was the problem of scale, but Manhattan was the biggest version of everywhere. The city bragged of an endless unraveling, a grid without limit; of course it was bound and stymied by rivers, curtailed by geographical circumstance" (34). Despite nature's geographic containment of New York City, its ideology is one of endless growth. This credo of unceasing proliferation is shared by zombies, who become the only characters whose appetites can match the city's. We might trace a connection, then, between the mythology of the Empire State and the mythology of empire itself: as Bruce Holsinger writes, empire "possesses the kind of expansive corpus and massive appetite that has

always been at the center of apocalyptic discourse" (475).[15] For the empire, like the zombie, expansion is inevitable.

While on one hand, *Zone One*'s zombie apocalypse marks an irrevocable break from the past, the novel simultaneously suggests that the plague brings nothing new. Whitehead describes survivors as "'slow or incapable of forming new attachments,' or so the latest diagnoses droned, although a cynic might identify this as a feature of modern life merely intensified or fine-tuned with the introduction of the plague" (53). The plague seems best read as an intensifier, rather than the origin, of the injuries of modern life. Whitehead summons New York infrastructural history, narrating the zombie disposal process. "They loaded the dead. The rains washed the blood after a time. The New York City sewer system in its bleak centuries had suffered worse" (78). The zombie apocalypse thus marks one location along a continuum of toxic histories, and in this sense is unexceptional: humans have always been monstrous. Just as humans have always been monstrous, the monsters remain somewhat indistinguishable from humans. Post-apocalypse, Mark Spitz notes, "Manhattan was empty except for soldiers and legions of the damned […] and already gentrification had resumed" (29). He later describes the zombies' death march as a "commute" that continues posthumously, "so hardwired was the custom" (188). Disaster capitalism marches forward, and old habits die hard, even for the undead. As the narrator satirizes, "New York City in death was very much like New York City in life" (64).

Zone One's toxic discourses further its indictment of the past as already monstrous. Mark Spitz comments on the post-apocalyptic rain, with its traces of skel ash: "This was not stuff you wanted on your skin." Whitehead writes: "It reminded Mark Spitz of when he visited his cousins in Florida and he emerged from the ocean with brown globs of oil on his chest and legs, the stuff still drifting ashore

[15] In this commentary, Holsinger is responding to Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri's *Empire* (2000).

so long after the big spill" (63).[16] Long after the spill itself, the oil remains, a zombie presence reflecting human carelessness and toxicity. In other words, humans were killing the earth long before zombies arrived. While parallels between the zombie apocalypse and the ecological apocalypse function in *Zone One* as what Kate Marshall calls "an ever-present joke, as if the survivors are constantly wondering whether the plague was in fact the work of a planetary immune system," Whitehead is also careful to distinguish between them (532). He notes that the weather system of zombie ash "did not shroud the metropolis" nor "taint the air in any sickening measure. A skel bonfire or kerosene party probably sent more toxic stuff into the air," drawing attention to the toxic pollution of human (or in this case, formerly human) activities (Whitehead 187). "It's terrible," one sweeper comments, and clarifies, "The environment" (190). As with Walter and Patty Berglund's confusion over the "we" that is "heading for catastrophe" in Franzen's *Freedom*, the object of monstrosity in *Zone One* is in constant need of clarification (405-06).

While the zombies and the weather are in some senses co-constructed in *Zone One*, Whitehead explicitly notes the representational divergences between the crisis of zombies and the crisis of global warming. He writes:

> That other, less flamboyant, more deliberate ruination altering the planet's climate had been under way for more than a hundred years, squeezing milder winters into the Northeast. People got used to it […] the nightly news footage of the venerable ice shelf splashing into the frigid seas, squeezed in if there were no more pressing outrages, or a celebrity death. […] The survivors endured the tandem disasters in their refuges, without the solace of warmer days. (193-94)

Whitehead draws attention to the scales of violence accompanying the planet's varying ruinations, characterizing climate change as a "less flamboyant" and "more deliberate" crisis than the zombie pandemic. This comparison calls upon theories of slow violence, juxtaposing the spectacle of the

[16] Through his reference to Florida, Whitehead may be invoking the history and imagery of the Deepwater Horizon oil spill. *Zone One* was published a year after this 2010 industrial disaster, considered the largest marine oil spill in history (see "Deepwater" n.p.).

zombie apocalypse (perhaps a self-reflexive jab at genre fiction itself) with the unspectacular but steady march of climate change, a crisis overshadowed by "more pressing outrages," and even "celebrity death[s]" (193-94). Whitehead thus points out the arbitrariness of the very ways we assess risk. While climate change may be less spectacular than zombies, Whitehead distinguishes it as a "more deliberate ruination," contrasting the planetary disaster of humans' own making with the inexplicable horror of the zombie plague. Despite these points of contrast, Whitehead still characterizes the zombie crisis and the climate crisis as "tandem disasters," where the juxtaposition of risk brings the specificity of each crisis, as well as the challenges of its resolution, into relief.

Just as Whitehead locates the zombie apocalypse along a continuum of human monstrosity, McCarthy uses motifs of environmental destruction and cannibalism to indicate a continuum of excessive human consumption. These themes are not only metaphorically connected, but linked through the ecological web of *The Road*'s fictional food chain. According to Ben De Bruyn, McCarthy proffers the warning, "If we continue to carelessly fill our shopping carts and to ignore the environmental problems which force some of us today to wear mouth masks […] our children may have to wear masks everywhere and carry their entire world in a grocery cart, like fundamentally homeless vagrants" ("Borrowed Time" 780). De Bruyn suggests that *The Road*'s apocalypse projects humanity into the late stages of environmental neglect, and Özden Sözalan similarly contends that "the whole novel can be read as a dark parody of consumerism, a shopping venture in dire circumstances […] driven by an irresistible urge for consumption" (94). For all *The Road*'s gravity, McCarthy occasionally seems to invite such parodic readings, casting his earthly stragglers as "shoppers in the commissaries of hell" (192). Despite the apparent rupture of the ruined earth, McCarthy's reference to survivors as "shoppers" generates readings of the similarities between pre- and post-apocalyptic life. In the cases of both *The Road* and *Zone One*, themes of consumption become yet another point of connection for post-9/11 analysis and ecocriticism.

Turning toward the connection between cannibalism and ecocriticism, Huebert's notion of "ecological cannibalism" is instructive (67). He argues that humans are ecological cannibals insofar as they "excessively devour their own planetary body": even before McCarthy's fictional cannibals confront us with excessive abjection, humanity as a species was "already engaged in the act of eating itself" (67). Huebert's reading of *The Road* casts the man and the boy not as innocent victims of the apocalypse, but as "inheritors of the legacy of grocery stores, gasoline, and roads—a legacy that has turned the world into the corpse on which they now gnaw" (76). In this sense, humans' pre-apocalyptic ecological cannibalism and post-apocalyptic intra-species cannibalism share the same logic of unsustainability: just as human consumption renders the earth incapable of sustaining human life, human cannibalism only hastens the extinction to which it responds.

Beyond suggesting that consumption finds its apotheosis in cannibalism, *The Road* also intertwines with cannibalism the history of American slavery. As the man and the boy enter a house looking for food, the narrator describes, "Chattel slaves had once trod those boards bearing food and drink on silver trays" (McCarthy 112). McCarthy productively calls attention to the barbaric history of transatlantic slavery, as well as its ongoing legacies. As Sözalan reminds us, "the place of loving family has always been maintained at the cost of other lives" (100). American domesticity—symbolized here by the plantation house and the silver tray—has never been a refuge for everyone, as Halaby's novel also suggests. Though McCarthy does not go so far as to establish a direct parallel between slavery and cannibalism, this resonance nonetheless evokes Stanley Cavell's "perception, or vision, that slavery is a form of cannibalism" (116). McCarthy's reference to histories of slavery undercuts the rupture of his apocalyptic world, suggesting that cannibalism is not the last resort of the abject future, but has always been a part of our past.

Racial capitalism thus becomes an inevitable point of connection for this discussion of the cannibal and the zombie. Like the cannibal, the figure of the zombie is steeped in critiques of human

consumption, and entwined with histories of slavery. The zombie has been called the "human face" of capitalism, and monster stories in general are a favorite allegory for American economic life (Shaviro 288). Karl Marx even points toward this connection when he states, "capital is dead labor, which, vampire-like, lives only by sucking living labor, and lives the more, the more labor it sucks" (342). Marx's vampire simile might also be extended to the zombie. In popular zombie films like George Romero's *Dawn of the Dead* (1978), the zombie "stand[s] for [the] capitalist drone," physicalizing our fears of "enslavement by an economic system or institution" (Lauro and Embry 86; Golub and Lane 47).

The zombie's connection to enslavement is not merely metaphorical. The mythical figure of the zombie itself can be traced back to the Haitian sugar plantations of the nineteenth century (see K. Thomas).[17] As Marina Warner writes, zombies "embody a vision of human existence that was precipitated by a chemical fusion of slavery, its abolition and its reinstatement, excited and fired in the kiln of poisoned power relations" (357). Now standing in for the "capitalist drone," Sarah Juliet Lauro and Karen Embry point out that "The zombie has thus transitioned from a representation of the laboring, enslaved colonial body, to a dual image of capitalist enslavement" (99). While this dual image of enslavement risks generalizing a very particular history, of significance here is how the zombie's past haunts scholars who argue the zombie is "nothing but surface" (Hurley "History" 315). The zombie's entrance into western popular culture with the rise of film in the 1930s made few references to its original context.[18] Nonetheless, as Hurley argues, the zombie always "brings with it its own history: a history of racialized slavery, and a history of how that history is suppressed" ("History" 318).

[17] Kette Thomas traces the movement of the zombie from West Africa to Haiti, arguing that "zombification practices would find expression in discourse associated with compromised subjectivities that resulted from imperialism and slavery" (2).
[18] The zombie has historically appeared more frequently within the visual media of film, television, and even comic books, than it has in the novel. As Hurley argues, the zombie-as-surface suggests a "visual logic at something of a remove from our usual reading practices" ("History" 315).

The intrusive histories of McCarthy's cannibals and Whitehead's zombies pose significant challenges to the seemingly incontrovertible apocalypticism of these novels, subverting the clear division of "before" and "after," and "us" and "them," and exposing the failures of such schismatic modes of risk management.

As this discussion has illustrated, despite *The Road* and *Zone One*'s clear investments in representing rupture, continuity invades. Yet an apocalypse that is simultaneously an extension of the past is a contradiction in terms: continuity disestablishes the rupture constitutive of apocalypse. This incongruity is generative, and complicates these novels' webs of allegorical meanings, as well as their visions of risk and agency. If, as Franco Moretti would say, "The monster expresses the anxiety that the future will be monstrous," curbing the monstrous future that the zombie and cannibal forbode necessitates clarifying these novels' understandings of cause and effect ("The Dialectic of Fear" 84). While neither novel addresses the original cause of their apocalypse, McCarthy suggests that human consumption taken to its extreme may have ravaged the earth. Whitehead also flirts with ideas of "apocalypse-as-moral-hygiene," as "Comeuppance for a flatlined culture," and as a way to get "rid of the extra population," though the narrative does not explicitly condone these visions (124, 217, 217). The multiplicity of the crises these novels engage both invites and complicates allegorical readings, the shifting locus of which produces some potentially unsavory effects: calls to action against ecocide contain the seeds of ecofascism, and reckonings with human agency contains the seeds of victim blaming. As Joshua Rothman writes in an article titled "The Unsettling Arrival of Speculative 9/11 Fiction," a category into which *The Road* and *Zone One* arguably fall:

> We all know that, factually and morally, Matt Taibbi's famous description of Goldman Sachs in *Rolling Stone*—"a great vampire squid wrapped around the face of humanity"—has nothing to do with the murder of thousands of innocent people on 9/11. […] All the same, even as the possibility of that connection is denied, it's there, hovering in the mental atmosphere. Fiction, like a thunderstorm, precipitates it. (n.p.)

Fiction thus creates its own atmosphere and weather system, one often unable to be forecast. Rothman predicts that eventually, post-9/11 speculative fictions will "float free" of their assumed referent, and "As a result, they'll become less unsettling and troubling. They'll end up being about 'something else'" (n.p.). *Zone One* and *The Road*'s reception histories may document this process of becoming about "something else." Alternately, and perhaps more convincingly, to be "about" 9/11 is to inevitably implicate a wider field of reference points, often with unsettling effects. Divergent visions of human agency in texts like *Zone One* and *The Road* construct a generative area of inquiry, yet also pose a critical problem for the task of uniting the critical camps of ecocriticism and post-9/11 analysis, as these visions collide within webs of allegorical meaning.

Both novels use the urgency of risk management—concentrating on "how to survive the next five minutes" in Whitehead's words, and "always expect[ing]" trouble in McCarthy's—to paper over the suggestiveness of their allegories (Whitehead 26, McCarthy 160). In one particularly suggestive passage, Whitehead directly confronts those who frame the plague as "divine-retribution," peddling their message like "umbrella salesmen standing outside a subway entrance in a downpour" (124). According to these salesmen, "the human race deserved the plague, we brought it on ourselves for poisoning the planet, for the Death of God, the calculated brutalities of the global economic system, for driving primordial species to extinction: the entire collapse of values as evidenced by everything from nuclear fission to reality television to alternate side of the street parking" (124). Like the lectures of Franzen's Walter Berglund, this exhaustive list intends to exhaust its reader, and even "Mark Spitz could only endure these harangues for a minute or two before he split. It was boring. The plague was the plague. You were wearing galoshes, or you weren't" (125). By insisting that speculative harangues around the apocalypse's origins are "boring," Whitehead encodes within his novel a refusal of certain explanatory modes of reading. We might read this passage as indicating exhaustion with such readings not only within but also beyond the world of his novel, particularly in light of literary criticism's

frequent engagement in an almost forensic exploration of the causes of fictional apocalypse. In part, this exploration is consistent with the didactic, moralizing leanings of the apocalyptic and dystopian genres: as Fátima Vieira describes, "images of the future are put forward as real possibilities because the utopist wants to frighten the reader and to make him realize that things may go either right or wrong, depending on the moral, social and civic responsibility of the citizens" (17). While identifying future risks suggests a strategy of prevention, both *The Road* and *Zone One* seem to internally resist such readings, focusing not on preventing risk but on surviving its arrival. The question becomes not one of blame and retribution, nor even one of deterrence, but rather one of galoshes: in other words, a question of dressing for the weather, and a question of adaptation.

NARRATING THE END OF THE WORLD:

Both *The Road* and *Zone One* find narrative closure through a shift from risk management to adaptation. Heise might articulate this shift as a turn from the apocalyptic perspective to the risk perspective. She describes, "In the apocalyptic perspective, utter destruction lies ahead but can be averted and replaced by an alternative future society; in the risk perspective, crises are already underway all around, and while their consequences can be mitigated, a future without their impact has become impossible to envision" (*Sense of Place* 142). Far past the point of prevention, the endings of *The Road* and *Zone One* both seem to point with certainty toward the end of the world. Rather than framing apocalypse as a crisis to be overcome, these novels offer neither solutions nor redemption from the inexhaustible zombie horde and the cannibal-ridden wasteland. In this final section, I argue that instead of urging preventative action, suggesting the utopian perfectibility of society post-crisis or a resolution of grief through violence, both novels ultimately trade risk management for an acceptance of risk.

Both novels renegotiate their relationship to risk through the collapse of their apocalyptic binaries and barriers. In *Zone One,* the breakdown of barriers begins with the collapse of the wall surrounding Manhattan that has staved off the zombies. Whitehead writes, "When the wall fell, it fell quickly, as if it had been waiting for this moment, as if it had been created for the very instant of its failure" (219). Of course, the wall has indeed been created for this very instant. Barriers are iconic tropes in the zombie genre, fortified only to fail, the Chekhov's gun of monster stories. As Canavan succinctly summarizes, "[t]he *telos* of the fortress, like the telos of empire, is always, in the end, to fall" (445). Soren Forsberg has pointed out that while "apocalypse" often implies closure, the original sense of the word points toward disclosure, a moment of revelation (134). Shortly after the wall falls, the novel offers still another revelation with the disclosure that Mark Spitz is Black. Toward the novel's end, Mark Spitz's colleague Gary asks, "Why do they call you Mark Spitz?" (230). He describes his namesake, a decorated white Olympic swimmer, and adds to his explanation, "Plus the black-people-can't swim thing" (231). This is the first explicit mention of Mark Spitz's race, over two-hundred pages into the novel.

This revelation reframes *Zone One* as, in Hurley's words, "a kind of meta-passing novel" that "buries blackness exactly where we can't see it: right there, on the surface" ("History" 321; see also Heneks 58).[19] While apocalyptic fictions often smooth over difference by uniting humans against a common enemy—Whitehead's "single Us […] reviling a single Them"—the exposure of Mark Spitz's race reasserts difference, complicating this binary from within (231). Mark Spitz's "knack for

[19] There is a distinctly visual quality to the passing narrative, a negotiation of recognition that Patricia Hill Collins has described as "simultaneous invisibility and hypervisibility" (7). Whitehead's earlier novel *The Intuitionist* (2000) also takes up questions of racial passing. Despite the tendency for zombies to take more easily to the screen than to the page, Hurley makes the interesting point that Mark Spitz's passing narrative "makes it impossible to imagine a movie adaptation of *Zone One,* as if one goal of this racial hide-and-reveal structure was to underscore the difference between this literary zombie novel and its frequently adapted comrades in genre fiction" ("History" 331).

apocalypse" is thus suggestively recast as a means of navigating a white supremacist world, full of existential risks long predating the zombie apocalypse (Whitehead 197). At the moment of revelation, the implications of Mark Spitz's identity—as a "survivalist even at a tender age," his attunement to the "code in every interaction," and even his observation that "It was still hard to get a cab" after the zombie apocalypse—take on new meaning, prompting rereading (9, 9, 64). Further, the restoration of Mark Spitz's race in the seemingly post-racial present of Whitehead's novel restores the racial past of the zombie itself.

Just as the barriers of zombie stories inevitably collapse, so too do the boundaries between the living and the dead. As Canavan writes, "no matter how long they [the zombies] have been gone from the action, we are always awaiting their eventual, inevitable return" (445). In the case of *Zone One*, not only does the zombie become the protagonist, but the protagonist becomes the zombie. The novel's last scene depicts Manhattan's deluge by the dead, who pour through the streets like rain: "they were really coming down out there," Mark Spitz thinks (258). In keeping with Whitehead's aqueous arsenal of zombie metaphors, the novel's last lines narrate Mark Spitz committing himself to the horde of monsters: "Fuck it, he thought. You have to learn how to swim sometime. He opened the door and walked into the sea of the dead" (259). The novel's end witnesses a breakdown of the binaries between "us" and "them," and between the living and the dead.

Mark Spitz's walking into the sea of the dead reflects his changed attitude in the face of risk. As Canavan writes, "[t]o become a zombie would be to obliterate the line dividing 'us' from 'them' by allowing ourselves to be fully and finally devoured by alterity" (450). Releasing the mandates of his paramilitary training, his transformation ends his zombie crusade: as David Simpson has elsewhere written of the war on terror, "war cannot easily survive the capacity to imagine oneself in the body of the other" (99). Mark Spitz's embodiment of "the other" transcends imagination as he resolves his war against zombies not through violence but through adaptation: in other words, as Hurley points

out, through his "superpower" of assimilation ("History" 322). Just as Mark Spitz has survived among the living, he will survive among the dead. Recalling *Zone One*'s earlier description of zombie ash "becoming assimilated into [his] body," Mark Spitz now assimilates the zombie body and his own body, offering himself once again to Manhattan's monstrous melting pot, this time comprised of zombies (Whitehead 187). His transformation thus renegotiates risk, navigating the existential zombie threat not by taking "them all down" but by "open[ing] the door and walk[ing] into the sea of the dead" (148, 259).

Though many scholars have compellingly appraised the ending of *Zone One*, the relationship between the passing narrative and his biopolitical integration—that is, the narrative proximity of Mark Spitz's "becoming" Black and "becoming a zombie"—remains somewhat unresolved. Returning to the unsettling effects of speculative fiction, this eventual bodily assimilation points in many directions given the many reference points for *Zone One*'s allegorical readings. As Forsberg writes, "On first glance, the notion that racist beliefs and the living dead are basically two flappy parts of the same cretinous cadaver is as striking as it is disgusting" (135). At the same time, Whitehead's novel seems to invite associations between social death (see Patterson) and living death. While Mark Spitz's zombification raises questions that remain unresolved within *Zone One*'s pages, his transformation undoubtedly offers several unique affordances to the novel, both narratively and politically, which this chapter's conclusion will shortly engage.

Just as Mark Spitz trades risk management for an acceptance of risk by becoming a zombie, the boy of *The Road* also develops an alternative vision for greeting the end of the world. In response to his father's fanatical protectionism, the son begins to question the boundary between the "good guys" and "bad guys." After each act of supposed self-defense, the boy questions his father, "Are we still the good guys?" (McCarthy 81). The son implores his father to help a man struck by lightning and to share their food with a fellow traveler, developing his own ethic of collectivity (51, 178-82). After

they are robbed, the father confiscates the thief's clothes and possessions in retaliation, justifying, "I'm going to leave you the way you left us" (276). When the boy objects, the man replies, "I wasnt going to kill him" (278). Yet the boy understands, "But we did kill him" (278). The boy's sense of relationality and responsibility begins to extend beyond the easy binary of good and evil, and beyond the immediate simplicity of cause and effect. Toward the novel's end, he no longer wants to hear his father's "Old stories of courage and justice," protesting, "in the stories we're always helping people and we dont help people" (42, 287). Thus, the boy outgrows the binaries of his father's "good guys" and "bad guys" myths.

Despite his father's heroic portrayal, the son's more relational ethics are ultimately rewarded: after his father's death toward the novel's end, the boy's outward gaze saves his life. When a *deus ex machina* stranger appears on the road, the boy tries to assess the risks surrounding him:

> How do I know you're one of the good guys?
> You dont. you'll have to take a shot.
> Do you have any kids?
> We do.
> And you didnt eat them.
> No. […]
> And I can go with you?
> Yes. You can.
> Okay then.
> Okay. (303)

Taken in by kindred spirits, the boy joins this family of a man and a woman, a little boy and a little girl. Though the boy asks about the presence of children and the absence of cannibalism, his primary markers of goodness, he ultimately has to "take a shot" and trust this stranger (303). Many scholars seem invested in framing the resolution of the boy's journey as hopeful due to its possibilities of reproductive futurism (see Graulund 72, Noble 106, and Søfting 712). Such readings once again mobilize the child as a "hedge against […] narrative closure" (Sorensen 588). As Canavan describes, "the function of women in most apocalyptic narratives is to code the ending as 'happy' or 'sad' based on their continued availability to bear the male protagonist's children when the story is over" (444).

While a reproductive dead end may have been conveniently foreclosed, I prefer to locate hope in collectivity rather than heterosexual reproduction, not only to bolster (much-needed) queer and feminist analysis of *The Road*, but also because according to the novel's own internal vision, human fertility will never override an infertile earth. What seems significant at *The Road*'s end is not the affirmation of reproductive futurism, but rather the affirmation of collectivity and exposure as meaningful ethics, even at the end of the world, suggesting possibilities beyond bare life. This message takes on particular significance given McCarthy's own commentary on human and environmental risk. In a *Rolling Stone* interview, McCarthy warns, in response to questions of environmental catastrophe, "We're going to do ourselves in first" (qtd. in Kushner n.p.). In other words, we will destroy each other before we destroy the planet that will, in turn, destroy us.

As Henry James suggested at the turn of the twentieth century, the "question of the novel's future becomes one with that of the future of the total swarm. How are the generations to face, at all, the monstrous multiplications?" (*Future* 245). Anxieties around the future of fiction are thus linked to the uncertain future of its consumers: in the post-9/11, globally warmed era, texts like *Zone One* and *The Road* question what future humans and the novel might have, and offer commentary on these questions through their novels' endings. Whitehead suggests humans' incapacity to recognize and narrate their changing world. Just before Mark Spitz joins the zombies, he describes:

> He didn't know if the world was doomed or saved, but whatever the next thing was, it would not look like what came before […]. It refused the shapes Mark Spitz conjured in his visions of reinvention in the big city […]. Why they'd tried to fix this island in the first place, he did not see now. Best to let the broken glass be broken glass, let it splinter into smaller pieces and dust and scatter. Let the cracks between things widen until they are no longer cracks but the new places for things. That was where they were now. The world wasn't ending: it had ended and now they were in the new place. They could not recognize it because they had never seen it before. (257-58)

In contrast to futurist narratives of overcoming apocalypse, Whitehead suggests doomsday has already arrived: either its unimaginable difference renders it fundamentally unintelligible, or its unimaginable sameness renders it fundamentally invisible.

While McCarthy and Whitehead's endings gesture toward new ethics by renegotiating their relationship to risk, both novels are unable to disclose what comes next in the texts' implied future. In complicating Mark Spitz's vision of reinvention, *Zone One* speaks to Peter Boxall's sense that "the narrative mechanics which have allowed us to negotiate our being in the world, to inherit our pasts and to bequeath our accumulated wisdom to the future, have failed" (217). In other words, *Zone One* implies a future that can no longer be the site of "*more of the same*," and that therefore refuses pre-existing narratives (Williams 2). The crisis of the future, in this sense, is inseparable from a crisis of narration. As genres function precisely by "look[ing] like what came before," the unknowability of *Zone One*'s post-human future speaks to a generic challenge in finding narrative closure for a story that does not yet exist (Whitehead 258). The future seems to refuse not only "the shapes Mark Spitz conjured in his visions of reinvention," but also the shapes that Whitehead might conjure. What genre models exist for narrative closure in a world that "would not look like what came before" (258)? Whitehead offers his own tongue-in-cheek evasion of this question, describing the plague's "knack for narrative closure" (130). The zombie's limitless hunger eventually consumes the narrative, overpowering the American Phoenix's competing narrative of rebirth and even Mark Spitz's survival story, and offering what Sorensen calls "radical narrative closure": Mark Spitz's zombification coincides with the end of his narration (560). In this sense, as the novel self-cannibalizes, *Zone One* circumvents the challenge of narrating what the "world-without-us" will look like, to borrow Eugene Thacker's term (5).

The Road's ending, too, thwarts expectations around narrating what might come next. After the father's death and the boy's rescue by another family, the narrative shifts to a time and place yet unseen. In what has often been described as a coda, McCarthy includes a final paragraph that is worth quoting at length:

> Once there were brook trout in the streams and in the mountains. You could see them standing in the amber current where the white edges of their fins wimpled softly in the flow. They smelled of moss in your hand. Polished and muscular and torsional. On their backs were vermiculate patterns that were maps of the world in its becoming. Maps and mazes. Of a thing which could not be put back. Not be made right again. In the deep glens where they lived all things were older than man and they hummed of mystery. (306-07)

In essay after essay, scholars question whether McCarthy provides refuge from the "feverland" of his own creation, and question whether the novel offers redemption, or even hope (28). While I take Shelly Rambo's lead in moving past the assumption that "Either there is redemption or there is not," it is worth engaging with the question of why McCarthy returns to pastoral lyricism at the end of so much horror (106). Many scholars interpret this return by reading the end of the novel as a revival of hope (see Kunsa). Yet falling back upon the stabilization and regeneration of the natural world, a long-established ecological trope that will be explored further in Chapter Three, seems questionable within *The Road*'s internal landscape, in which the natural world itself has lost signifying power. As Kenneth Brandt argues, *The Road*'s scorched earth can "no longer function as a redemptive field" (64). Just as Whitehead's zombies disrupt Mark Spitz's "parable of his journey back to the city," the loss of the natural world disrupts the redemption of ecological revelry in McCarthy's coda (257).

Furthering the case against reading McCarthy's coda as redemptive, the novel cautions that these brook trout represent "a thing which could not be put back. Not be made right again" (McCarthy 307). The coda does not imagine the trout's eventual return, but rather engages in what Huebert calls "elegiac protomourning," acknowledging the irreversible reality of loss (66). The description of the trout that could not be "put back" nor "made right again" echoes an earlier description of the boy's reaction to witnessing cannibalism (McCarthy 307). After a narrow escape, the boy appears

traumatized, and his father "very much feared that something was gone that could not be put right again" (144). The parallels between the trout and the boy recall my earlier discussion of environmental harms as tropes for anthropocentric anguishes: perhaps *The Road* invokes the exterior, large-scale ruination of nature to remedy the representational challenges of the interiority of human trauma, or perhaps it enlists a grievable boy as a proxy for the natural world we seem incapable of grieving. These questions remain unresolved, in part due to the interpretive entanglement of nature and the child, which, as this chapter has discussed, are both powerful apparatuses of articulating a loss of innocence: neither can be set "right again" (144). Tim Edwards suggests that *The Road* instructs readers that the "seemingly Edenic past seems to carry in it, somehow, the seeds of its own destruction" (58). Here, we might extend zombie critics' reminder that the "[t]he telos of the fortress […] is always, in the end, to fall," advising us that the telos of Eden is always, in the end, to be lost (Canavan 445).

While the back-to-nature thrust of *The Road*'s coda does not overturn its focus on human survival in an unsustainable world, it crucially bends away from anthropocentrism, elegizing not the humans doomed to a dying earth, but rather the brook trout and "all things […] older than man" (307). If McCarthy's coda does not signal that everything will be "okay" for the human protagonists, to use the novel's own phatic mantra, then what is its function? I suggest that McCarthy resorts to ecocriticism's interests in the long arc of geologic time, a temporal shift that serves not to remedy human suffering, but to reframe its scale. Just as Whitehead's novel cleverly evades the narrative challenges posed by zombification, McCarthy's coda circumvents the impossible conceit of writing a human account of an extinction event. This elegiac coda brings the reader back to a time before total extinction, urging the recognition that there was a time before humanity: by extension, there will also be a time after.

As Hurley writes, "In the world of deep time, all that *might* come to pass *will* come to pass, sooner or later. The endless *maybes* of risk become certainties" ("Impossible Futures" 763).[20] While McCarthy and Whitehead's novels are widely considered allegories for various contemporary crises, we might also consider whether these novels move beyond the paranoia of the risk society by, paradoxically, taking this logic to the extreme. *Zone One* reflects the inability to escape consumption by the zombie apocalypse, and zombification comes to pass. Similarly, *The Road*'s coda reflects the contingency of the human mark on the geologic record, de-emphasizing the precariousness of the man and the boy's struggle for life. These endings' temporal shifts produce curiously non-anxious ways of reading these zombie- and cannibal-ridden survival stories. Just as if the future has already arrived, anxiety loses its hold; in becoming a certainty, risk loses its riskiness. Both novels' endings thus let go of fantasies of control and risk management. Instead, they advocate, "you'll have to take a shot" and "You have to learn how to swim sometime," exchanging survivalism for surrender and hypervigilance for exposure (McCarthy 303, Whitehead 259).

POST-HUMAN PROBLEMATICS: A CODA

To conclude this chapter, I turn to questions of what these novels mean when they say the world is ending. Disrupting the redemptive promises of apocalyptic narratives is generative, both narratologically and politically. Considering humans according to the deontology of the Anthropocene and the scales of deep time facilitates species-wide self-reflexivity, yet simultaneously risks producing a "wishful ecology" that understates the unresolved business of human difference (Evernden 16). As Dipesh Chakrabarty has rightfully questioned of the Anthropocene, "who is the 'we' of this process?" (10). By extension, who is the "us" of Thacker's "world-without-us" and McKibben's "nothing but

[20] Here, Hurley is writing about Leslie Marmon Silko's *Almanac of the Dead* (1991), but I extend her analysis to McCarthy and Whitehead.

us" (Thacker 5, McKibben 58)? The apocalyptic binaries of "us" and "them" merit further scrutiny not only in novels, but also in theory. While the plagues of zombies and cannibals may be motivated by indiscriminate hunger, real crises are always unevenly distributed.

Taking up these questions of the "we" and the "us," in this chapter's conclusion, I consider whether *The Road* and *Zone One* unwittingly conflate the end of America and the end of the world. These novels suggestively rewrite narratives of American futurity bound up with myths of American exceptionalism—the move-to-New-York story, the western, and the road narrative. In staging the deaths of these narratives, both *Zone One* and *The Road* take up the meta-literary questions of the limitations of the apocalyptic novel in grappling with crisis. Whitehead writes of the Reconstruction command post, "Rumor was they had two of the last Nobel laureates working on things up there—useful ones, none of that Peace Prize or Literature stuff" and elsewhere describes, "All the writers were busy pouring kerosene on the heaps of the dead, pitching in for a change" (35, 41-42). While we can never take this Pulitzer Prize-winning writer's mockery of literature completely seriously, Whitehead nevertheless raises questions of what writing has to offer in moments of crisis (his own writing cannot help but become the implied answer to this question).[21] *Zone One*'s zombie-inflected commentary thus echoes Martin Amis's description of the project of post-9/11 writing—"a feeling of gangrenous futility had infected the whole corpus"—as well as Mark McGurl's suggestion that the novel itself has become a "zombie genre" (Amis n.p., McGurl n.p.). *The Road*, too, depicts a linguistic and literary extinction, a world that has "lost its referential value" (Sözalan 10). The father and son often stumble upon forgotten books' remains. McCarthy writes, "They scrabbled through the charred ruins of houses […]. A corpse floating in the black water of a basement […]. Soggy volumes in a

[21] Whitehead won the 2017 Pulitzer Prize for Fiction for *The Underground Railroad* (2016). While of course this postdates *Zone One*, it highlights the enduring satire of Whitehead's meta-literary commentary.

bookcase" (138). The juxtaposition of the floating corpse and soggy volumes creates parallels between threats both existential and literary.

In this sense, these texts in the end self-cannibalize: as Sorensen writes in commentary that might be extended to *The Road* as well, *Zone One* imagines the "zombie apocalypse as the ending of all stories" (562). In expanding their apocalyptic visions to the level of all stories and to the level of the species, these texts cannot help but overlay critiques of American exceptionalism and human exceptionalism. As Morgenstern writes of *The Road*'s coda, "Can patriarchy narrate its own death? And can it do so in anything other than an elegiac mode that serves, finally, to reinforce its fantasy of immortality?" (33). Meanwhile, zombie crises are always already self-cannibalizing, marking the end of all stories accessible to us. In both novels, then, American falls and failures are articulated through stories of total human extinction and zombification. This synecdochic suggestion of America-as-the-world seems to fortify the consuming American exceptionalism these novels attempt to disrupt.

Despite the slippage between the scales of America and the world, might there still be a "utopian kernel" in these stories of risk coming to pass? A question posed by *Zone One* might help illuminate this question. Mark Spitz wonders, just before committing himself to the zombie horde, "Would the old bigotries be reborn as well, when they cleared out this Zone, and the next, and so on […]? Or was that particular bramble of animosities, fears, and envies impossible to recreate? If they could bring back paperwork, Mark Spitz thought, they could certainly reanimate prejudice, parking tickets, and reruns. There were plenty of things in the world that deserved to stay dead, yet they walked" (231). As Jamie Russell notes of the zombie genre, and as applies to *Zone One* here, "the old order is overturned without anything being offered in its place" (83). Whitehead's narrative suggests a new beginning, yet "whatever the next thing was" never appears on the page (257). Similarly, *The Road* seems to affirm collectivism at the end of the world, suggesting a renewed humanity that transcends individual survivalism. Yet the narrative ends before this alternative vision is realized. While *The Road*

and *Zone One* productively conjure a future that does not "look like what came before," they offer no alternative vision (Whitehead 257).

While I earlier read these endings as the solutions to narrative challenges, I here suggest that these narrative challenges also reflect a larger imaginative challenge: how to construct a new ending from old stories? As Ramón Saldívar writes, "Whitehead proposes that it may well be […] necessary first to imagine the end of the world before we may imagine the historical end of racialization and racism" (13). Extending this commentary to McCarthy, *The Road* proposes that it may be necessary to first imagine the end of the world before we may imagine the end of overconsumption. Here, Saldívar reformulates the famous phrase, "it is easier to imagine an end to the world than an end to capitalism" (qtd. in Fisher 2). Certainly, these novels are not beholden to the task of envisioning new futures, and their exposure of imaginative hurdles is in itself instructive. Recalling that late capitalism rests on "the guaranteed promise of the future as the site of *more of the same,"* perhaps these novels can only imagine something different by first imagining the end of the world (Williams 2). Returning to the crises that anchor this project and to these novels' allegorical insights, perhaps it is easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of the war on terror: what else can stop a war with no particular enemy or battlefield, and thus no end? As for climate change, the end of global warming is already an impossibility. Narrative closure poses a critical challenge for allegories of crises with no foreseeable ends. As Richard Gray writes of American fiction at a time of crisis, "Recognition that the old mindset has been destroyed, or at least seriously challenged, is widespread in recent literature. We are still, perhaps, waiting for a fictional measure of the new world view" ("Open Doors" 132). Thus, perhaps in staging the death of all stories, *The Road* and *Zone One* offer less an empirical statement about the end of humanity than anxiety about our capacity to create new worlds.

3. Reading Risk, Reading Whitman, and Reading Practices in Contemporary Intertexts: Gayle Brandeis's *Self Storage* (2007), Michael Cunningham's *Specimen Days* (2005), and Ben Lerner's *10:04* (2014)

"the earth has become an ejector seat that no longer recognizes any distinctions between rich and poor, black and white, north and south or east and west"
- Ulrich Beck, *Risk Society*

I guess it is a uniform hieroglyphic,
And it means, Sprouting alike in broad zones and narrow zones,
Growing among black folks as among white,
Kanuck, Tuckahoe, Congressman, Cuff, I give them the same, I receive them the same.
- Walt Whitman, "Song of Myself"

In the previous two chapters, I have compared and contrasted texts on the basis of some generic similarities, from the domestic networked novel to the apocalyptic allegory. Thus far, this exploration has raised, in the first chapter, questions of the limits of the realist novel to grapple with the complexities of global risks without resorting to conspiracy or contrivance. In the second chapter, I have shown that apocalyptic fictions chart speculative pathways through some of these narrative challenges; in particular, the problem of scale. Yet other representational hurdles emerge through the blunt instrument of allegory, which struggles not to flatten the scales it enlarges. In this chapter, I explore yet another formal strategy employed by contemporary novelists to grapple with risk, crisis, scale, and the novel's formal limits: intertextuality. Rather than a generic similarity, what unites the three texts of the post-9/11, globally warmed era that constitute this chapter—Gayle Brandeis's *Self Storage* (2007)*,* Michael Cunningham's *Specimen Days* (2005), and Ben Lerner's *10:04* (2014)—is their shared interest in poetry. In particular, these novels collectively invoke the words of Walt Whitman, turning to his poetry as a patterning device that organizes their form and contents, as a point of reference that shapes their readings, and as a mechanism to circumvent the risk society's modes of reading. These are not the only post-9/11 novels to engage with Whitman—for example, Frédéric Beigbeder's *Windows on the World* (2003) quotes the final two stanzas of Whitman's "Salut au Monde,"

while Joseph O'Neill's *Netherland* (2008) begins with an epigraph from Whitman's "I Dream'd in a Dream"—yet their engagements are the most substantial, as each text creates a sustained dialogue with Whitman.

As discussed in this project's introduction, various contemporary risks, including 9/11 and climate change, have prompted discussions not only of how the novel represents crisis, but of a perceived crisis of the novel. As Suman Gupta writes, "Either the contemporary novel is securely enmeshed in its own fictional crisis, or it apprehends the worldly crisis within itself—or some interesting version of both: very different political commitments are involved in these positions" (459). This project has thus far outlined several aspects of the crisis of the novel, whether fictional, worldly, or both. First, there is the question of the novel's relationship to representativeness, as discussed toward the close of Chapter One, which explored the politics of the category of the "Great American Novel." As Pieter Vermeulen describes, the novel is "the form that has traditionally sustained the categories of the human and the individual," a description that illuminates the heightened pressure facing the novel in an era of identity politics (140). Second, there is the question of the novel's utility raised in Chapter Two. This question is played out both within the novel (Whitehead's "writers […] pitching in for a change" and McCarthy's "soggy volumes in a bookcase") as well as in dialogues around the novel (Amis's "feeling of gangrenous futility" and McGurl's "zombie genre") (Whitehead 42, McCarthy 138, Amis n.p., McGurl n.p.). While these two factors—the novel's representativeness and its utility—hardly comprise a comprehensive list of the crises of the novel, of interest here is how and why the contemporary novel might turn to poetry to circumvent these challenges.

In contrast to suggestions of the limits of the novel to grapple with crises both fictional and worldly, poetry might offer solutions to these challenges by moving beyond the novel's focus on the individual to speak to and for a more universal audience, and by sustaining a different relationship to utility. Poetry is often assumed to be a form more appropriate than the novel for addressing crisis and

its aftermath. 9/11 was no exception, and the attacks' catalysis of poetry and its circulation is well-documented (see Karhio et al.): poems like Auden's "September 1, 1939" were resurrected, and countless new poems inspired, such as those included in the Library of Congress's *Poetry of September 11*, a guide to poetry written in 9/11's aftermath (see Armenti).[22] In their foreword to *Poetry After 9/11* (2002), Valerie Merians and Dennis Loy Johnson write, "There were, in the immediate aftermath, poems everywhere," suggesting, "Prose wasn't enough. There was something more to be said that only poetry could say" (ix). In her introduction to the same anthology, American poet Alicia Ostriker writes of the collected poems, "These are survival tools" (xi). Despite such declarations, the question of poetry in the aftermath of crisis has its own controversial history. Tracing this history often returns us to Theodor Adorno's much-repeated and much-misread assertion that "to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric," to W. H. Auden's line, "poetry makes nothing happen," and to Julia Alvarez's response to Auden's line—"poems might / still save us from what happens in the world"—in her poem "'Poetry Makes Nothing Happen'?" (Adorno 34, Auden 94, Alvarez 89).[23]

Notwithstanding these concerns over barbarism and utility, poetry has often been received as a tool of healing and survival: the same could not as easily be said for the novel, which faces its own separate burdens of representativeness. Billy Collins, the Poet Laureate of the United States from 2001 to 2003, observed in an interview with *The New York Times*, "In times of crisis it's interesting that people don't turn to the novel or say, 'We should all go out to a movie,' or, 'Ballet would help us.' It's always poetry. What we want to hear is a human voice speaking directly in our ear" (qtd. in D. Smith n.p.). Elsewhere, Collins writes that "Poetry has always accommodated loss and keening; it may be said to be the original grief counseling center" ("Poetry and Tragedy" n.p.). These descriptions of

[22] Anne Karhio refers to Auden's "September 1, 1939" as "an iconic reference point drawn upon in the aftermath of 9/11 as well as the 2008 financial crisis" (1).
[23] Adorno argues not for the end of poetry, but for a change: it would be "barbaric" to keep writing the same kind of poetry after Auschwitz.

poetry's unique affordances map out a range of assumptions about what the poem, as opposed to the novel, can deliver in the wake of a crisis: Merians and D. L. Johnson point to poetry's ability to say "more" than the novel, Ostriker to poetry's healing capacity, and Collins to poetry's immediacy, orality, and counsel. Does poetry say "more" than the novel, or merely say something different? Are poetry's therapeutic effects attributable to its form, or rather to reading practices? These pages cannot fully litigate the question of whether poetry is a "survival tool" and whether prose is a tool of a different kind, nor the merits of such instrumentalizing logics themselves. Yet by reading closely the instances where Brandeis, Cunningham, and Lerner's novels turn from prose to poetry, this chapter will explore the ways in which poetry functions as a tool of reframing and rereading. Across these novels, reading Whitman's poetry helps characters reread their relationship to risk, and helps authors take formal and political risks.

Since Julia Kristeva coined the term "intertextuality" in the 1960s, critics have failed to arrive at a single definition of the term nor a common set of interpretive apparatuses. According to Graham Allen's *Intertextuality* (2011), the term continues to be "underdetermined in meaning and overdetermined in figuration," to extend Harold Bloom's famous formulation (2). While I join Allen in recognizing that the project of arriving at a single definition of intertextuality would be "doomed to failure," intertextuality is nonetheless a useful point of reference for this chapter in the sense that it encompasses the various ways Brandeis, Cunningham, and Lerner incorporate Whitman into their novels (2). As Allen writes, "The act of reading […] plunges us into a network of textual relations. To interpret a text, to discover its meaning, or meanings, is to trace those relations. Meaning becomes something which exists between a text and all the other texts to which it refers and relates, moving out from the independent text into a network of textual relations" (1). The novels in question engage with Whitman's poetry and prose through a variety of intertextual apparatuses, including paratext, parody, plagiarism, citation, and criticism, all of which I will engage with and closely read in this

chapter. The apparatus I will focus on most centrally is that of reading itself: each of these novels stages metatextual encounters with Whitman's corpus. Whitman is not merely referenced, but actively *read*, with narrative consequences for individual characters, as well as formal consequences for the novels more broadly.

To contextualize these intertextual encounters with Whitman, I first offer a brief summary of each novel, with an emphasis on Whitman's figuration. In *Self Storage*, Brandeis's protagonist, Flan Parker, is a dissatisfied wife and the mother of two young children who inherits a well-worn copy of Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* from her late mother. Having committed many of his passages to memory, she turns to Whitman for moral guidance, using the text as a sort of self-help book as she navigates her struggling marriage, her daughter's near-death injury, and the ethical challenges posed by the post-9/11 risk society, largely dramatized through her Afghan neighbor, Sodaba Suleiman. Flan's apparently sincere emulation of Whitman diverges from Cunningham and Lerner's characters. Cunningham's *Specimen Days*, its title adapted from Whitman's prose works (1882), is not Cunningham's first intertextual work: his Pulitzer Prize-winning novel, *The Hours* (1998), draws heavily on the life and works of Virginia Woolf.[24] *Specimen Days*, Cunningham's second intertextual novel (and his first novel published after *The Hours*), consists of three stories that travel across time and genre. In each story, various recurring characters spew Whitman's poetry, seemingly unconsciously. The triptych's first part, "In the Machine," is set in nineteenth-century New York during the industrial revolution, and might be characterized as a ghost story (see Cain and Rafferty). Lucas, a twelve-year-old Irish American boy, communicates mostly by spouting Whitman's verses: he "speak[s] as the book," the book being *Leaves of Grass* (Cunningham 4). Lucas reads Whitman's book nightly, and even runs into Whitman on the streets of downtown Manhattan. The second story, "The Children's Crusade," is set in post-9/11 New

[24] Throughout this chapter, the title *Specimen Days* will refer to Cunningham's novel, rather than Whitman's prose, unless otherwise specified.

York and takes the form of a neo-noir detective story. Cat, a Black forensic psychologist, is tasked with thwarting an army of child suicide bombers terrorizing New York under the direction of a woman who calls herself "Walt Whitman," and *Leaves of Grass* serves as the terrorists' manifesto. The third section, "Like Beauty," joins *The Road* and *Zone One* in turning to speculative fiction to imagine a vision of post-disaster America, in which New York has been turned into a theme park. The story centers on the character of Simon, an android who recites Whitman's poetry whenever he begins to experience human emotion.

Despite the generic inconsistencies between Brandeis's "mommy-lit" novel and Cunningham's genre-blending one, Lerner's novel is perhaps the greatest outlier, venturing into the realms of autofiction and metafiction, and engaging with Whitman in a more self-consciously literary way.[25] *10:04* details a period in the life of Ben, Lerner's protagonist and autofictional avatar, who is a writer and professor working on his second book. The novel plots Ben wandering around New York, being diagnosed with a heart condition, and platonically impregnating his best friend. Running parallel to the story of these events is the metafictional account of the novel itself: lavish dinners with literary agents, residencies at Marfa, and the full text of Lerner's *New Yorker* story, "The Golden Vanity" (2012), that led to an advance on *10:04*. Whitman's words are interspersed throughout the novel, in some places appearing unattributed and in others appearing in the form of direct literary criticism of Whitman's works. Ben teaches a course on Whitman, grapples with Whitman's utopian poetics, and even describes himself as "a would-be Whitman" (4).

While this chapter is not centrally concerned with making the case for *why* Brandeis, Cunningham, and Lerner choose Whitman as interlocuter, but rather with the *work* Whitman performs within each text, these questions cannot be entirely separated, and I will here offer some brief

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[25] See Hewett's "You Are Not Alone: The Personal, the Political, and the 'New' Mommy Lit" (2013) for a full discussion of mommy lit.

conjectures about what Whitman means within and across these novels. Throughout this chapter, I will primarily read Whitman not as a poet or even as a historical figure, though I will occasionally offer my own readings of his poetry or biography where helpful. Rather, I will read the Whitman(s) that Brandeis, Cunningham, and Lerner create as a product of their own literary imaginations: that is, as a sort of literary device and as a narrative driver of risk. Each novel deploys Whitman as shorthand for its own thematic concerns, an idea that has been advanced by previous scholarship. The range of these scholarly interpretations seemingly responds to Whitman's own poetic admission, "Do I contradict myself? / Very well then I contradict myself, / (I am large, I contain multitudes.)" ("Song of Myself" 51.6-51.8). As Randall Jarrell's analysis reveals:

> [Whitman] says over and over that there are in him good and bad, wise and foolish, anything at all and its antonym, and he is telling the truth; there is in him almost everything in the world, so that one responds to him, willingly or unwillingly, almost as one does to the world, that world which makes the hairs of one's flesh stand up, which seems both evil beyond any rejection and wonderful beyond any acceptance. (126)

Though in Whitman there may be "almost everything in the world," it is important to pin down the particular versions of Whitman that appear across these three novels in order to explore the work that Whitman performs in each text.

In an article that deals with Brandeis and Cunningham (as well as Halaby), Georgiana Banita argues that Brandeis uses "the broad, undiscriminating ecstasy of Whitman's vision as shorthand for hedonism and compassion," while Cunningham "invests it with the moral ambivalence of our post-9/11 era, cannily acknowledging Whitman as a useful interlocutor in exploring the pitfalls of contemporary patriotism" ("Race" 260). While Whitman is coded differently in each novel, Banita persuasively suggests that both Brandeis and Cunningham invoke Whitman's words "as an American Bible, the axis around which a national (and occasionally nationalist) discourse rotates," an idea this chapter's conclusion will explore more fully (243). When it comes to *10:04*, critics like Jacqueline O'Dell have described Whitman's function within the novel as "a figure for the horizon of sincerity

and as a yardstick for literary value, both symbolic and economic" (453). Lerner's narrator and protagonist, Ben, offers his own view of Whitman as a cipher for sincerity, describing, "I'll work my way from irony to sincerity in the sinking city, a would-be Whitman of the vulnerable grid" (4).

While this chapter will engage with Whitman as a cipher for the themes raised above, including nationalism, sincerity, and literary value; my reading will bring a closer attention to risk to this preexisting conversation. These novels engage in criticism of the distribution of risk within their fictional worlds, in particular, the question of risk as universally distributed (the vision of Beck's risk society) and the question of risk as unevenly distributed, particularly along lines of social vulnerability. All three novels deploy Whitman to resolve the problems that arise from this tension between visions of risk as ubiquitous and uneven, using Whitman to transition from managing risk to embracing risk, both at the level of character—like the protagonists of *Zone One* and *The Road*—as well as at the level of form. Whitman, I will argue, aids in the resolution of this tension and allows a transition to embracing risk, despite its unevenness, through his disengagement from risk altogether. This disengagement from risk operates through Whitman's ecopoetics and, in particular, his famous vision of grass as a "uniform hieroglyphic," as I will detail shortly in full ("Song of Myself" 6.10). The work Whitman performs within each text thus contributes to this project's larger exploration of risk, ecology, and identity. These three contemporary novels' mutual dialogue with Whitman seems undoubtedly worthy of inquiry and comparison, inviting analysis of *why* Whitman (and why Whitman *now*), as well as analysis of how poetic intertext illuminates and complicates questions of the novel's form. Yet Brandeis, Cunningham, and Lerner have never been written about collectively: to date, the only time all three Whitman-inspired texts seem to have been mentioned together is in Ed Folsom's 2015 "A Current Bibliography," a regular feature of the "Walt Whitman Quarterly Review" that catalogues Whitman's ever-expanding afterlives. In this chapter, I put all three novels into conversation for the first time, and expand critical attention to Whitman as a cipher—whether for compassion, nationalism,

or sincerity—by suggesting Whitman is a cipher not only for contemporary political challenges, but also for contemporary reading practices.

In this chapter's first section, I explore Whitman's famous vision of grass as a "uniform hieroglyphic," connecting the symbolism of grass to what Wai Chee Dimock (1996), in a seminal essay, calls Whitman's "noncontingent poetics," whereby democratic attention—taken to its extreme—eliminates distinction itself ("Whitman" 71). I then use this connectivity to analyze the various uniform hieroglyphics that appear in these three Whitman intertexts: Brandeis, Cunningham, and Lerner use suspicion, ecology, and literary form itself as uniform hieroglyphics to portray landscapes of seemingly evenly-distributed risk. I point to the fundamental paradox of the uniform hieroglyphic, and argue that each novel stages the failures of its universalizing gestures. In this chapter's second section, I move from using Whitman and Dimock to read these novels, to using the novels to read Whitman. I suggest that each novel stages encounters with Whitman, who appears not only through the intertextual apparatuses of citation or allusion, but also through instances of reading itself. In each novel, reading Whitman leads to a reframing of risk to embrace its transformative potential, with implications for both reading Whitman and for reading practices in general. These encounters change these novels' characters and their relationship to risk: in *Self Storage*, Flan turns to Whitman for self-help, and transitions from confinement to adventure; in *Specimen Days*, Whitman's refusal of distinction leads one character to his death, and leads Cat from forensic detective to terrorist sympathizer; and in *10:04*, reading Whitman transforms the very novel Ben is writing, which transitions from a story of forgery to an account of sincerity, contingency, and damage. Throughout my discussion of each encounter with Whitman and its reframing of risk, I attend simultaneously to these encounters' implications for contemporary reading practices, as well as questions of identity. This chapter's conclusion turns, like the last chapter's, to questions of scale, exploring the relationship between Whitman and American expansionism, and the costs of dialoguing with the "American Bard."

THE UNIFORM HIEROGLYPHIC

A useful starting place for my investigation of ways of reading in these three intertextual novels is Whitman's own way of reading, and in particular his reading of grass. As a framing device for how Whitman might help us read these novels, I turn to Whitman's view of grass as a "uniform hieroglyphic" and its accompanying paradoxes. Whitman's utopian and unifying vision of grass appears most famously in the following (slightly-condensed) section of *Leaves of Grass*, which I will return to throughout this chapter:

> A child said *What is the grass*? fetching it to me with full hands;
> How could I answer the child? I do not know what it is any more than he.
> I guess it must be the flag of my disposition, out of hopeful green stuff woven.
> […]
> Or I guess it is a uniform hieroglyphic,
> And it means, Sprouting alike in broad zones and narrow zones,
> Growing among black folks as among white,
> Kanuck, Tuckahoe, Congressman, Cuff, I give them the same, I receive them the same.
> And now it seems to me the beautiful uncut hair of graves.
> […]
> The smallest sprout shows there is really no death,
> And if ever there was it led forward life, and does not wait at the end to arrest it,
> And ceas'd the moment life appear'd.
>
> All goes onward and outward, nothing collapses,
> And to die is different from what any one supposed, and luckier.
> ("Song of Myself" 6.1-6.38)

The importance of grass to Whitman's corpus has been well documented: in her influential study, *Whitman the Political Poet* (1988), Betsy Erkkila describes grass for Whitman as a "hieroglyphic of democracy" (99). More recently, Perin Gürel has indicated the staying power of this motif, declaring, "The most well-known political image of 'Song of Myself,' is after all, 'grass" (105). For Whitman, grass serves as an emblem of democracy due to its uniformity. As discussed in the previous chapters via *Freedom* and *Once in a Promised Land*'s visions of environmental crisis as an existential threat, and via *The Road* and *Zone One*'s staging of apocalyptic risks that render the distinctions of identity irrelevant, ecology often serves as a conduit to universal risk, de-emphasizing anthropological difference. Grass

functions similarly for Whitman, caring for neither difference nor distinction, and sprouting "alike" and "the same" across place, race, and status ("Song of Myself" 6.11, 6.13). The uniform hieroglyphic, then, is thematically significant for its insistence upon sameness, and also formally significant. When Whitman frames grass as a uniform hieroglyphic, he both *reads* the grass and frames the grass as *writing*: grass becomes a text *to be read*. Following Jeanne Cortiel, Whitman's uniform hieroglyphic constructs "the grass as form, not as metaphorical offspring or as symbolic or inscribed piece of cloth, but as writing itself" (177). At the risk of overstating, the framing of grass as writing resonates with the double meaning of the title of Whitman's magnum opus, *Leaves of Grass*: his pages become the "leaves" on which his poems are printed. His poems, in turn, become the "grass," and thus their own "uniform hieroglyphic," a point I will return to in detail.

Extending our attention from grass as a "uniform hieroglyphic" to Whitman's corpus more broadly, we can establish a link between the uniformity of Whitman's grass and Dimock's notion of Whitman's "noncontingent poetics" ("Whitman" 71). Dimock reads Whitman's line from his 1855 Preface to *Leaves of Grass*, "The poet judges not as the judge judges but as the sun falling around a helpless thing," as not only "a democratic manifesto, but also […] as a noncontingent poetics, which, in its unfastidious, unconditional generosity, in effect eliminates luck by eliminating the invidious distinctions it fosters" (71). According to this view, Whitman achieves his radical democracy by disengaging from distinction itself: the grass's uniformity can only achieve universality through the radical dissolution of difference. Dimock and many other writers, notably Randall Jarrell (1953) and even Lerner himself in his book of criticism, *The Hatred of Poetry* (2016), have focused on Whitman's syntax as the source of his poetry's noncontingency. Lerner writes, "Whitman's famous catalogues—his long lists—model federalism in their very structure, uniting in a single extended syntactic unit all the differences (of people's class, race, gender, geography, etc.) that threaten the coherence of the people; his lines are always trying to 'hold all,' always unenjambed" (*Hatred* 46). Influenced by Dimock

and Jarrell, Peter Riley recently coined the term Whitman's "grammar of risk" to highlight the risk Whitman's poetry takes in "forc[ing] us into the proximity that continually suspends semantic subordination" (218). Echoing Lerner, Riley describes Whitman's poetry as supplying us "with a succession of interconnected independent clauses that more often than not go unencumbered by a subordinate clause that would seek to explain, justify, or complicate their sense" (228). In what follows, I connect the ecological dimensions of Whitman's "uniform hieroglyphic" and the syntactic dimensions of Whitman's "noncontingent poetics," bringing these connections to bear on my readings of all three Whitman-inflected novels. In this section, I discuss the uniform hieroglyphics that Brandeis, Cunningham, and Lerner deploy to depict their landscapes of risk: in *Self Storage* and *Specimen Days*, suspicion becomes a uniform hieroglyphic, as does ecology, while *10:04* considers the uniform hieroglyphics of poetry, money, and disaster.

Brandeis sets *Self-Storage* in a seemingly post-racial society, summoning the university as a model of multiculturalism. Flan describes the Student Family Housing complex where she lives (her husband is working on a doctoral thesis on Baudrillard and soap operas) as a "wonderfully international community": "It was always a treat to see the urban planning scholar from Ghana wearing a Tweety T-shirt I had folded, to know the English major from India walking by probably had red underwear beneath her sari [...] In our courtyard alone, there were also families from Wales, from Guatemala, from Afghanistan. Our blond family was an anomaly," she describes (17-18). The university community is framed as a multicultural melting pot, where risk and suspicion are levied evenly, without regard for race, nationality, or religion. Flan describes, "Whenever someone shiny showed up in the neighborhood—someone with polished nails or a new sedan or Baby Bjorn—they were treated, however unfairly, with suspicion" (15). Echoing the language of Whitehead's "single Us [...] reviling a single Them," the Student Family Housing community is initially framed as a utopian collective into which a new form of post-9/11 suspicion intrudes (231). When one of Flan's yard sales

is shut down, Flan asks a woman, "Why do you think they're cracking down on us now?" (Brandeis 101). The woman responds, "They're cracking down on everyone since the [9/11] attacks" (101). Brandeis initially constructs a post-racial community in which risk is evenly distributed, as "everyone" is a target in the post-9/11 crackdown.

Cunningham's novel presents a similar landscape of universal risk. Throughout this analysis, I will focus mostly on his first and second stories ("In the Machine" and "The Children's Crusade") for their particular relevance to ecology and 9/11, and will turn to the third story ("Like Beauty") in this chapter's conclusion. Like *Self Storage* and *10:04*, "The Children's Crusade" is set in 9/11's aftermath. Mirroring the "universal crackdown" of Brandeis's fictional world, the protagonist of this story, forensic psychologist Cat, is trained to see risk everywhere (Brandeis 101). Cunningham writes, "She [Cat] walked home through the dusk of another perfect June day among citizens who refused to shed their habits of looking suspicious to her. The guy nervously unloading boxes from a bakery truck, the jogger in Princeton sweats, even the blind man tapping along with his cane—they all seemed like potentials [bombers]. They *were*, in fact, all potentials. Everyone was" (127). As everyone looks suspicious to Cat, risk is diffuse.

Despite their opposing relationships to risk—the suicide bombers pose the risks that Cat manages—Cunningham's terrorists share Cat's model of risk distribution. Their targets represent a broad cross-section of society: their first victim is "a [white] real estate developer, part of the World Trade rebuild" and their second is a Black Burger King employee (107, 165). Cat interprets the attacks' message, "It's as if they're saying nobody's safe. You're not safe if you're a real estate tycoon, and you're not safe if you work for minimum wage" (154). As in *Self Storage,* everyone is treated with suspicion, and no one is sheltered from risk. Yet in both *Self Storage* and *Specimen Days*, suspicion, once equalized, is no longer suspicion at all. As Banita writes of "The Children's Crusade," "Precisely because danger is so meticulously concealed, suspicion cannot alight on any single individual; in other

words, if everyone is a suspect, no one truly is" ("Race" 262). If suspicion, once equalized, is no longer suspicion at all, then the very notion of targeting, as well as the notion of detection, becomes incoherent.

Herein lies the paradox of risk's even distribution, and the paradox of the uniform hieroglyphic itself. While critics like Stephen Tapscott, analyzing Whitman's "uniform hieroglyphic," read the word "uniform" as synonymous with "universal," if we take grass to be a system of writing—that is, if we take its hieroglyphic nature seriously—then its uniformity dooms its system of signification to failure (53). As Cortiel points out, "writing signifies through difference, and difference only […] as writing, the grass must remain paradoxical […]. This 'uniform hieroglyphic' is an oxymoron that condenses the fundamental contradictions through which *Leaves of Grass* thrives" (177). These contradictions are also, I will argue, the tensions through which these novels thrive. The paradoxes and contradictions of Whitman's "uniform hieroglyphic" correspond to his noncontingent poetics. Just as writing signifies through difference, and difference only, so too do luck and risk. Only through the elimination of these differences can Whitman's line hold: "to die is different from what any one supposed, and luckier" ("Song of Myself" 6.38). Dimock reads this line thus: "The Whitmanian self is thus always lucky, he can only be lucky, whether he lives or dies. And he is just as lucky as everybody else" ("Whitman" 77). Of course, luck, once equalized, is no longer luck at all: thus, the Whitmanian self might also be said to be "paradoxically […] beyond luck, beyond its caprice and, above all, beyond its inequities" (Dimock, "Whitman" 77).

To illustrate the consequences of Whitman's elimination of distinction, in Cunningham's novel, the uniform hieroglyphic of grass renders the distinctions between life and death meaningless. The child bombers of "The Children's Crusade" justify their actions by appropriating the aforementioned lines of Whitman's poetry: "Nobody really dies. We go on in the grass. We go on in the trees," they tell the detectives (*Specimen Days* 133). Here, the uniform hieroglyphic of grass renders the very concept

of murder meaningless. Whitman's ecocritical poetics reframe the scales of human life in ways that can emphasize beauty, endurance, and regeneration, but also in ways that minimize the value of individual lives. The bombers tell Cat that killing one person "doesn't matter to the world, […] doesn't matter in geologic time" as "The numbers don't crunch in single digits" (106, 110). In this sense and at this scale, a human life becomes statistically insignificant. Just as *The Road*'s ecological coda invokes planetarity to suggestively reframe the scale and temporality of human life, softening the horrors of McCarthy's post-apocalyptic world, Cunningham's characters deploy Whitman's ecology toward similar ends. Though emerging from different discourses, the tension between the species-level and anthropological views of humanity explored in ecocriticism clearly resonates with the tension in Whitman's corpus between the individual and collective, and between the particular and universal. Dimock summarizes this tension as an irreconcilability between a "democratic" and a "phenomenological" self ("Whitman" 71). "The problem in Whitman (to the extent that it is one)," she writes, "can be restated, then, as […] a conflict between the opposing claims of universality and particularity in the definition of personhood" (71). Ecological poetics are one way of not only navigating these opposing claims, but also of obscuring their opposition.

THE FAILURES OF THE UNIFORM HIEROGLYPHIC

While each of these Whitman-inspired novels features its own system of uniform hieroglyphics, each narrative ultimately reveals the faultiness of such universalizing gestures. Beginning briefly with *Self Storage*, despite the would-be utopia of the student housing community, racialized suspicion nonetheless focalizes around Flan's Afghan neighbors, Sodaba and Raminullah Suleiman, reflecting *Self Storage*'s contradictory vision of race and risk.[26] Flan notes that the Suleimans' "duplex

[26] See Banita's "Race, Risk, and Fiction in the War on Terror" (2010) for a full discussion of Brandeis's "inchoate awareness of race as a major component of the war on terror" (245).

had been egged twice since September 11," and some less tolerant neighbors even ask of Raminullah, "Do you think he's a terrorist?" (19, 92). In contrast to the notion of "cracking down on everyone," risk is not evenly distributed, but focalizes around the Suleimans due to racial profiling and Islamophobia (101). Further, in a remarkable echo of Halaby's *Once in a Promised Land*, Raminullah is cast as a microbiologist whose investments in environmental security frame him as a threat to national security. Both *Self Storage* and *Once in a Promised Land* appeal to the resonances between toxic discourses and the toxicity of US racism by emphasizing the perceived threat of contamination. In Halaby's novel, an FBI agent suggests Jassim may be a security risk as "the rest of America does not have access to the entire city's water supply with the means to tamper with it" (232). Meanwhile, in *Self Storage*, a friend of the Suleimans tells Flan when Raminullah is eventually arrested, "of course they think he was making biological weapons. But he's not a terrorist. He is just a man from Afghanistan, a scientist studying plant pathogens. And now they've detained him […] We fear they've sent him to Guantánamo Bay" (Brandeis 169). Like Jassim, Raminullah's profiling ruptures the would-be utopia of the university community by revealing the uneven distribution of racialized suspicion.

While the realities of racial profiling undercut suspicion as a uniform hieroglyphic in *Self Storage*, in *Specimen Days*, racialized infrastructures disrupt nature's unifying potential. Cunningham's first story, "In the Machine," speaks back to Whitman's notion of grass as uniform hieroglyphic most directly. While *Leaves of Grass* collapses life and death into an endless cycle of generation under the axiom "The smallest sprout shows there is really no death," *Specimen Days* undercuts notions of *nature as equalizer* from its very first line: "Walt said that the dead turned into grass, but there was no grass where they'd buried Simon. He was with the other Irish on the far side of the river, where it was only dirt and gravel and names on stones" (Whitman, "Song of Myself" 6.34; Cunningham, *Specimen Days* 1). From the outset, Cunningham's text reveals the ways in which the realities of race, urbanization, and industrialization disrupt Whitman's vision of unity. Instead of creating unity, death only reproduces

segregation: where the Irish are buried, there is no longer any grass to equalize. Lucas's encounter with Walt Whitman thus restores hope in a natural process that has already been disrupted by the racialized infrastructures of the city.

The trope of nature and its harms as equalizer—recalling Neil Evernden's "wishful ecology"—extends far beyond these novels, and even into risk theory (16). In *Risk Society* (1992), Ulrich Beck writes, "*poverty is hierarchic, smog is democratic.* […] risks display an *equalizing* effect within their scope and among those affected by them, it is precisely therein that their novel political power resides" (36). According to Beck's vision, risk both democratizes and divides, equalizes and exacerbates difference. The inequities of risk—the very inequities Dimock describes the Whitmanian self as being "beyond"—are thus up for debate within the discourse of risk criticism itself ("Whitman" 77). Beck reads smog as democratic according to the same logic by which Whitman reads grass as democratic: both symbols, borrowing Erkkila's language, function as "hieroglyphics of democracy" (99). While smog and grass may be indifferent to anthropological difference, their democratizing function is ultimately a fantasy, as environmental justice movements have long insisted.

Lerner's novel exposes the fantasy of nature as equalizer through its own uniform hieroglyphic, the storm. Ben witnesses the possibility of collectivity emerging around an approaching storm, 2011's Hurricane Irene: "the city was becoming one organism," he writes, "constituting itself in relation to a threat viewable from space, an aerial sea monster with a single centered eye around which tentacular rain bands swirled" (17). The aerial view of the city from space performs a scalar shift that constructs the city as a single organism in relation to an external threat: the city becomes one body by zooming out, and by accessing a planetary perspective. According to the uniform hieroglyphic of the storm, a symbol that transforms millions of New Yorkers into a single organism, the city is *reread* as a unified body. The city appears unified in the face of natural disaster not only from space, but on the ground, too. Ben describes the "common conversation" that emerges around the storm,

which "remov[es] the conventional partitions from social space" (17). He details, "riding the N train to Whole Foods in Union Square, I found myself swapping surge level predictions with a Hasidic Jew and a West Indian nurse in purple scrubs" (17). In a multicultural subway car that recalls the multicultural utopia of Flan's student family housing complex, a communal threat makes community possible.

Yet the storm, which promises to "remov[e] the conventional partitions from social space," never arrives (17). Meanwhile, the second storm that bookends *10:04*, 2012's Hurricane Sandy, ends up reinforcing the very partitions the uniform hieroglyphic promises to remove. Ben describes the storm's aftermath:

> We never lost power. Another historic storm had failed to arrive, as though we lived outside of history or were falling out of time. Except that it had arrived, just not for us. […]. Power and water were knocked out below Thirty-ninth Street and in Red Hook, Coney Island, the Rockaways, much of Staten Island. Hospitals were being evacuated after backup generators failed; newborn babies and patients recovering from heart surgery were carried gingerly down flights of stairs and placed in ambulances that rushed them uptown, where the storm had never happened. Houses up and down the coast had been obliterated, flooded, soon a neighborhood in Queens would burn. Emergency workers were fishing out the bodies of those who had drowned during the surge; who knew how many of the homeless had perished? (230-31)

Lerner's language partitions the city, calling attention to geographic divides—"Power and water were knocked out below Thirty-ninth street" while "uptown […] the storm had never happened"—as well as class divides as he questions "how many of the homeless had perished" (230-31). The utopian possibility of collective disaster gives way to disparity as uptown is spared. This passage overrides *10:04*'s previous reading of the city as "one organism […] in relation to a threat viewable from space" by highlighting the uneven consequences of the threat on the ground (17). While natural disasters may not discriminate, preparation, resilience, and recovery do (see Faber 2015). The uneven distribution of the storm's damage speaks back to the larger tendency to view nature, and by extension, natural disasters, as an equalizing force. In contrast to the uniform hieroglyphic of Whitman's grass, which

"Sprout[s] alike in broad zones and narrow zones," the storm only magnifies the divisions between the zones of New York City ("Song of Myself" 6.11). *Self Storage, Specimen Days,* and *10:04* thus reveal the fantasies of collectivity and equality produced by disasters both natural and man-made. Grass is the "uniform hieroglyphic" and the "great equalizer" in the same way that 9/11, smog, and the storm are equalizers, which is to say, not at all.

While the novels in question deploy various symbols—from suspicion to nature—as would-be uniform hieroglyphics, they similarly deploy literary form itself. Beginning with *Specimen Days*, the very form of Cunningham's novel utilizes the uniform hieroglyphic, reincarnating the same characters, objects, and locations throughout its tripartite structure. For example, Catherine of the first story is reincarnated as Cat in the second and Catareen in the third, an emplotted embodiment of Whitman's line "every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you" ("Song of Myself" 1.3). Cunningham also includes recurring objects such as a bowl inscribed with "mysterious […] figures" in the first story, "strange symbols" in the second, and an "untranslatable message" in the third (*Specimen Days* 52, 66, 325). Perhaps the most obvious uniform hieroglyphic across *Specimen Days*'s three sections is Whitman's poetry itself. Reading the form of Cunningham's novel through the prism of Whitman's poetry, and particularly the sixth section of "Song of Myself," takes on particular significance in light of the novel's positioning as a 9/11 novel. Cunningham's tripartite structure formally disrupts the binary of "before" and "after" that has organized debates around post-9/11 literature, as explored more thoroughly in Chapter Two. As a triptych, *Specimen Days* overlays onto the palimpsest of New York a story of continuity, unearthing the ghostly resonances between past, present, and future.

The fact that Cunningham, in his 9/11 novel, turns first to the past, shows us the slippery signifier that is 9/11. As with the stories of apocalypse discussed in Chapter Two, the apocalyptic signifier of 9/11 itself seems to produce a fault line between past and present, and yet Cunningham's novel exposes the faultiness of that very rupture. In the most obvious instance of this investment in

continuity, "In the Machine" rereads the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire in light of 9/11, lending the 1911 tragedy fresh political heft while also undermining the singularity of the 2001 tragedy. As Robert Duggan writes, Cunningham's "patterns of temporal juxtaposition […] throw a new (or not so new) light on the city's turbulent history and produce patterns of repetition and difference that may re-cast readers' reactions to the attacks" (381-2). Following Duggan's reading, Cunningham indeed attempts to recast readers' reactions to the attacks by reframing terror's source and meaning. As Susana Araújo writes: "Oppression and exclusion underwrite the history of New York, the symbolic locus of US energy, creativity, and diversity. For Cunningham, terrorism does not need to fly in a hijacked plane into US territory. It is already here in various guises—through social inequalities, economic policies, work conditions, racism, and migration laws" (77-78). What 9/11 has shattered, then, if it has shattered anything at all, is a sense of American security that never transcended the category of myth. Rather than framing the violence of 9/11 as intrusive or aberrant, and therefore ahistorical, Cunningham uses 9/11, just as Whitehead does, to resurrect the specters of a long history of violence. Whitman's investments in cycles of regeneration are darkly recast as the same characters, objects, and locations are reborn in violent contexts that disrupt the futurity of American progress narratives: the past, present, and future are trapped, zombie-like, in an endless loop.

Turning now to literary form in *10:04*, Lerner engages metacritically with poetry as a uniform hieroglyphic. Just as for Whitman, grass serves as a universalizing symbol through its ecological dimensions as well as its formal dimensions—the "leaves" (pages) of "grass" (poems) of his own literary production—Lerner also grapples with poetry's universalizing potential. In an address to students of Columbia University's School of the Arts, a lengthy text-within-the-text, the full length of which is reproduced midway through the novel, Ben describes first wanting to become a poet in the

face of the *Challenger* disaster of January 28, 1986.[27] Listening to then-President Reagan's address to the nation, Ben describes falling in love with the last lines of Reagan's speech, appropriated from a poem entitled "High Flight" (1941) by John Gillespie Magee: "*We will never forget them, nor the last time we saw them, this morning, as they prepared for the journey and waved goodbye and 'slipped the surly bonds of earth' to 'touch the face of God'*" (qtd. in Lerner 112). Ben describes his reaction:

> I felt it in my chest; the sentence pulled me into the future. […] the meaning of the words was nothing compared to that first experience of poetic measure—how I felt simultaneously comforted and stirred by the rhythm and knew that all across America those rhythms were working in millions of other bodies too. […] I think I became a poet because of Ronald Reagan and [his speechwriter] Peggy Noonan. The way they used poetic language to integrate a terrible event and its image back into a framework of meaning, the way the transpersonality of prosody constituted a community. […]
>
> I make no claims for 'High Flight' as a poem—in fact, I think it's a terrible poem—and Ronald Reagan I consider a mass murderer. […] But I wonder if we can think of them as bad forms of collectivity that can serve as figures of its real possibility. (112-16)

In this passage, Lerner sketches out Ben's poetic origins and the emergence of his faith in "the transpersonality of prosody": in other words, the emergence of his faith in poetry (114). Reading this passage with Whitman in mind, Lerner configures poetry as itself a uniform hieroglyphic, with a particular affective power to coordinate "transpersonal" rhythms "all across America" (112).

While in his poetic origin story, Ben presents himself as genuinely moved by poetry's transpersonality, he later complicates the potentiality of prosody by conflating the rhythms of poetry and the rhythms of capital. He describes a lavish celebratory dinner after receiving the six-figure advance for his novel:

> After my agent's percentage and taxes […] I would clear something like two hundred and seventy thousand dollars. Or Fifty-four IUIs [intrauterine inseminations]. Or around four Hummer H2 SUVs. Or the two first editions on the market of *Leaves of Grass*. Or about twenty-five years of a Mexican migrant's labor […] I stalled and the majesty and murderous stupidity of it was all about me, coursing through me: the rhythm of artisanal Portuguese octopus fisheries coordinated with the rhythm of laborers' migration and the rise and fall of art

[27] The American space shuttle *Challenger* broke apart and exploded seventy-three seconds into its highly televised flight, killing all seven crew members (see McConnell).

> commodities and tradable futures […] coordinated, or so it appeared, by money. One big joke cycle. One big totaled prosody. (155).

The "totaled prosody" Ben describes here is coordinated not by the transpersonality of poetry, but by the transpersonality of capital, which becomes its own uniform hieroglyphic by rendering Ben's literary production, Mexican migrant labor, and Whitman's writing fungible (155). What Jacqueline O'Dell calls "the difference-flattening destruction undergirding neoliberal capital" uncomfortably echoes the difference-flattening tendencies undergirding Whitman's poetry, returning us to his noncontingent poetics (452). According to O'Dell's reading of *10:04*, poetry is tethered to money not only because the rhythms of poetry "feel like those of money's circulation," but also because both money and "literary world-making" are ways of accounting for "the forces that mediate disparate people and objects" (452). This connection between poetry and money is generative, and particularly strange considering frequent claims of poetry's inutility. In *The Hatred of Poetry,* Lerner quotes Wallace Stevens's famous observation, "Poetry is a kind of money," and elaborates, "like money, it [poetry] mediates between the individual and the collective, dissolves the former into the latter, or lets the former reform out of the latter only to dissolve again. […] The affect of abstract exchange, the feeling that everything is fungible" (83). Lerner actually misquotes Stevens, whose original line is "Money is a kind of poetry" (165). This error, accidental or not, seems only to reinforce the fungibility of poetry and money, which, like Whitman's "noncontingent poetics" and "democratic self," seem to mediate and even to dissolve the boundaries between the individual and the collective.

READING WHITMAN, READING RISK

Thus far, I have used Whitman's uniform hieroglyphic to read these novels, and to explore their relationship to risk, the individual, and the collective. In this next section, I conversely use these novels to read Whitman, closely reading moments of intertextuality in Brandeis, Cunningham, and Lerner's novels as not only ways of reading Whitman, but also of reading and rereading the world.

These texts not only engage with Whitman via reference, allusion, and citation, but stage embodied encounters with Whitman that make something happen in these novels' plots. In each case, I will argue that reading Whitman leads to a reframing of risk: Whitman is not merely a cipher or yardstick, as previous critics have suggested, but a narrative driver of risk-taking, openness, and naivete. While I earlier described how risk can be embraced if distinction is no longer registered in accordance with Whitman's noncontingent poetics, risk can also be embraced for its transformative potential. Whitman's wishful ecologies in each novel reread crisis as generative, despite acknowledging its uneven distribution, engaging in a sort of narrative disaster capitalism.[28]

In her influential book *Risk* (2013), Deborah Lupton writes, "It is important to emphasize the 'always becoming' and transitory nature of risk," citing George Rigakos and Alexandra Law's definition of risk as "an unrealized potentiality" (Lupton 10, Rigakos and Law 80). Each of these novels points to unrealized potentialities that, like McCarthy and Whitehead's endings, will occur in a future that happens off the page; realized in the eyes of the reader, in Lerner's case; or in Brandeis and Cunningham's, in a temporality beyond narrative closure. In what follows, I attend to the ways in which *Self Storage, 10:04,* and *Specimen Days* encounter Whitman, and subsequently heed his calls to risk naivete and embrace risk. I also explore how all three novels, through their Whitmanian intertext, represent and investigate ways of reading, extending beyond Whitman in particular, to offer a broader commentary on contemporary modes of writing, reading, and criticism. At stake in these readings is my suggestion that while dialogues with Whitman's uniform hieroglyphic comprise these novels' immanent risk criticism, these novels can only embrace the transformative potential of risk by ignoring their own insights around risk's uneven distribution, a contradiction these novels struggle to resolve.

[28] In *The Shock Doctrine* (2007), Naomi Klein describes "disaster capitalism" as "orchestrated raids on the public sphere in the wake of catastrophic events, combined with the treatment of disasters as exciting market opportunities" (14).

READING WHITMAN, READING RISK: *SELF STORAGE*

In tracing Flan's transition from embracing security to embracing risk via Whitman, it is helpful to begin with Brandeis's positioning of Flan as a reader. In contrast to Lerner's avatar, who is already a professor, novelist, and critic—and in this sense, a firmly professional reader—Flan is characterized as a self-consciously non-expert reader who may not fully understand Whitman. For Flan, *Leaves of Grass* is both a sentimental and a scholarly object. While she inherits her copy from her mother, the book also symbolizes her yearnings for another life. After being accepted into graduate school at Reed College, Flan gives up her potential academic career to support her husband's doctoral work and raise children. She describes, "I couldn't wait for professors with elbow patches and bifocals to point me in the right direction. Maybe I'd become a professor myself someday. Or a librarian. A book reviewer. Something that had to do with Whitman, with words. Then Shae [her husband] walked into my life" (22). Even with her dreams on pause, Whitman remains her portal to another, more intellectually fulfilling life. Flan describes, "I wanted to study 'Song of Myself,' look into what Whitman was really doing with it. I already knew a lot of his omnivorous lines, as he called them, by heart. I wanted to understand them in a better, deeper way. I still do" (14). Yet due to her overwhelming domestic responsibilities, she admits, "As much as I loved to read, *Leaves of Grass* was pretty much the only nonchildren's book I was able to squeeze into my life" (14).[29] Flan's position as a reader serves both to strengthen her characterization as a dissatisfied housewife in need of excitement and change and, perhaps, to preempt critiques of the novel's many misappropriations of Whitman.

[29] To be fair, at other points in the novel, Flan seems impressively knowledgeable about Whitman, quoting passages from memory and spouting various bits of Whitman trivia, such as comparing the post-9/11 crackdown to the "Society for the Suppression of Vice" of Whitman's day (Brandeis 103).

Throughout *Self Storage*, Whitman's words facilitate Flan's moral makeover, urging her toward self-actualization and self-improvement under the banner of Whitman's famous opening line: "I celebrate myself" ("Song of Myself" 1.1). The novel opens with Flan's narration, "*I celebrate myself.* Sorry. I just can't do it. Walt Whitman starts 'Song of Myself,' the greatest poem in the world, with those three words. I wish I could follow his lead, start the same way, but I can't. The words sound tinny in my own voice—arrogant, wrong. Maybe someday I'll be able to say 'I celebrate myself' freely, even joyfully, like he does, but I'm not there yet" (3). As Flan navigates her feeling of being "trapped in Riverside" and "stuck in an endless loop" of childcare, she treats Whitman as a life guru—"my therapist, my priest, my touchstone"—and someone whose words she consciously lives by (38-39, 14, 117). His words guide Flan on her "very Whitmanesque" search for personal fulfillment, coded in the novel as "finding what makes you say Yes inside," and inspired by his line "You must habit yourself to the dazzle of the light and of every / moment of your life" (Brandeis 77, 66; Whitman, "Song of Myself" 46.35-36). While transitioning from self-doubt to self-celebration is characteristic of the postfeminist transformations of the mommy-lit genre, in its particular post-9/11 context, Whitman also helps Flan transition from security mom to risk-taker.[30] *Self Storage* is set in the summer of 2002, staged in the aftermath of 9/11 and in a year that "was one of the hottest on record so far" (Brandeis 6). Flan recalls the attacks, "It looked like a whole city was crumbling at once [...] The kids raced out of the bathroom, their mouths still ringed with foam. They looked so trusting, it just about killed me. How could I protect them with such shaky hands?" (94). 9/11 accentuates Flan's identity as a (security) mom, calling upon her to protect her children from risk despite her own fear.

[30] The "security mom" emerged in the 2004 US presidential campaign when *Time Magazine* featured the cover story "Goodbye, Soccer Mom. Hello, Security Mom." Karen Tumulty and Viveca Novak describe the security mom, "She used to say she would never allow a gun in her house, but now she feels better if her airline pilot has one. She wanted a nuclear freeze in the 1980s and was a deficit hawk in the 1990s, but she now believes the Pentagon should have whatever it wants. Her civil liberties seem less important than they used to, especially compared with keeping her children safe" (n.p.).

Guided by Whitman, Flan passes into risk-taking and eventual self-celebration through the crucible of her Afghan neighbor, Sodaba Suleiman. Flan describes herself as "endlessly curious" about Sodaba and her otherness, comparing her to a "dark exotic anemone," a "dark jellyfish," and even "a dark ghost" (38, 77, 115, 173). Brandeis reconfigures the dehumanizing and fetishistic underpinnings of Flan's obsession with Sodaba as part of her abundant Whitmanian empathy and curiosity. Flan muses, "I wonder if that's why our lives collided later; maybe my curiosity acted like a magnet, pulling her into my orbit. Maybe nothing would have happened if I hadn't been so intrigued" (38). Flan describes her curiosity as exerting a supernatural force on Sodaba, framing herself as magnet and actor while rendering Sodaba the passive object pulled into orbit. Though Flan comments, "Neither of us had any inkling of the duet we'd perform in the not-too-distant future," Sodaba remains gazeless and voiceless throughout the novel: she is clearly the object, rather than the partner, of Flan's duet fantasy (75).

Brandeis facilitates the collision of Flan and Sodaba's lives through an actual collision in which Sodaba nearly kills Flan's daughter, Nori, in a car accident. The diffuse racialized fear surrounding the Suleimans after 9/11—which Flan initially appears to resist—is eventually consolidated under the guise of coincidence, which brings the dangers of the other into focus. As Banita convincingly argues, the car accident "serves to sharpen an otherwise vague notion of the dangerous other, and simultaneously to defuse it by subordinating it to an environment of undifferentiated risk" (252). Here, the coincidence maintains a refusal of distinction according to the logics of the uniform hieroglyphic: risk remains diffuse and yet simultaneously alights on the Suleimans in particular, a contradiction that the very concept of the accident denies. As with *Freedom* and *Once in a Promised Land*, not even the novel's post-9/11 context of political and environmental crisis proves sufficient to actually power the plot, which once again turns to the car accident, in addition to a loosely rendered thriller plot, to move the story forward.

The thriller plot comes into focus when, in a largely incoherent turn of events, Flan is called upon to rescue Sodaba from the threat of deportation after the accident. Flan's immediate reaction, "What the fuck?" is one that readers likely share (172). In the face of this baffling summons, Flan turns to Whitman to resolve her uncertainty, producing what is arguably the most extended encounter with Whitman's poetry in *Self Storage,* meriting close reading for its depiction of self-help in practice. Flan reflects on harboring Sodaba:

> *I can say no*, I told myself. *I don't have to do a thing*. But somehow I wasn't convinced. […] Could I live with myself if I did this for Sodaba? Could I live with myself if I didn't? I thought of the bombings in Afghanistan. Could I let her and her unborn child go back to that kind of life?
>
> That's when I turned to Walt Whitman.
>
> I grabbed *Leaves of Grass* from my underwear drawer, and let the pages spread at random.
>
> […] This time, the book opened to the section about the runaway slave: *The runaway slave came to my house and stopped outside, […] He staid with me a week before he was recuperated and passed north, / I had him sit next me at table…my firelock leaned in the corner.*
>
> How could I read this and not help Sodaba afterward? I didn't want to put plasters on Sodaba's neck or soak her feet or do anything else of that nature, plus she probably wouldn't accept any clothes I had to offer her, but I could certainly lean my firelock in the corner, at least for a while. I hoped Shae would understand one day. (173-74)

Despite Flan's ongoing urges to "kill Sodaba […] or take off her burqa and use it as a noose," Flan decides to at least temporarily put down her weapons ("firelock") and to rescue Sodaba just as Whitman (according to her reading) rescued the runaway slave (183). She justifies her murderous desires with Whitman's aforementioned openness to contradiction: "I wanted to […] kiss her [Sodaba]. Maybe kill her. *Do I contradict myself? Very well then, I contradict myself*" (135).

The above passage marks the clearest example of Flan reading Whitman for self-help, as she turns to Whitman in a moment of personal crisis. Yet Flan's deployment of Whitman for self-help draws an uncomfortable and misleading analogy between Sodaba and the runaway slave that reveals the odd angles at which Whitman's poetry and Brandeis's novel meet. Despite the obvious symbolism of Whitman's runaway slave, Whitman never actually harbored a fugitive slave, and his record on

abolition is muddled at best.[31] As Dimock points out, "The runaway slave is not a *particular* slave, he is *any* slave, for the poet would have done as much for anyone bearing that generic identity, his goodwill also being offered generically, occasioned not by any qualities peculiar to the slave but by his membership in a collective category" ("Whitman" 73). In the context of the law, Dimock argues, "substitutability and interchangeability […] hardly detract from human dignity. They guarantee it" (73). Legal dignity becomes its own uniform hieroglyphic (as Chapter Four will explore in full), suggesting a dignity conferred *a priori*, without exception. Yet in the context of the novel, categoric personhood strips Sodaba of dignity, rendering her hardly a character at all. Instead, Sodaba serves as a mere narrative crutch to highlight Flan's white saviorism and personal growth, what Jasbir Puar and Amit Rai have called an "'easy icon' in need of [white] feminist rescue" (127). This mistranslation of Whitman's runaway slave, which Brandeis literalizes by projecting his generic identity onto the character of Sodaba, points to a formal problem with intertextuality as it crosses the border between the poem and the novel—a border across which the runaway slave, as a generic identity, struggles to translate.

In writer Laraine Herring's interview with Brandeis, included in the "Reader's Guide" that supplements the novel, Brandeis notes, "It's a huge responsibility, writing about another culture […]. In *Self Storage*, I hoped to convey our common humanity through Sodaba, even though it can quite literally be veiled by our differences on the surface. I wanted to get down to the beating human heart we all share" (273-74). Yet in trying to literalize the veiling of the self, Brandeis reinforces outdated and racist notions of the burqa's inherent oppression, constructing Sodaba as the limit case of

[31] Though Whitman denounced the Fugitive Slave Act, declaring [it] "is at all times to be defied […] by speech, by pen, and, if need be, by the bullet and the sword," he nonetheless believed fugitive slaves must be returned to their owners due to constitutionality: in answer to the question 'MUST RUNAWAY SLAVES BE DELIVERED BACK," he answered, "They must" (qtd. in Reynolds 145).

difference, and charging Sodaba with the burden of signifying race.[32] Brandeis's attempt to highlight the universality of the "beating human heart" through the exceptional case is always already doomed to failure: in the spirit of Dimock's Whitman, if we're really all different (and thus, if we're really all the same), then no one is *more* different than anyone else (274). Brandeis's universalizing gestures and investments in highlighting "the beating human heart we all share" are predicated on Sodaba's exceptional position (274). At the same time as Brandeis mines Sodaba's difference, she also obscures this difference through Whitman's poetry: Flan interprets Whitman as "a master at imagining himself in other skins. […] He could see himself as a soldier, a slave, a mother giving birth, a blade of grass" (73). As Banita points out, "The title phrase, 'self storage,' gains, then, the added significance of a self forcibly stored within another" (255). Rather than constructing Sodaba as an actual character whose interactions with Flan prompt moral change, Brandeis instead frames Sodaba as a sort of storage unit for Flan's ethical potential and sense of adventure, which, with the help of Whitman's poetry, is realized.

Turning now to how reading Whitman and helping Sodaba facilitate Flan's transformation, Flan sums up her own narrative trajectory: "I was stuck in an endless loop […]. Then Sodaba appeared on my doorstep and the entire script flew out the window" (117). Through rescuing Sodaba, Flan embraces risk and enables personal growth. Here, Lupton's writing on the connection between risk and personal growth is instructive:

> Voluntary risk-taking may also be viewed as a means of self-improvement, a form of working upon the self. This notion, which is commonly represented in self-help books, sees self-actualization in terms of a balance between opportunity and risk, choosing between an array

[32] The widespread western feminist mischaracterization of the veil as an inherently oppressive symbol is hardly new: feminist theorists like Chandra Mohanty and Saba Mahmood have critiqued western feminist conceptions of agency and freedom. As Butler writes, concisely summarizing such arguments, the "ostensible lack of agency signified by the veil or the burka, not only misunderstands the various cultural meanings that the burka might carry for the women who wear it, but also denies the very idioms of agency that are relevant for such women" (47).

> of opportunities, some of which may be more 'risky' than others. From this perspective, risk-taking is viewed as a way of extending one's usual habits and activities out of a habituated 'comfort zone.' (209-10)

Lupton also references Anthony Giddens, who quotes from a self-help book that argues, "If we reject deliberate risk-taking for self growth, we will inevitably remain trapped in our situation. Or we end up taking a risk unprepared. Either way, we have placed limits on our personal growth, have cut ourselves off from action in the service of high self-worth" (Giddens, *Modernity* 78). Flan's narrative of personal transformation neatly maps onto Lupton's description of risk-taking as self-help, a conduit to self-improvement. Armed with and guided by Whitman, Flan takes the voluntary risk of helping Sodaba, and in this way transitions from being trapped in her "comfort zone" to a sense of adventure.

The relationship between risk and personal growth illuminates how, in Brandeis's novel, helping the other is always folded back into self-help. After Flan decides to help Sodaba, she thinks to herself, "The woman who had put my daughter in the hospital, who had punctured my daughter's lung, maybe infected her liver. What in the hell was I doing helping her? *I and nobody else am the greatest traitor*" (183). Flan seemingly overcomes the mandates of the security mom to provide for the other's security. Yet in a moment of perhaps accidental intertextual irony, Brandeis punctuates Flan's love for the other with a line from Whitman describing masturbation, excising the line from its context: "I and nobody else am the / greatest traitor, / I went myself first to the headland, my own hands carried me there" ("Song of Myself" 28.21-28.23).[33] I recontextualize this line to suggest that Brandeis's faith in Whitman as an icon of outward attention may be fundamentally outsized, notwithstanding the fact that this outward attention is never actually achieved. We can follow critics like Christopher Merrill in reading Whitman's seemingly outward gaze as always already a projection of the self: Merrill writes

[33] Lerner's *10:04* also features an entire section on Ben masturbating at an intrauterine insemination clinic. For further discussion of the masturbatory resonances of *Leaves of Grass* and these lines in particular; see Ladkin 134; Erkkila, "Melville" 267; and Maslan 51.

that "Song of Myself" "requires the dissolution of the self, the union and scattering of its atoms over the sentries, the headland, and the sea—la petit mort, the French euphemism for orgasm: the little death. I is everywhere" (96).

Whitman's transcendent "I" thus becomes a sort of Möbius strip collapsing the boundaries between inward and outward attention: the self is everywhere and nowhere, both omnipresent and dissolved. If his "I" is everywhere, then Whitman himself becomes a uniform hieroglyphic. As Banita argues in relation to *Self Storage*, "Whitman's outward attention to the world and its inhabitants is used to gloss over the transcendental self-attention practiced by this book's protagonist" (257). Brandeis's attempts to mobilize Whitman's words to turn her protagonist away from herself and toward the outside world are structurally foiled by the form of the individual transformation narrative. While Brandeis constructs Whitman's text as a beacon of outward empathy, this beacon only serves to help Flan find the "Yes" in her own life, leading her on a journey to authenticity, self-expression, and self-celebration. Outward gestures are ultimately folded inward, and Whitman's vision of collectivity becomes a medium for the white woman's self-actualization.

Just as in this project's first chapter, the divergent endings of Franzen and Halaby's networked novels prompted investigations of the accessibility of the domestic retreat, the divergence between the Parkers and Suleimans' plotlines in *Self Storage* prompts investigations of the accessibility of voluntary risk-taking. Flan is forced to flee her home after aiding and abetting Sodaba under the somewhat flimsy threat of FBI apprehension. When Flan tells her friend Pia, "I might not be in any danger at all," Pia replies "It's more exciting this way […] Flan, you need a change […] You've been in a rut for too long now" (229-30). The risk of Flan's arrest is reinscribed as a chance for freedom, an opportunity for Flan to break out of what Brandeis calls her "rut" and what Lupton might call her "comfort zone," and to risk her way to an unequivocal happy ending (Brandeis 230, Lupton 209). Flan convinces her husband to go along with the escape by telling him, "This could be our adventure together. Our chance

[…] To taste the world" (Brandeis 237). Even in the so-called "crackdown" of the post-9/11 moment, risk does not consume, but rather liberates the Parkers.

Meanwhile, the ongoing threats facing Sodaba and her still-detained husband remain not only unknown, but entirely unaddressed. As Banita remarks, "as soon as Flan's virtue and compassion have been sufficiently underlined […] the Afghan couple […] exits the narrative" (259). This swift narrative exit—arguably an even more overt elimination of non-white characters than Lalitha's abrupt death in *Freedom*—prompts Richard Gray to offer the critique, "The Afghan characters here are narrative instruments, the beneficiaries of Flan's liberating gestures" (*After the Fall* 121). Just as *Once in a Promised Land* reveals the inaccessibility of the so-called domestic retreat to Halaby's Arab American protagonists, *Self Storage* reveals the exclusionary nature of risk-taking for personal growth in an era of suspicion, surveillance, and racial profiling. Only through the illusion of a universal crackdown—an illusion not even sustained through the internal world of the novel—can the reader celebrate the Parkers' escape, and tolerate the Suleimans' exiting of the narrative.

In the absence of any real depth to Flan's liberating gestures, the entire white savior plotline emerges as a narrative stepping-stone enabling Flan's literal and figurative escape into a better future. The Suleimans are exposed as mere instruments of Flan's transformation, while Whitman is exposed as not only a symbolic, but also a material instrument of Flan's reinvention. In a series of happy accidents, Flan comes into possession of another woman's passport, and her worn copy of *Leaves of Grass* ends up selling for ten thousand dollars to Jake, a Whitman look-alike who runs a rare books store. As Jeffrey Gonzalez describes, Brandeis's Whitman is "a gift that keeps on giving" (832). Jake writes Flan a check, hands her a blank notebook and tells her, "Now you can write your own Song" (247). As Flan contemplates the notebook's blank pages, she reflects, "That's where Whitman waited for me, I realized as we hurtled down the freeway: that empty space where his voice and mine could meet. A place where I could try to store my story, my self. His poem was the flashlight I'd use to peer

inward, the flashlight I'd use to usher forth my own dark pencil marks. I knew he wouldn't mind if I borrowed his opening line" (250-51). In a perhaps unexpected parallel to Lerner, Brandeis's book also metafictionally folds in on itself: Flan ultimately trades reading for writing, and the text is revealed as a sort of fictionalized autofiction, as Whitman's borrowed opening line, "I celebrate myself," becomes the opening line of Brandeis's first-person novel. Flan thus summons Whitman's opening line as her own narrative ending, marking the completion of her narrative arc from self-doubt into self-celebration. The Parkers embrace risk and hit the open road, flinging themselves into "Whitman's great Unknown" (231).

READING WHITMAN, READING RISK: *SPECIMEN DAYS*

In *Specimen Days,* Cunningham's characters have various encounters with Whitman, including reading *Leaves of Grass*, meeting Whitman himself on the streets of New York, forming a terrorist cult around his poetry, and programming androids with his lines. In what follows, I will touch briefly on "In the Machine" before discussing the "The Children's Crusade" in depth, to demonstrate how across these stories, reading Whitman leads to a reframing of risk. Beginning with "In the Machine," Whitman's line "to die is different from what any one supposed, and luckier" becomes a refrain against risk management ("Song of Myself" 6.38). The despairing protagonist, Lucas, seeks to keep his beloved Catherine from attending work due to a threat he perceives lurking within the machines. He stumbles upon Walt Whitman, who directs him, "Go north. Go up to the edges of the city and beyond. Go see where the buildings diminish and the grass begins" (75). Following Whitman's instructions, Lucas looks at the stars and thinks: "Walt had sent him here, to find this, and he understood. […] It was what the book told him, night after night. When he died he would leave his defective body and turn into grass. He would be here like this, forever. There was no reason to fear it" (79). Lucas interprets the message of *Leaves of Grass* ("what the book told him") as one of renewal,

a renewal founded upon the lack of distinction between life and death (79). This interpretation is produced through a particular kind of fundamentalist and literalist reading of Whitman's *magnum opus*.

Under the spell of his transformative encounter with Whitman, Lucas shifts his perspective toward the geologic, reframing his fear of death by considering his own body's inevitable rebirth through grass, and thereby reinterpreting risk. Returning home for his nightly ritual of reading Whitman, Lucas comes upon the lines, "*The smallest sprout shows there is really no death, / […] All goes onward and outward, nothing collapses, / And to die is different from what anyone supposed, and luckier*" (qtd. in Cunningham 79). The ecological investments of Whitman's poetry, when decontextualized, allow Lucas to deny the very category of death. Lucas's encounter—with Whitman himself, with nature, and with Whitman's words—convinces him to martyr himself to spare Catherine from the machines, and the story ends with his death. According to Whitman's vision of endless renewal, the arguable tragedy of Lucas's death is transformed through the crucible of ecology: the stoppage of Lucas's heart is quickly transposed into the image of "the grass under your feet," echoing Whitman's line from the final stanza of "Song of Myself," "I bequeath myself to the dirt to grow from the grass I love, / If you want me again look for me under your boot-soles" (Cunningham, *Specimen Days* 101; Whitman 52.10-52.11). The uniform hieroglyphic of grass homologizes life and death, emptying these categories of their meanings, and *de-risking* risk.

"The Children's Crusade" stages the most extended reframing of risk via Whitman. Forensic psychologist Cat encounters Whitman through the terrorist organization inspired by his words, led by a woman who calls herself Walt Whitman (henceforth referred to as "Walt"). Through this encounter, Cat transitions from managing risk to embracing risk. Cat is an obvious cipher for suspicious ways of reading the world in the post-9/11 moment, speaking to the long-standing relationship between the detective and the critic. In *The Novel and the Police* (1988), D. A. Miller describes the realist novel's webs of cause and effect, where "the trifling detail […] is suddenly invested with immense significance"

(27). "This process finds its most programmatic embodiment in detective fiction," he suggests, as "the detail literally incriminates" (28). This paranoid strategy of the realist novel to connect the seemingly unconnected—detailed in full in Chapter One—is also the strategy of the suspicious critic. In *The Limits of Critique* (2015), Rita Felski discusses what detective stories might reveal about contemporary suspicious reading protocols and describes critique's infection by paranoia. Analogizing detection and critique under the banner of suspicious readings, Felski argues that both modes of reading share "a penchant for interrogating and indicting, a conviction that deceit and deception are ubiquitous and that everyone has something to hide, a commitment to hunting down criminal agents," and "a professionally mandated mood: an ambient attitude of mistrust that expresses itself in a refusal to let down one's guard" (86). While longstanding debates around the novel and disciplinary power inform my reading of "The Children's Crusade," so too does the newer field of the "criminal humanities." In the first book-length exploration of the criminal humanities, Michael Arntfield and Marcel Danesi (2016) describe the criminal humanities as "the overlaying of literature and narrative on to the study of criminals and their victims," likening the discipline to the medical humanities (3). While the former scholarship, including Miller and Felski, provides useful theoretical context, connecting reading and suspicion in a figurative sense, the latter scholarship enables discussion of how forensic readings are put into practice in a literal sense, not only in the novel but also in the world.

Against the backdrop of this relationship between the detective and the critic, Cat's encounter with Whitman comes into relief. Tracing the arc of this transformative encounter, which leads her from risk management to embracing risk, necessitates examining Cat before and after Whitman. At the beginning of "The Children's Crusade," Cat describes her work: "You got a little crazy, working the nuts. […] Bartenders must start seeing a world full of drunks; lawyers must see it as largely made up of the vengefully injured. Forensic psychologists got infected by paranoia" (Cunningham, *Specimen Days* 121). Echoing this project's earlier discussion of risk's assignment by perception rather than

actuality, Cat conveys the ways in which attention to risk produces risk: Cat is a hammer to whom everyone looks like a nail. Reread in light of this analogy, Cat's perception of risk as universal, and suspicion as a uniform hieroglyphic—"they all seemed like potentials. They *were*, in fact, all potentials. Everyone was"—points to her "professionally mandated mood" as a forensic psychologist, and to her "conviction that deceit and deception are ubiquitous" (Cunningham 127, Felski 86). On guard against her vulnerability to infection by paranoia, Cat describes, "The trick was to keep living with the conviction that almost everyone was actually harmless. It was the job's central irony. If you weren't careful, you could get as paranoid as the people you dealt with" (Cunningham 138). The occupational hazards of the forensic psychologist are thus doubly paranoid, requiring vigilance against vigilance itself. This recursive formulation mirrors Felski's observations of the "critiques of critique," which "only draws us further into a suspicious mind-set, as we find ourselves caught in an endless regress of skeptical questioning" (9).

For Cunningham, Cat is an ideal vehicle for exploring risk management and reading practices not only because of her occupation, but also because of her function as an expert reader within his detective story. Through Cat's reading, *Specimen Days* stages the criminal humanities in practice. Drawing on Simon Stern's definition of the clue as "the significant detail that does not come into visibility until an expert recognizes and interprets it," Felski describes the clue as "a product of specialized knowledge—a hieroglyph to which the expert holds the key" (98). (Here, specialized knowledge allows the hieroglyphic to be read, whereas the uniformity of Whitman's hieroglyphic—its utter lack of specialization—prevents its reading.) Cat's familiarity with Whitman gives her an edge in tracking down the bombers. When a child terrorist calls Cat and tells her, "Nobody really dies. We go on in the grass. We go on in the trees" and "Every atom of mine belongs to you," she detects, "I think it was a line from Walt Whitman. *Leaves of Grass*" (Cunningham 134). The narrator describes, "Cat was probably the only department member who'd recognize it [Whitman]; she was without question the

only one on the premises who'd read Winnicott and Klein, Whitman and Dostoyevsky" (134). Thus, Cat's specialized knowledge of Whitman—in other words, her unique way of reading—allows her to crack the case.

While Cunningham positions Cat as an expert reader of risks due to her educational background, I also want to suggest a connection between her expertise and her identity. In contrast to Banita, who reads "The Children's Crusade" as a reversal of racial stereotypes because "the policewoman is black," I propose in contrast that Cat's identity as a Black woman plays into still more stereotypes around vigilance ("Race, Risk, and Fiction" 262). Cat describes the feeling of being watched, "She felt it. Any woman could; it was survival coding," and elsewhere describes code switching into "[t]he queenly bearing and the schoolmarm diction, the smiling ultraformality. You did what you had to do" (Cunningham 124, 117). In this sense, just as for Mark Spitz in *Zone One,* navigating the risks of living as a Black man in the United States uniquely prepares him to navigate the risks of the zombie apocalypse, Cat's "survival coding" as a Black woman uniquely prepares her for the forensic work of risk management. Interestingly, Cunningham also seems to connect Cat's identity to her knowledge of poetry. When Cat informs her wealthy white boyfriend about the Whitmanian aspect of the terrorist plot, he replies, "I've never read Whitman." Cat thinks to herself, "*Of course you haven't. You're Cedar Rapids. You're Cornell and a Harvard MBA. Your people don't do poetry. They don't need to*" (144). Cat's internal monologue raises the question of who "needs" poetry. In contrast to *10:04*'s association of poetry with loafing, Cat here frames poetry as a necessity, though notably not for everyone, recalling lines of thinking that circulate among Black feminist theory such as Audre Lorde's classic essay "Poetry Is Not a Luxury" (1977).

Though Cat's literary education is a unique asset in the police department, she is also a lay reader who "hadn't thought about him [Whitman], really, since college. Yes, she was an avid reader, but she wasn't the kind of person who sat home at night and read poetry for pleasure" (Cunningham,

Specimen Days 139). For this reason, she seeks the expertise of a Whitman scholar. At this point, "The Children's Crusade" becomes an exercise in the criminal humanities, where literary interpretation becomes a conduit to interpreting motive.[34] "The Children's Crusade" turns readers and professors of poetry into expert forensic investigators. Cat tracks down New York University Professor Rita Dunn and interrogates her about Whitman's poetry, asking questions such as "Can you give me some idea about Whitman's message to his readers" (158). She searches for an answer like an interrogator might search for a confession. Cat's interview with Dunn reflects one vision of a revived utility for the humanities, put to forensic ends.

We might read Cunningham's novel, then, as offering a dark rejoinder to seemingly ubiquitous questions of literature's utility: the study of literature is legitimated as providing specialized knowledge that might uncover clues in criminal cases. Poetry is pathologized, and forensic reading is professionalized. Interestingly, the terrorists themselves offer an alternative to these forensic ways of reading. When Cat interrogates Walt, she questions, "Why did you choose Whitman?" and what "message" she "wanted the boys to get" from Whitman's poetry (205). Walt initially responds, "Oh, I don't think you get a message from poetry, really. You get a sense of beauty" (205). I cannot help but read this scene as a dramatization of aforementioned poet laureate Billy Collins's poem "Introduction to Poetry," his own treatise on ways of reading, which ends with the lines, "But all they want to do / is tie the poem to a chair with rope / and torture a confession out of it. // They begin

[34] Literary studies, in the wake of 9/11, has seen a robust debate around the identification between literature and terrorism. Scholarly accounts of this relationship, such as Peter Boxall's chapter "A Curious Knot" in *Twenty-First-Century Fiction* (2013), often refer back to Don DeLillo's *Mao II* (1991), in which Gray, the protagonist, declares: "There's a curious knot that binds novelist and terrorists" (41). It seems likely that Cunningham drew inspiration for "The Children's Crusade" from DeLillo's novel. Cunningham's bombers' refrain "We all work for the company" evokes Gray's notion of writers as "all incorporated" (Cunningham 187, DeLillo 41). Similarly, terrorist leader Walt's line "Whitman was the last great man who really and truly loved the world," closely echoes Gray's pronouncement, "Beckett is the last writer to shape the way we think and see" (Cunningham 205, DeLillo 157).

beating it with a hose / to find out what it really means" (*Sailing* 16). Walt speaks back to Cat's mode of reading, attempting to awaken her to poetry's beauty, rather than its evidentiary value, and to awaken her to a new way of reading beyond suspicion.

After encountering Whitman through the child bombers and their leader, Cat relinquishes her risk-management. She adopts a temporarily thwarted child terrorist and flees New York, armed with a sack of groceries and a copy of *Leaves of Grass*. Just as *Self Storage* ends with an escape for the Parkers, as they point their car west to the open road, the ending of "The Children's Crusade" also embraces a risky unknown. The story's ending takes Whitman's refusal of distinction to its logical extreme, collapsing symbolic binaries by integrating cop and terrorist, love and violence, and rejecting a return to order. We might read Cat's escape with the child terrorist as her victory in a battle against paranoia, as she finally adopts "the conviction that almost everyone was actually harmless," trading risk management for blind faith (138). Yet Cat does not believe the boy is harmless, but recognizes in him "the face of true intent," detecting his "murderous smile" and smiling back (213, 214). Cat acknowledges the boy may one day "decide that he finally loved her enough to kill her": in accordance with Whitman's refusal of distinction, the boundaries between love and murder have become indistinguishable, and the story's ending repeats the refrain "*To die is different than what any one supposes, and luckier*" (195, 214).

In this sense, Cat's narrative ending diverges from Flan's flirtation with danger in rejecting the very terms of danger itself. Returning to Dimock's analysis, "The Whitmanian self is thus always lucky, he can only be lucky, whether he lives or dies," Cunningham seems to use Whitman's noncontingent poetics to reject the terms by which we might code the ending of "The Children's Crusade" ("Whitman" 77). Banita, similarly drawing on Dimock's writing, interprets Cunningham's ending thus: "if dying is luckier, then the whole structure of illusions distinguishing life and death, safety and risk, becomes flawed or invalid. If this hypothesis is accurate, then the reason why Cat fearlessly leaves the

city with a potential criminal in tow is not that she has decided to bravely face the risk, but simply that she no longer believes in risk at all" ("Race" 264). Cat's narrative is subsumed into Whitman's undifferentiated vision of risk, obfuscating questions of whether "The Children's Crusade" is a cautionary tale or a tale against caution itself.

READING WHITMAN, READING RISK: *10:04*

While in *Self Storage* and *Specimen Days,* encounters with Whitman primarily enact change through the plot, leading characters to embrace risk, the unknown, and even death, in *10:04*, Ben's encounter with Whitman primarily enacts change through the novel's own form and aesthetics. For Ben, reading Whitman fundamentally changes the book he is writing, which, in accordance with Lerner's metafictional project, becomes the book we end up reading. Prior to encountering Whitman, Ben begins writing a novel in which a living author tries to sell fabricated correspondences with dead authors. At a dinner with several other writers, Ben describes his attitude toward the project: "I was trying to sound excited about the project I was describing, but felt, despite the wine, dispirited: another novel about fraudulence, no matter the bruised idealism at its core" (119). In what follows, I will closely read part four of Lerner's novel, which documents Ben's Marfa residency, as an exercise in practices of reading Whitman sincerely (though not uncritically). In response to this encounter with Whitman, Lerner embraces in his novel an aesthetics of risk, and reaches out to his readers just as Whitman attempts to "spring from the pages" of his poetry ("So Long" 66).

Ben brings *Specimen Days*, the collection of Whitman's impressionistic prose after which Cunningham's novel is titled, to his Marfa residency, where he prepares to teach a course on Whitman. He grows disillusioned with Whitman's utopian poetics and "everyman" persona: "Whitman, because he wants to stand for everyone, because he wants to be less a historical person than a marker for democratic personhood, can't really write a memoir full of a life's particularities," Ben describes (168).

Lerner thus diagnoses "what makes the book [*Specimen Days*] bizarre" in the same manner Dimock diagnoses "The problem with Whitman," referring to the tension between the "democratic" and "phenomenological self" (Lerner, *10:04* 168; Dimock, "Whitman" 71). To contextualize Lerner's critique, Whitman tried famously hard to present himself as a "marker for democratic personhood" (*10:04* 168). The first edition of *Leaves of Grass* excludes the name of the author on its cover and title pages. In place of Whitman's name in the paratext was an etching of a daguerreotype (of which Whitman had several), an image of a man in laborer's clothes, clearly intended to evoke a working-class everyman, which became known as "the carpenter" (see Reisch 113).

While *10:04* insightfully problematizes the "everyman" Whitman, Lerner also deploys Whitman as a cipher to problematize the universalizing gestures of literature more broadly. In contrast, Ben takes up the project of exposing the particular material conditions under which his fiction and poetry are written. At his residency at Marfa, which provides him with "a house, a stipend, a car," he describes hearing "voices in Spanish: men were working on the roof" (159, 172). Ben tries "to imagine how they [the workers] imagined me or the other residents in the houses they maintained, residents whose labor could be hard to tell apart from leisure, from loafing" (172). In addition to describing the disembodied voices of the men at work on the house in which he writes, Ben elsewhere attends to the "swift underclass of Spanish-speaking laborers" at a book talk (118). In contrast to the poet as manual laborer evoked by Whitman's daguerreotype, Ben exposes not only the division between his labor as a writer and other forms of labor, but also the reliance of his writing on this division, naming the structures of class and race that make his own literary production possible. Connecting Lerner's attention to the politics of literary production to modes of reading, O'Dell reads Lerner's regard for the "the human labor, in all its alienated forms, that bring a particular work of literature into being" against paranoid modes of reading: rather than encouraging readers to be "on the lookout for un-mined subtext," O'Dell argues, Lerner's novel encourages "the recognition that universal

representation is a fantasy and that trans-historical literary value should be questioned" (455). Pulling back the curtain on the process of literary production, then, becomes a defensive gesture allowing readers to suspend paranoia.

While Ben, particularly during his residency, seems to use Whitman as a figure to contravene—a benchmark against which to measure the erasures of literature—Whitman's writing nonetheless inspires in him the possibility of literary transpersonality. Eventually, his encounter with Whitman makes him rewrite his entire novel. After reading Whitman at Marfa, Ben describes, "I'd been hard on Whitman during my residency, hard on his impossible dream, but [...] we made, if not a pact, a kind of peace. Say that it was standing there that I decided to replace the book I'd proposed with the book you're reading now [...] I resolved to dilate my story not into a novel about literary fraudulence, about fabricating the past, but into an actual present alive with multiple futures" (*10:04* 194). Yet Lerner does not merely "replace" the proposed book with a new version, but rather incorporates this *avant-texte* into the final version of the novel, leaving his process of drafting and revision in for us to read. As O'Dell writes, "in keeping these portions, the novel allows Lerner to leave a trace of this erasure, in turn promoting a sincere mode of reading that recognizes the erasure on which the fantasy of sincerity is founded" (456). Through the form of his revised novel, Ben resurrects his own idealism without erasing the traces of its bruises, redeeming his novel from fraudulence by exposing its fraud: *10:04*'s *avant-texte,* which encodes the risks of writing itself, is exposed, rather than erased.

While Ben states overtly that his encounter with Whitman changed his novel, the question remains of how this transformation connects to risk. To answer this question, I turn to *10:04*'s description of the "Institute for Totaled Art," housed in the Brooklyn apartment of his sometimes-girlfriend, Alena. This fictional institute, based on the real-world Salvage Art Institute founded by the Polish American artist Elka Krajewska, collects damaged works of art that "had transitioned from being a repository of immense financial value to being declared of zero value without undergoing what

was to me any perceptible material transformation […] it was no longer a commodity fetish; it was art before or after capital" (Lerner 134). Toward the novel's end, as Hurricane Sandy floods lower Manhattan, Ben hearkens back to Alena's project: he describes, "Scores of Chelsea galleries had been inundated and soon the insurers would be welcoming the newly totaled art into their vast warehouses. Alena's work wasn't on a ground floor, I remembered; besides, she strategically damaged her paintings in advance; they were storm-proof" (231). In her essay "Totaling the Damage: Revolutionary Ambition in Recent American Poetry" (2015), Jennifer Ashton draws a parallel between Alena's totaled art and Lerner's novel itself: "The ingenious form of aesthetic resistance that the novel imagines for itself is based on Alena's ingenious form of risk management. *10:04* imagines, in short, that instead of the work of art being subsumed within the inevitable damages of capital, the damages of capital are subsumed within it. *10:04* presents itself as the achievement of this work," she writes (n.p.). Following Ashton's suggestion, Lerner creates his own form of totaled art by leaving traces of the alterations and damages that disfigure his writing: in doing so, he effectively storm-proofs his own novel, incorporating risk before it arrives.

Beyond embracing an aesthetics of risk management, Lerner's encounter with Whitman also leads him to embrace risk and contingency in the figure of the reader. Lerner's novel has often been considered a work of New Sincerity (see O'Dell and Voelz), and while I am not primarily concerned here with making a case around categorization, I do seek to borrow critics' useful outlining of the fundamentally dialogic nature of New Sincerity texts. Adam Kelly writes that New Sincerity works are "ultimately defined by their undecidability and the affective response they invite and provoke in their readers, with questions of sincerity embedded, on a number of levels, into the reader's contingent experience of the text" ("The New Sincerity" 206). Zadie Smith characterizes the writing of David Foster Wallace and his contemporaries as primarily "attempting to make something happen off the page, outside words, a curious thing for a piece of writing to want to do" ("Brief" 143). What we see

in Brandeis, Cunningham, and Lerner's metafictional portrayals of their characters reading Whitman is, I suggest, a literary depiction of precisely what Smith is describing. These intertexts show us what happens off the page, on the page: that is, Whitman "make[s] something happen" off the pages of his poetry, and that something is recorded on the pages of these intertextual novels.

Kelly argues, also writing on Wallace's fiction, that "[i]n Wallace's terms, the greatest terror, but also the only true relief, is the passive decision to relinquish the self to the judgment of the other, and the fiction of the New Sincerity is thus structured and informed by this dialogic appeal to the reader's attestation and judgment," and adds, "this uncertainty is structural, allowing as it does for a genuine futurity that only the reader can provide" ("David Foster Wallace" 143, 145). If there is, as I suggested in this project's first chapter, an incompatibility between contingency and narrative, then attempts to dialogically engage the reader—whether we call such attempts New Sincerity or recall Whitman's insistent line "It is I you hold and who holds you"—intervene in this incompatibility by restoring contingency in the figure of the reader ("So Long!" 65). As Mark Doty writes in his recent *What is the Grass: Walt Whitman in My Life* (2020) of Whitman's line "I stop somewhere waiting for you," "He waits for us because the poem requires us, because it is no ordinary poem, in the usual sense of an aesthetic object complete in itself. It *is* a poem, a remarkable one, but it's also a call to change our way of seeing self and other" (Whitman, "Song of Myself" 52.17; Doty 6).

In what constitutes *10:04*'s most obvious debts to Whitman, the novel's concluding pages complete Ben's transformation, via his encounter with Whitman, from suspicion to emulation. The novel's final passages switch tense, voice, and form to address readers directly. Ben narrates moving through New York as he and Alex prepare for yet another storm: "Lower Manhattan was black behind us, its densities intuitive […]. The moon is high in the sky and you can see its light on the water. I want to say something to the schoolchildren of America," he writes (239). Lerner here borrows—unattributed—a line from President Reagan's *Challenger* speech: "I want to say something to the

schoolchildren of America who were watching the live coverage of the shuttle's takeoff. I know it is hard to understand, but sometimes painful things like this happen" (Reagan n.p.). He also plagiarizes Whitman throughout this concluding section, admitting, "What I mean is that our faceless presences were flickering, every one disintegrated, yet part of the scheme. I'm quoting now, like John Gillespie […] everything else I hear tonight will sound like Whitman, the similitudes of the past, and those of the future, corresponding" (*10:04* 238-39). Here and throughout the final paragraphs, Lerner borrows from the following lines of Whitman's "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry":

> The simple, compact, well-join'd scheme, myself disintegrated, every
> one disintegrated yet part of the scheme,
> The similitudes of the past and those of the future,
> […]
> It avails not, time nor place—distance avails not,
> I am with you, you men and women of a generation, or ever so many
> generations hence
> (2.2-3.3)

Describing his and Alex's journey home, Ben concludes the novel by blending his, Reagan's, and Whitman's words, "I will begin to remember our walk in the third person, as if I'd seen it from the Manhattan Bridge, but, at the time of writing, as I lean against the chain-link fence intended to stop jumpers, I am looking back at the totaled city in the second person plural. I know it's hard to understand / I am with you, and I know how it is" (Lerner, *10:04* 240). Here, Lerner's narrative, like a condensed version of the temporal continuum of Cunningham's triptych, switches from *10:04'*s prior four parts' past tense ("Lower Manhattan was black behind us") to present ("The moon is high in the sky") to future ("I will begin to remember our walk"), and then back to the present ("I am looking back"). Beyond these temporal shifts, Lerner also shifts in voice from first person to second person plural, and shifts in form from prose to poetry. These shifts in temporality, voice, and form produce Lerner's most forceful attempt to embody the "would-be Whitman of the vulnerable grid" (4). He mirrors "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry's" collapse of time and space, as if inspired by the poem's

lines "it avails not, time nor place—distance avails not, / I am with you" to project himself into the future, and into the arms of his readers (3.1-3.2).

10:04's ending, according to my reading, brings the text back to Ben's poetic origin story, this time infused with Whitman, as he fulfills his resolve to become "one of the artists who momentarily made bad forms of collectivity figures of its possibility" and fulfills his resolve to "write a novel that dissolves into a poem" (108, 158). Further, the ending of *10:04* reveals the relationship between these two forms of resolve. In *Contemporary Literature and the End of the Novel* (2015), Pieter Vermeulen describes affect's "refusal to be contained by individual subjects," cleaving "categories such as the individual, the nation, and even the human" (8, 16). In his coda on James Meek, Vermeulen describes affect's ability to "cut across the boundaries of the individual and the collective that the novel has traditionally drawn and policed" (134-35). Extending Vermeulen's comment on the novel to literature more broadly, poetry, like the novel, draws and polices boundaries. According to Lerner, poetry might even be said to transcend such boundaries, or at the very least to widen their limits. In *The Hatred of Poetry*, Lerner describes, "I tended to find lines of poetry beautiful only when I encountered them quoted in prose, in the essays my professors had assigned in college, where the line breaks were replaced with slashes, so that what was communicated was less a particular poem than the echo of poetic possibility" (22). Lerner locates beauty, then, in the place where prose and poetry meet, as they do in Reagan's speech: we might view this meeting place as the place where formal boundaries, and by extension the boundaries between individual and collective, are renegotiated, turning a "mass murderer['s]" repackaging of "a terrible poem" into a figure of the "real possibility" of "collectivity" (Lerner, *10:04* 116). By dissolving their prose into Whitman's poetry (and in Lerner's case, his own poetry), these novels attempt to mobilize this sense of poetic possibility, though they struggle to actualize this possibility within their plots.

How are we to reconcile *10:04*'s final attempts at transpersonality and collectivity with Lerner's own critiques of such universalizing gestures? This need for reconciliation responds to the contradiction within *10:04* and its ending: Lerner both names and remakes Whitman's mistakes. To illustrate this contradiction, I turn back to an earlier point in the novel in which Lerner takes a less ecstatic view of the lines from "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry" that end his novel: he writes, "he [Whitman] has to be nobody in particular in order to be a democratic everyman, has to empty himself out so that his poetry can be a textual commons for the future into which he projects himself. And he is always projecting himself: 'I am with you, you men and women of a generation, or ever so many generations hence; / I project myself—also I return—I am with you, and know how it is'" (*10:04* 168). In *The Hatred of Poetry*, Lerner pushes his suggestion even further, expanding his argument about the "textual commons" from Whitman's poetry to Whitman himself: "Walt Whitman is himself a place for the genuine, an open space or textual commons where American readers of the future can forge and renew their sense of possibility and interconnectedness," he writes (49). In quoting these lines from Whitman at his novel's end, then, and in turning to his own poetry, Lerner tries to empty out his writing and himself—recalling Merrill's descriptions of the reliance of "Song of Myself" on "the dissolution of the self"—to become a textual commons for his reader, a perhaps surprising gesture for a work of autofiction (96).

There is a strange inconsistency here, that after so many pages of critiquing Whitman's project (surely Lerner's "pact" or "peace" does not erase these criticisms), Lerner adopts Whitman's impossible project as his own. As Elaine Blair writes in her review of *10:04*:

> It may be presumptuous for a white, male scion of the professional American middle classes to offer a fictionalized version of his life as representative of a larger public. It's certainly presumptuous for almost any literary novelist to imagine he'd have enough readers to add up to a public in the first place. But isn't that what Ben would be doing anyway, in crypto form, if he wrote about the forger? Instead, he's going to admit his outrageous ambitions outright, and do his best to justify them. It's part of the effort of making a writer's labour visible. And you could argue that the riskiest thing for a writer-narrator to confess is not something from his so-called private life, but his desire to speak to us and move us with his novel. (n.p.)

Following Blair's reading, Lerner makes himself vulnerable to the very critiques he levies at Whitman, vulnerable to the contingency of his future readers, and vulnerable to what he calls in an interview "the embarrassment of ambitious american [sic] poetry" (qtd. in Dickman). In thinking with Whitman, then, Lerner succeeds in writing himself "from irony to sincerity in the sinking city, a would-be Whitman of the vulnerable grid" (*10:04* 4). Lerner's formal risks here respond to the risks of his own embarrassing Whitmanian ambitions.

In their account of New Sincerity, Mitchum Huehls and Rachel Greenwald Smith describe a class of writers who articulate "their formal innovations as responses to the literary marketplace" (8). "For these white male writers," they write, "this self-fashioning was often a direct response to the threat of other competing audiences and products," such as Franzen's appraisal of the shrinking "tribe" of white male readers, while "a readership of women and people of color [was] on the rise" (8). Extending Huehls and Smith's account to *10:04,* we can locate Lerner's metafictional project within the tradition of such formal risks, and his dialogic appeal to readers as an investment in consumer affect. In the conclusion to his seminal New Sincerity manifesto, "E unibus pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction," Wallace writes:

> The next real literary "rebels" in this country might well emerge as some weird bunch of anti-rebels, born oglers who dare somehow to back away from ironic watching, who have the childish gall actually to endorse and instantiate single-entendre principles. […] The new rebels might be artists willing to risk the yawn, the rolled eyes, the cool smile, the nudged ribs, the parody of gifted ironists, the "Oh how banal." To risk accusations of sentimentality, melodrama. Of overcredulity. Of softness. (192-93)

Reading Wallace's essay with writers like Brandeis in mind, it strikes me that hardly any genre risks the exclamation "Oh how banal" and accusations of "sentimentality," "melodrama," "overcredulity," and "softness," more than mommy-lit and self-help. To ground this suggestion in the material, the two novels by women authors discussed in this project thus far, *Self Storage* and *Once in a Promised Land*, both have readers' guides appended to their text. In *Self Storage*, this takes the shape of "Reading Group

Questions and Topics for Discussion" while in Halaby's novel, this takes the form of a "Reading Group Guide" (see Brandeis 281-83, Halaby 339-44). For these women authors, the dialogic, relational nature of literature is already assumed, as evidenced through the textual apparatuses surrounding their novels. While New Sincerity's politics of race and gender cannot be fully unpacked in these pages, this discussion of risk and reading would be remiss not to identify the question of whose risk-taking is seen as political and whose is seen as merely personal, and whose risks pay off and whose are dismissed.

While the sense of risk and vulnerability written into *10:04*'s ending absorbs some of the novel's contradictions, Lerner's sense of embarrassment insufficiently resolves his novel's inconsistencies. Indeed, the contradictions contained within the uniform hieroglyphic remain unresolved in all three Whitman-inflected novels, which expose the illusions of the uniform hieroglyphic only to ecstatically reinvest in these same illusions. These novels can only follow Whitman in embracing risk by papering over their own insights about its uneven distribution. Despite their enormous differences in genre and authorial positioning, *10:04*, *Self Storage*, and *Specimen Days* are united in their mutual embarrassment over their own invocations of Whitman. While Flan consistently turns to Whitman for direction and solace, she admits that upon first encounter, she "found Whitman a little embarrassing at first, a little rhapsodic for my pseudojaded taste (a recently acquired trait, via my boyfriend Rob)" (13). Here, *Self Storage* suggests that Whitman's unapologetic enthusiasm and sincerity bear a certain shame in an era of postmodern cynicism, evoking Riley's commentary that "Under the conditions of crisis neoliberalism, 'risk' has become sutured to a phobia of being singled out as naïve, stupid, or shallow" (218). Risk perception and risk management have thus become sutured to a particular mode of suspicious reading, which Whitman's rhapsodic verses disrupt. Flan's embarrassment mediates (albeit inconsistently) her admiration for Whitman throughout the novel. For example, when she extends her "find your Yes" advice to a friend, she finds herself self-conscious: "I didn't know I was going to say that. It just popped out of my mouth. It felt like something I would

have overheard at Grounded. It felt like something Whitman might have said" (Brandeis 66). Here, Whitman's lines become commensurate with the marketing ploys of Grounded, a new-age coffee shop.

Beyond the embarrassment of Whitman's rhapsody, Cunningham and Lerner also point to an embarrassment over Whitman's particular Americanness. Cunningham describes in the preface to *Laws for Creations,* his 2006 collection of Whitman's poetry and prose, "The America of my novel [*Specimen Days*] is meant to be Whitman's America extended, which is, I know, a rather grand claim on my part, but a novelist who's afraid of embarrassing himself by trying to do more than he's capable of doing should probably think about going into some other line of work" (xxiii). Similarly, when asked in an interview about "where Whitman fits in your mind now that you're done with the novel [*10:04*]," Lerner replied, "maybe it's the embarrassment of Whitman that has been obsessing me because it is in so many ways the embarrassment of ambitious american [sic] poetry" (qtd. in Dickman n.p.). It is worth noting here that while Cunningham and Lerner's embarrassment is linked to excesses of grandiosity and ambition, Brandeis's embarrassment, articulated through Flan, appears linked to excesses of insecurity and shame. Beyond embarrassment around the particularly American dimension of Whitman's ambitions, Lerner goes a step further in locating his embarrassment in the very occupation of poet: he describes, "most of us carry at least a weak sense of a correlation between poetry and human possibility that cannot be realized by poems. The poet by his very claim to be a maker of poems is therefore both an embarrassment and accusation" (*Hatred* 13). There is an embarrassment, then, not just to Whitman's "impossible desire," as Lerner writes in his book of criticism, and to Whitman's "impossible dream," as he writes in his novel, but to poetry in general, and its link—however tenuous—to human possibility (*Hatred* 99, *10:04* 194).

Placing *10:04* in conversation with Lerner's own literary criticism and commentary raises important questions of identity and positionality, with implications for debates around whether poetry and the novel might ever be "transpersonal," and whether a "communal body" might ever exist

(Lerner, *10:04* 114). While the embarrassment of Whitman becomes a stand in for the embarrassing ambitions of poetry in the era of the risk society, the embarrassment of Whitman in particular is not entirely interchangeable, defying readings of Whitman as himself a uniform hieroglyphic. Lerner describes the specificity of his embarrassment over Whitman in *The Hatred of Poetry:*

> What makes Walt Whitman so powerful and powerfully embarrassing a founding figure for American poetry is that he is explicit about the contradictions inherent in the effort to "inhabit all." This is also what makes it so silly to imply Whitman's poetic ideal was ever accomplished in the past and that we've since declined—because of identity politics—into avoidable fractiousness. "I am the poet of slaves, and of the masters of slaves," Whitman wrote in his journal, indicating the impossible desire to both recognize and suspend difference within his poems, to be no one in particular so he could stand for everyone. You can hate contemporary poetry—in any era—as much as you want for failing to realize the fantasy of universality, but the haters should stop pretending any poem ever successfully spoke for everyone. (64-5)

The impossibility of Whitman's desire to "inhabit all" and to "recognize and suspend difference" lies in the particularity of Whitman's identity as a writer, and in the particularity of his readers' identities (64). Langston Hughes famously responds to Whitman's poem "I hear America Singing" with the lines "I, too, sing America […] / I, too, am America" (107). The "I, too" of Hughes's poem makes visible the illusions of Whitman's fantasy of universality: in contrast to Merrill's aforementioned analysis that in "Song of Myself," "[Whitman's] I is everywhere," the insistent "I" of Hughes's poem reminds us that his "I" and Whitman's are not the same (Merrill 96). Herein lies the risk of emulating Whitman: only through the elimination of distinction can Whitman claim, "I am the poet of slaves, and of the masters of slaves," and only through revisionism can Whitman's poetic ideal be resurrected with nostalgia throughout these novels (*Notebooks* 67). In "The Children's Crusade," the terrorist ringleader, Walt, hopes that "If we can return to a time like Whitman's, maybe we can love the world again" (Cunningham 188). This hope articulates the very fantasy against which Lerner's novel warns (and struggles to resist): that "Whitman's poetic ideal was ever accomplished in the past" (*Hatred* 64).

Writers like Brandeis, Cunningham, and Lerner embrace Whitman despite their collective embarrassment, as do many of his critics. Through an unusually enthusiastic body of scholarship,

many of Whitman's critics respond to what Araújo describes as Whitman's "almost painfully physical" desire to reach his readers: "Whitman built his image as a poet, quite literally, opening his arms to all his readers," she writes (70). Whitman scholarship often contains surprisingly confessional movements toward Whitman's open arms. Cunningham begins his introduction to *Laws for Creations* with the following confession: "In college [...] I decided to try to become as much as possible like Walt Whitman" (ix). He describes reading the following lines from "So Long" in his college dormitory, with the sounds of Pink Floyd seeping through the walls:

> Camerado, this is no book,
> Who touches this touches a man,
> [...]
> It is I you hold and who holds you,
> I spring from the pages into your arms
> (Whitman, "So Long" 62-6)

Cunningham recalls, "Never before had a writer leaped off the page and touched me like that: directly, personally, erotically. It was my first experience of literature's ability to telescope time" (*Laws* ix-x). While the homosocial elements of Whitman's poetry may have generated particular resonance for Cunningham, further resonances emerge between the way a young Cunningham reacts to Whitman's poem and the way Lerner's young Ben reacts to Gillespie's lines in Reagan's speech: Cunningham notes "literature's ability to telescope time," while Ben describes, "I felt it in my chest; the sentence pulled me into the future" (Cunningham, *Laws* x; Lerner, *10:04* 112). I want to suggest here that such reactions to Whitman's lines have as much to do with practices of reading as with Whitman's practices of writing.

In a recent essay, Riley describes being critical at first of the spell of Whitman's writing, reproaching "those who I felt came too easily under the influence of his gravitational (and this often likewise means stylistic and rhetorical) pull," a pull that produces unusually ecstatic criticism (216-

17).[35] In my own time thinking alongside Whitman, I felt this gravitational pull, which democratized my critical attention, pointing me toward ever-expanding fields of inquiry. Though Cunningham himself admits, "I'm not a Whitman scholar, nor for that matter an academic of any kind," his rhapsodic, personal, and even erotic encounter with Whitman illustrates a larger trend, perhaps best described as Whitman's seeming intervention in his own body of criticism (*Laws* xii-xiii). In the novel and in criticism alike, Whitman carries a unique invitation to move beyond critique, which we might interpret as an invitation to move beyond attunement to a particular kind of risk. In *In Walt We Trust: How a Queer Socialist Poet Can Save America from Itself* (2015), John Marsh writes that Whitman "saved his life" and describes his book as "a mix of biography, literary criticism, manifesto, and, I am not embarrassed to say, self-help. God knows, we need it" (29). In *The New Walt Whitman Studies* (2020), editor Matt Cohen describes the essays of Peter Riley and Chris Castiglia as "embody[ing] in their essays a form of critical activity that operates outside the paradigm of the suspicious or revelatory" (12). In Castiglia's case, as well as Riley's, reading and writing with Whitman permit a new orientation toward risk and suspicion, and a dropping of the guard. Castiglia describes Whitman as a source of "company," "inspiration," and "solace," while Riley admits to using Whitman to "complicate the parameters of my own analytical persona: that part of me which seeks to and has been painstakingly trained to remain critically *en gardé*" (Castiglia 214, Riley 216). As Whitman scholars like Marsh and Castiglia read Whitman for self-help, and as risk critics like Giddens quote self-help books in their scholarship, perhaps Flan's mining of Whitman for self-help in *Self Storage* is not so different from Whitman scholarship, after all.

[35] Riley's essay details examples across centuries, citing from the nineteenth century John Addington Symonds's acknowledgment that "I have exceeded the bounds of an analytical essay by pouring forth my personal confession" and from the twentieth century Thomas Edward Crawley's uncharacteristically poetic simile, "as the oak tree unfolds out of the folds of the acorn, so Whitman's *Leaves* of 1881 unfolded out of the folds of the acorn of 1855" (Symonds 35, Crawley 225).

Toward the conclusion of his essay, Riley connects his analytical persona to the sense that "Whether trained in the academy or no, all of us are critics at the moment" (231). While Riley's reading is compelling on its own terms, I underscore this line of thinking to connect ways of reading literature with ways of reading the world: that "everyone's a critic" is both symptomatic and reinforcing of the risk society, particularly in its post-9/11 iterations. When Riley writes "all of us are critics at the moment," he speaks to the same impulse that Flan and Cat describe in Brandeis and Cunningham's novels, respectively: the impulse to view everyone with suspicion. Whitman's poetry—for the critic and for the novelist—allows passage through and beyond the phobia of naivete. Riley reads "Song of Myself" as daring readers "to risk the security of epistemological and ontological depth for a surface defined by naïve faith […] as well as the potential frustrations and embarrassment of 'failing' and 'missing'" (226-27). "Whitman's poetry," Riley continues, "dares all of us to fleetingly swap the safety of our reinforcing depths, for the uncertainty, potential excitement, and immediacy of the thereness and suchness of the world in front of us" (231). It may be that Whitman's ongoing embrace of his readers continues to shape the genres and critical paradigms of his own scholarship, or that Whitman is a useful interlocutor in a moment bearing witness to a reengagement with post-critical ways of reading. In either case, for the Whitman critic and for the Whitman-inspired novelist alike, reading Whitman seems to reorient risk.

CONCLUSION: WHITMAN & THE PROBLEM OF SCALE

Just as Chapter One's conclusion discussed the so-called "Great American Novel" in reference to Franzen's *Freedom* and Halaby's *Once in a Promised Land*, raising questions of who can speak for the nation, this chapter's conclusion extends these questions to great American poetry. In his titles as the "American Bard" and "Bard of Democracy," Whitman, perhaps more than any other American poet, has been assumed to speak for the nation. Whitman's status as a national mouthpiece and even a

"national technology" prompts this chapter to revisit the concerns motivating Chapter Two's conclusion, returning us to the problem of scale and the risks of reading alongside Whitman (Lerner, *Hatred* 76). Just as the blunt instrument of allegory collapses the distinction between the end of America and the end of the world in McCarthy and Whitehead's apocalyptic fictions, the ever-expanding nature of Whitman's poetry has often been used in service of American expansionism. As T. S. Eliot claims, "no art is more stubbornly national than poetry" (8). Whitman's legacy witnessed a renewed relationship to nationalism in the wake of 9/11 in particular. In January 2003, around two years after the 9/11 attacks, then-First Lady Laura Bush planned an elaborate literary celebration entitled "The White House Symposium on Poetry and the American Voice," which would celebrate the works of Walt Whitman, Emily Dickinson, and Langston Hughes. The symposium was eventually cancelled due to a boycott and counter-event called the "National Day of Poetry Against the War" (see Braxton 178-9).[36]

Later that same year, as Bush was announcing the so-called end of the Iraq invasion under the banner of "Mission Accomplished," conservative commentator David Brooks, then a columnist for *The Atlantic*, published an article titled "What Whitman Knew." In this article, Brooks discusses Whitman's "Democratic Vistas," which he praises as "the nation's most brilliant political sermon," embodying "the exuberant energy of the American society—the energy that can make other peoples so nervous" (n.p.). Brooks reads Whitman to evoke the doctrine of Manifest Destiny that has underlain America's imperial project: "It seems as if the Almighty had spread before this nation charts of imperial destinies, dazzling as the sun," he quotes (n.p.). Brooks extols Whitman's assurance that "despite its many imperfections, America is a force for democracy and progress," invoking Whitman's

[36] See Juliana Spahr's "Contemporary U.S. Poetry and Its Nationalisms" (2011) for a fuller discussion of the "special synergy" between the Bush administration and literary institutions like the Poetry Foundation (685).

faith in American providence: "Far, far indeed, stretch, in distance, our Vistas! […] How much is still to be disentangled, freed!" (Brooks n.p.; Whitman, *Prose Works* 361). With Whitman as interlocuter, Brooks celebrates American expansion as predestined and ongoing. In a similar vein of associations between Whitman and conservative commentators, Bruce Robbins describes Whitman's "Salut A Monde" as "a little frightening. It sounds just a little bit like George Bush" (84). Whitman and 9/11 are thus associated not only within the novel, but also in the world.

Though the association between Whitman and 9/11 in popular culture is of particular interest to this project, the association between Whitman and nationalism long precedes the contemporary period. In his introduction to *Laws for Creations*, Cunningham articulates his own understanding of the relationship between America's vistas and Whitman's vistas: "Whitman was inventing a self at the same time his country was inventing *it*self. He could almost have *been* early America, embodied," Cunningham writes (xxii). According to Cunningham's reading, Whitman becomes a cipher for still-unrealized American ideals:

> Beginning in 1861, just six years after Whitman published his first edition [of *Leaves of Grass*], he and America lived through the Civil War, when the American dream, fueled by the labor of slaves, began visibly to tarnish. Whitman went south to nurse and comfort the wounded, and in the editions he published after the war we can see his vision beginning to take on shadows, as the nation itself began to realize that it might not be, and might never have been, possible for all its citizens to live freely and equally, in peace, each according to his or her beliefs and needs. (xxii)

As a cipher for a national project, Whitman once again points in multiple and even opposing directions: toward the early promise of American democracy and toward the long shadow of its failures. In dialoguing with the American Bard, Brandeis, Cunningham, and Lerner seem to invoke Whitman's duality as both a symbol of American ideals and a yardstick against which to measure the failures of such ideals. Grappling with this dualism, their novels try in various ways to critique and even transcend their own patriotic impulses, struggling to respond to Michael Rothberg's diagnosis that "The most difficult thing for citizens of the US empire to grasp is not the internal difference of their motley

multiculture, but the prosthetic reach of that empire into other worlds" (153). These novels' dialogues with Whitman, I suggest, ultimately foil such attempts to foray into other worlds, both because Whitman's words mean "anything at all and its antonym" and because Whitman's outward attention tends to be folded back inwards (Jarrell 126). With these challenges in mind, while Brandeis, Cunningham, and Lerner productively encounter Whitman in their own texts, rerouting contemporary modes of reading risk and reading the world, they fail to grapple fully with what it means to ventriloquize Whitman, and in doing so to ventriloquize the intractable American expansionism of Whitman's vision.

Exploring the circulation of objects in the global economy, Lerner pays homage to Whitman while also gesturing toward the global. Buying instant coffee in an upscale supermarket, Ben describes:

> the seeds inside the purple fruits of coffee plants had been harvested on Andean slopes and roasted and ground and soaked and then dehydrated at a factory in Medellín and vacuum-sealed and flown to JFK and then driven upstate in bulk to Pearl River for repackaging and then transported back by truck to the store where I now stood reading the label. It was as if the social relations that produced the object in my hand began to glow within it. (*10:04* 19).

Recalling the transnational nodes of the networked novel, *10:04* exposes the social relations that produce everything from the coffee bean to literature itself, making the global relations that produce Lerner's writing glow within his novel. Sunyoung Ahn productively argues that often accompanying the ethos of New Sincerity is a sensibility she calls "new worldliness," marked by the end of endless self-referentiality and American insularity (36). Various points in Lerner's novel reveal glimmers of such worldliness. Yet *10:04'*s relationship to the distinctly national figure of Whitman occludes such glimmers. In *The Hatred of Poetry*, Lerner even calls Whitman "less a person than a national technology" (76). Thus, Whitman—as a framing device, as a textual commons, and as an imagined partner in dialogue across texts and time—both enlarges and confines the scales of Lerner's novel.

In Brandeis's novel, Flan points toward her own new worldliness, particularly through her love for globes. She reminisces on her and her estranged father's shared love for globes: "It was amazing to me that such small objects could represent vast spaces, distant things," Flan says (108). Later, she recalls looking at a globe with her mother: "I'm stuck here," she recalls her mother saying, "'but you're not, honey. The whole world is open to you. I hope you'll see most of it.' She gave the globe a spin. I wonder if she was thinking of Whitman as the countries blurred before our eyes: *My left hand hooking you round the waist, / My right hand pointing to landscapes of continents, and a plain public road. / Not I, nor any one else can travel that road for you. / You must travel it for yourself*" (248). In this passage, as Flan's mother spins the globe, the countries "blur" together: national boundaries become indistinguishable as she contemplates the world in its entirety. Flan's self, like the Whitmanian self, becomes increasingly expansive, as she moves from her little life into a worldly adventure, aided by a stolen passport with its "musty possibility" (148). She thinks of Walt Whitman "proudly calling himself an American, one of the roughs, a kosmos," citing a line from "Song of Myself" that forcefully flattens scale. In this line, the scale of one particular American, just "one" of many roughs, becomes commensurate with the scale of "a kosmos," the entire universe: *e pluribus unum* and *e unibus pluram* become indistinguishable (129). This collapse of scale, facilitated by Whitman, replicates the logics of McCarthy and Whitehead's endings, where America becomes the center of the world and even the universe.

Cunningham's novel stages America's "prosthetic reach into other worlds" most directly, both in his stated intentions for writing *Specimen Days* and in the content of the novel (Rothberg 153). Cunningham states in an interview, "My fear is that the US, in its shock and outrage [after 9/11], will elect to destroy the rest of the world. I wrote the book with that sense and I live with it after having finished the book" (qtd. in Duggan 382). In particular, the third story of *Specimen Days*, "Like Beauty," uses speculative fiction to stage a journey from the US to another planet, expanding the potential of American destruction from the rest of the world to the rest of the universe. "Like Beauty" joins *The*

Road and *Zone One* in using speculative fiction to shift between the scales of the nation, the globe, and even the galaxy. Toward the story's end, a multicultural crew of misfits prepares to board a spaceship and begin a new life on a distant, paradisal planet called Paumanok (after Whitman's "Starting from Paumanok"). Of the earthly emigration, the android protagonist of "Like Beauty," Simon, thinks:

> They're all crazy. Though of course the passengers on the Mayflower had probably been like this, too: zealots and oddballs and n'er-do-wells, setting out to colonize a new world because the known world wasn't much interested in their furtive and quirky passions. It had probably always been thus, not only aboard the Mayflower but on the Viking ships; on the Niña, Pinta, and Santa Maria; on the first convoys sent off to explore Nadia, about which the people of Earth had harbored such extravagant hopes. It was nut jobs. It was hysterics and visionaries and petty criminals. The odes and the monuments, the plaques and pageants, came later. (293)

In this speculative future, America is recast not as the New World but the Old World, and the historic Mayflower ship is recast as a futuristic spaceship. Echoing a passage from *Freedom* in which Walter describes, "it wasn't the people with sociable genes who fled the crowded Old World for the new continent; it was the people who didn't get along well with others," Cunningham also offers a eugenic vision of renewal (Franzen 444). Cunningham has elsewhere stated that *Specimen Days*, like all of his novels, ends with, "life going on," "with something still ahead," and with "somebody moving into some uncertain future that may be terrible or may be great or may be some combination of the two" (qtd. in Small n.p.). Yet is this intergalactic exodus an example of what Cunningham hopes to convey—"life going on," "something still ahead," "an uncertain future"—or is it an example of history doomed to repeat itself, caught in an endless loop? *Specimen Days*'s vision is not strictly one of renewal, but also one of repetition: while the mission to Paumanok may reflect the capacity to colonize a new segment of the universe, Cunningham undercuts the future-orientation of this mission by framing it as an echo of the past. As Araújo points out, "[c]olonization, empire, freedom, and identity also become, here, unnervingly entangled in Cunningham's image of a futuristic Mayflower" (85). Thus, Cunningham's stated intentions are subverted by the very form of his novel, which speaks to repetition rather than uncertainty.

Despite Cunningham's suggestive retelling of the story of America's colonization, readers never actually arrive to this new world. Rather, in what Araújo calls a "crucial detour," we stay alongside Simon, the android who never gets on the ship, but remains behind to care for the dying alien Catareen (85). The ever-expanding future is hinted at, but never arrives for the reader, suggesting a rejection of the logics of growth and expansion, and so it first appears, a rejection of Whitman. When Simon tells his maker, Emory Lowell, that he will stay behind on Earth, Lowell prompts him to recite Whitman, offering the words, "A child said" (327).[37] Yet Simon replies, "I don't feel like reciting poetry just now" (327). If we read Whitman as a figure of continuation and expansiveness—an expansive self, an expansive America—then we can read Simon's rejection of Whitman's poetry as a rejection of this expansion. Simon at last breaks with his programming, both his "poetry chip" and his "survival chip," and breaks with Whitman's words (305, 281).

This reading of Simon's severance from Whitman is weakened, however, by the fact that Simon, after seemingly rejecting Whitman and his expansionist impulses, cites Whitman again to express these impulses' opposite. "Like Beauty" ends, with echoes of *The Road* as well as Flan's western road trip in *Self Storage*, with Simon setting out to cross the Rockies on a horse: "He would ride west, he thought […]. He was going into his future. […]. He said aloud [quoting Whitman], 'The earth, that is sufficient, I do not want the constellations any nearer, I know they are very well where they are, I know they suffice for those who belong to them.' He rode on then, through the long grass toward the mountains" (333). In contrast to the expansionist logic of the interplanetary journey to Paumanok, inspired by Whitman's lines "I strike up for a New World," here Cunningham invokes an opposing line from Whitman ("Starting From Paumanok" 1.21). Whitman's poetry is so expansive, so all-encompassing, that it begins to mean everything, and therefore nothing. In "The Children's Crusade,"

[37] Here, Lowell prompts Simon to finish the line "A child said What is the grass? Fetching it to me with full hands" (Whitman, "Song of Myself" 6.1).

Professor Rita Dunn states of Whitman, "You can go at him from just about any angle and find something that seems to support some thesis or other," and indeed Cunningham excises Whitman's lines to support multiple, and even opposing, agendas (160). Following the trajectory of the uniform hieroglyphic, Whitman's own lines begins to lose their signifying power.

While Simon deprograms himself of Whitman's words to reject the frontier of outer space, he reprograms himself with yet another frontier. Extending this contradiction to the novel more broadly, Cunningham seems unable to shed his own investments in Whitman as a mouthpiece of American expansion and American myth. Araújo writes that "Cunningham uses the history of New York as a mirror where the United States is forced to recognize itself and to see through its own forged narratives" (65). Yet this mirror, I suggest, risks being warped by Whitman's words. As biographer David Reynolds writes of Whitman, "If, as he once said, his poetry was 'a great mirror or reflector' of society, it was a mirror in which America would see itself artistically improved" (83). In attempting to shed their investments in Whitman's endless expansionism, these novels speak, like the apocalyptic fictions of Chapter Two, not only to narratives of contemporary crisis, but also to a contemporary crisis of narration. In "The Children's Crusade," Walt asks Cat, "So tell me. Would you say this is working out? Does this seem to you like a story that wants to continue?" (187). In doing so, she echoes near verbatim a line from *10:04* in which Calvin, one of Ben's graduate poetry students, asks Ben, "'let me ask you something […] can you look at me and say you think this,' and here he swept the air with his arm in a way that made 'this' indicate something very large, 'is going to continue?'" (219). As with the uniform hieroglyphic, there is an unresolved contradiction here between the suggestion of a story of American expansionism that can no longer continue and the articulation of this story through the words of Walt Whitman. While these novels productively reread the contemporary risk society by reading Whitman, the effects of such rereadings remain somewhat unresolved, located in the uncertain future. In the

following chapter, I turn to life-writing and to the relationship between risk and narrative in the real world, where such textual afterlives are not only implied, but lived.

4. Risk and The Perfect Storm: States of Exception in Dave Eggers's *Zeitoun* (2009) and Mohamedou Ould Slahi's *Guantánamo Diary* (2017 [2015])

"The greatest danger, therefore, is not the risk, but the perception of it."
- Ulrich Beck, "The Cosmopolitan Society"

"When you come out of the storm, you won't be the same person who walked in. That is what this storm is all about."
- Haruki Murakami, *Kafka on the Shore*

While this project has thus far addressed representations of risk in the novel, this final chapter will address the multiple forms of risk and crisis colliding in the world. This chapter therefore turns away from fiction to the plotting of risk within life-writing, as articulated through the accounts of two men's incarcerations in various US prisons in the aftermath of 9/11: Mohamedou Ould Slahi, the author of *Guantánamo Diary* (2017 [2015]), and Abdulrahman Zeitoun, the subject of Dave Eggers's *Zeitoun* (2009).[38] Through these case studies, this chapter will explore storms both literal and figurative, including 2005's Hurricane Katrina and the "perfect storms" that pulled Slahi and Zeitoun into webs of suspicion. In this final chapter, I build upon earlier discussions of what makes crisis happen and what crisis makes happen in the novel, extending this exploration of risk and plotting to life-writing that documents how risk and crisis take shape and are experienced in the world.

As I will establish, Hurricane Katrina and the war on terror are intimately connected infrastructurally and discursively: in public discourse, in literature, and in literary criticism. Several scholars, including Jeffrey Melnick and Arin Keeble, have located Hurricane Katrina as a turning point in the development of the 9/11 novel. Their account of this turning point bolsters this project's claim that ecological themes are a key site for reconceptualizing the post-9/11 novel. Melnick, in the closing

[38] I will henceforth use the name "Zeitoun" to refer to Abdulrahman Zeitoun unless otherwise specified.

pages of *9/11 Culture* (2009), describes the possibility that Hurricane Katrina will emerge as "the pivotal moment for our study of 9/11 art," suggesting that "While questions of race, privilege, and power have been largely submerged in artistic conversations surrounding 9/11, Katrina forced artists in the United States to confront America's central dilemma" (157). In contrast to the narrative of apocalyptic rupture surrounding 9/11 (see Chapter Two), Hurricane Katrina was widely read as exacerbating pre-existing divisions of race, class, and geography.

While post-9/11 narratives often invoke depoliticized narratives of the fall (mostly concerned with "the intactness of white families," Melnick suggests), post-Katrina narratives are often loaded with what Keeble calls "an aggregation of dissent and political discourse" (Melnick 93, Keeble 173). Keeble even suggests a causal link between the absence of political discourse in post-9/11 literature and its frequent presence in post-Katrina literature. Picking up Melnick's line of inquiry, Keeble identifies a process of political spillover between 9/11 and Katrina narratives, an interplay founded on his suggestion that post-Katrina literary fiction "seems profoundly aware of the dominant conceits of the 9/11 novel" (174).[39] In this sense, post-9/11 fiction might even be designated as either "pre-Katrina" and "post-Katrina." Though not explicitly framed in these terms, such accounts of the interplay between 9/11 and Hurricane Katrina in fiction speak to the affordances of reading across multiple forms of risk, which often suggestively reroute (and even rewrite) each other: here, the novel prompts its attendant criticism to reevaluate its own assumed reference points. Despite the so-called rupture of "before" and "after" documented by early 9/11 literature, the turning point of Hurricane Katrina seems to represent yet another "after," intervening in questions of periodization to suggest a

[39] See, for example, the slow violence of post-Katrina fictions like Jesmyn Ward's *Salvage the Bones* (2011) or Philipp Meyer's *American Rust* (2009). In a direct reference to 9/11, Meyer writes of the collapse of the World Trade Center, "There were certain places and certain people who mattered a lot more than others. Not a single dime was being spent to rebuild Buell" (45). This theme of abandonment, and the question of whose lives matter, is also taken up by Ward.

multiplicity of "befores" and "afters." In light of there always being more "afters," we can reread the texts composing this project—with the exception of *Specimen Days* (2005)—as not only part of a post-9/11 corpus, but also a post-Katrina one.

Beyond picking up on themes of risk and crisis, this discussion of *Guantánamo Diary* and *Zeitoun* ties up several of the threads running through the previous chapters. Pulling on these threads in order of their appearance, Slahi and Eggers's networked plots resonate most obviously with the plots of Franzen and Halaby's networked novels. Second, the apocalyptic fictions of Chapter Two reemerge in *Zeitoun* in particular: visions of post-Katrina New Orleans appeal to apocalyptic rhetoric, and a line from McCarthy's *The Road*—"in the history of the world it might even be that there was more punishment than crime"—even serves as one of Eggers's epigraphs (McCarthy 33, qtd. in Eggers 7). Finally, Slahi and Eggers's narratives revisit the questions of particularity and universality explored through Whitman intertexts in Chapter Three, perhaps most notably through echoes of the storm as "uniform hieroglyphic" evoked by Lerner in *10:04*. Further, both texts pick up on Chapter Three's exploration of suspicious and paranoid readings, as well as the through line of racial profiling that runs throughout the entire project.

Guantánamo Diary and *Zeitoun* take up issues of enormous scale, from the war on terror and indefinite detention to Hurricane Katrina, through the stories of two men caught in the crossfire of crisis and perceived risk. Despite the generic shift away from fiction in this chapter, the formal elements of Slahi and Eggers's texts recall the networked plots with which this project began. As this inquiry shifts from fiction to non-fiction and thinks through the construction of webs of risk across genre, as well as how such constructions are read, I return to Amitav Ghosh's suggestion that "the calculus of probability that is deployed within the imaginary world of a novel is not the same as that which obtains outside it; this is why it is commonly said, 'If this were in a novel, no one would believe it'" (23-4). This question of probability and plausibility is particularly pertinent for works of nonfiction

that aim to verify their subjects' innocence: the question of believability becomes not only one of good writing, but one of good faith. Thinking with *Guantánamo Diary* and *Zeitoun* evinces the calculus of probability that obtains not in the novel, but in the world, and particularly during a time of heightened suspicion. In this sense, both texts reengage the coincidences, paranoias, and suspicions of the networked plotlines with which this project began. For example, just as Halaby describes of Jassim, "the government is […] grasping at straws. Jassim is a straw," Slahi similarly reflects, "The investigators were just drowning and were looking for any straw to grab, and I personally didn't exactly want to be that straw" (Halaby 269, Slahi 53). In reading across the plotting of risk in fiction and in life-writing, this final chapter exposes the stakes and consequences of how risk is perceived—that is, how risk is *read*—in the real world.

Throughout this chapter, I will classify *Guantánamo Diary* and *Zeitoun* as examples of life-writing. I use the term "life-writing" in its broadest sense, following Kay Schaffer and Sidonie Smith's designation of life-writing as "an umbrella term that encompasses the extensive array and diverse modes of personal storytelling that takes experiential history as its starting point" (7). More specifically, both texts serve a testimonial function, as both Slahi and Zeitoun serve as witnesses to a particular confluence of crisis. While the categories of life-writing and the testimonial are useful for reading across *Guantánamo Diary* and *Zeitoun*, the broadness of these categories potentially elides crucial differences of genre, production, authorship, publication, and reception, which I briefly touch on here. Despite its title and marketing, *Guantánamo Diary* is not, strictly speaking, a diary, as it was written with an audience in mind: the manuscript was initially composed as a series of letters from Slahi to his lawyers, protected from the eyes of interrogators by attorney-client privilege, and it eventually addressed the audience of the American public (Slahi xxxvii). Thus, while Slahi's text might be classified as personal storytelling, it also has an undeniably legal function.

Zeitoun differs in several key ways, particularly along lines of mediation, literariness, authorship, and reception. First, though Slahi's story is mediated by editor Larry Siems, himself a writer and human rights advocate, Zeitoun's is mediated far more significantly by author Dave Eggers. Second, while this chapter will explicitly attend to *Guantánamo Diary*'s literary elements, this kind of reading runs counter to the frequent treatment of testimonial narratives, whereas Eggers brings to bear on *Zeitoun* his status as a Pulitzer Prize-winning writer of literary fiction, non-fiction, and journalism. These differences in authorship—Slahi's contested legal status, Siem's background as a human rights lawyer, and Eggers's literary status—also inform the literary ecosystems in which both texts circulate. Additional differences between these texts relate to the conditions of their publication, and the relationship between their subject and their mediators. While *Zeitoun* was written after Zeitoun's release, with the full cooperation of the Zeitoun family, Slahi remained in Guantánamo for ten years after writing his manuscript, and for nine months after the book's publication (a publication he was not aware of in advance, and learned about through a Russian television program). This separation between text and author poses significant questions about narrative closure in the face of ongoing detention, which this chapter's conclusion will address. As with the previous chapters' pairings of texts, I will read these texts together across uneven fields of authorship without obscuring these differentials.

While Slahi was not initially aware of the original publication of his manuscript, he did collaborate with Siems to publish a second, "restored" edition in 2017, a year after his release, and in this chapter I will rely mostly on the second edition for several reasons: first, so as not to fetishize the authenticity of the first version; second, for the clarity of the second edition, in which the thousands of redactions of the first edition have been filled in; and third, in order to discuss what it means to restore a text, and for the generative themes of rebuilding in the second edition.[40] Despite the

[40] When referencing text from *Guantánamo Diary*, I will indicate these areas of original redaction with brackets.

differences between *Guantánamo Diary* and *Zeitoun*, which are to be addressed rather than avoided, my central motivation for reading these texts together is that both use stories of individual (and, I will discuss, exceptional) men to convey complex structural critiques of the war on terror, Islamophobia, racism, capitalism, and militarization, as both men become caught up in webs of risk, violence, and suspicion. In this sense, both texts become another way of plotting risk, as crises at enormous scales converge in the lives of their subjects.

In this chapter's first section, I explore the plotting of risk in both texts through a close reading of coincidence and suspicion, through which both Slahi and Zeitoun become caught in the convergence of crisis. Across both texts, racial profiling emerges as a form of bad and paranoid reading, revealing the real-world stakes of suspicious readings in the era of the risk society. In attempting to correct these readings, I will argue that these texts function as literary trials that aim to prove their subjects' innocence; however, this exoneration establishes the policing function of the reader, reproducing the very forensic mode these texts seek to dismantle. In section two, I explore the exceptional individual as a powerful yet flawed vehicle for conveying structural critiques, a discussion that provides a crucial hinge between the novel and life-writing. Like *Freedom* and *Once in a Promised Land*, *Guantánamo Diary* and *Zeitoun* also take a panoramic view of contemporary risks, charting not through the novel but through life-writing how large-scale forces alight on the particular individual. Life-writing deepens and complicates this discussion of plotting risk, as the scaffolding of events in Slahi and Eggers's texts generates insights not only about how risk is represented, but about how risk circulates through the structures and infrastructures of the real world. This chapter also connects discourses of exceptionality to questions of literary form, exploring life-writing's investments in the individual who must be simultaneously representative and extraordinary. I discuss the primary narrative conventions that frame Zeitoun and Slahi as exceptional, the implications and limitations of

such exceptionality, and the impact of exceptionality on questions of worthiness and narrative resilience.

In section three, I shift from questions of the relationship between exceptionality and innocence at the level of the individual, to questions of how discourses of exceptionality maintain American innocence at the level of the nation. I explore the primary rhetorical maneuvers through which the state of exception takes shape, and through which illusions of American innocence are maintained by offloading risk. Through this discussion, I explore how discourses of exceptionality normalize certain forms of violence while simultaneously framing such violence as un-American: in this way, the state of exception and American exceptionalism become mutually constitutive. This chapter's conclusion turns to questions of repair and restoration, contrasting Slahi and Siems's vision of rebuilding a text with Zeitoun and Eggers's vision of rebuilding a city. Through this juxtaposition, I discuss both life-writing's reparative potential as well as the gap between reparative reading and material reparations.

THE PERFECT STORM

In an extension of this project's discussions of the network as it structures the novel, both Slahi and Zeitoun become entangled in webs of crisis, coincidence, and racial profiling. The singular narratives of these individual men provide readers with a window into "perfect storms" of suspicion and coincidence, which become signifiers for risk within the context of Hurricane Katrina and the war on terror. Throughout this chapter, the term "perfect storm" serves as a useful analytic metaphor for a number of reasons: first, it evokes moments of crisis when latent risks converge and become hyper-visible, creating productive objects for risk criticism. Second, the meteorological metaphor of this term picks up the connection between risk criticism and ecocriticism. Third, those in the eye of the perfect

storm become witnesses to the ways crises overlap, returning us to Christian Parenti's "catastrophic convergence" (7).

Both *Guantánamo Diary* and *Zeitoun* are marketed according to this third point in particular, positioning their protagonists at the center of multiple colliding risks: the cover of Slahi's second edition boasts a blurb from *The Guardian* describing Slahi as the "true and complete witness" of the "global war on terror," while Michael Eric Dyson describes in his blurb for *Zeitoun* the protagonist's entrapment in "the swirling vortex of Hurricane Katrina and post-9/11 America" (Mishra, "The Global War on Terror" n.p.; Dyson, back cover endorsement). While Slahi faces the perfect storm of coincidence and geography, accused of being in the wrong place at the wrong time, the confluence of post-9/11 militarization and the destabilization of disaster turned Hurricane Katrina into the perfect storm for Zeitoun and many others. Cynthia Franklin describes Katrina as "a perfect storm not only of wind and water but also of governmental bureaucracy and ineptitude, post-9/11 militarization and Islamophobia, antiblack racism, and neoliberal disregard for poor, old, and otherwise vulnerable people" (857). Hurricane Katrina and its aftermath reveal how ongoing patterns of structural inequality allow each new crisis to exploit vulnerabilities produced by its predecessors. This exploitation is largely facilitated by the role of the state: Susan Lurie writes that the encounter between 9/11 and Hurricane Katrina "brings together emerging analyses of the state's failure to protect against the attacks, critiques of state-of-exception domestic tactics in wars on terror, and the spectacular evidence of state neglect and violence against citizens in New Orleans" (181). Zeitoun and Slahi's narratives articulate these emerging analyses by unraveling the many forms of risk and crisis that converge in their lives.

To understand the nature of these perfect storms, it is necessary to briefly outline some important context on the infrastructural histories of Guantánamo Bay and New Orleans, which will frame the collisions of the crises of 9/11 and Hurricane Katrina in *Guantánamo Diary* and *Zeitoun.* In December 1903, Cuba leased forty-five square miles of territory to the United States in exchange for

an acknowledgment of Cuban sovereignty in the aftermath of the Spanish-American War. The agreement required Cuba to lease or sell land "to enable the United States to maintain the independence of Cuba": so-called protection authorized imperial intervention (Halsall n.p.). While a focal point of public discourses around the war on terror, Guantánamo Bay's history undercuts the timescales of the post-9/11 state of exception by pointing to the *longue durée* of the US expansion into the Americas. Guantánamo Bay has long been an important site in the history of American empire. In her seminal article "Where is Guantánamo?" Amy Kaplan describes the US "global penal archipelago," writing, "to ask about the location of Guantánamo is to ask: where in the world is the United States?" (Kaplan 831, 832). The importance of this question echoes Michael Rothberg's insistence, in appraising the state of post-9/11 American literature, on grasping "the prosthetic reach of that [US] empire into other worlds," and reminds us that labelling this study an "American project" is never as clear-cut as it seems (153).

Guantánamo Bay is a site that gestures not only toward the long imperial history of the US "global penal archipelago," but also a long environmental history: the US used Guantánamo Bay as a naval base and a coaling station, pointing to the entanglement of the military and fossil fuels (Kaplan 831).[41] Just as coal is threaded through the infrastructural history of Guantánamo Bay, oil lurks beneath the infrastructural history of New Orleans. According to journalist Greg Palast, the canal that flooded during Hurricane Katrina—"like a rifle barrel pointed right at the city"—was built "because oil companies wanted to save time. […] So just oil tankers could save a day or two, the city of New Orleans drowned" (qtd. in Desvarieux n.p.). Zeitoun himself also emphasizes this history. Contemplating a mural in the train station-turned-prison in which he is detained in Katrina's aftermath, he notes that in one panel, "oil derricks stood below a flooded landscape, water engulfing a city"

[41] For more on this connection, see On Barak's *Powering Empire* (2020).

(Eggers 214). In this final chapter, then, this project returns to questions of oil and water raised by the environmental discourses of Chapter One. Beyond the history of fossil fuels, several more immediate material and political connections between 9/11, the ensuing war on terror, and Hurricane Katrina provide important context for *Zeitoun* in particular. First, the war on terror diverted public resources, leading to widespread disinvestment from infrastructure.[42] Second, 9/11 prompted the consolidation of the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) and the Department of Homeland Security (DHS). This folding of FEMA into DHS led to the militarization and securitization of disaster response, where emergency management—including rescue efforts—became secondary to so-called security.[43] The crises that converge in *Zeitoun* and in *Guantánamo Diary* are driven not merely by coincidence and plotting, but by infrastructures and institutions.

My attention to infrastructure here may seem to run counter to conceptions of Hurricane Katrina as a natural disaster, yet the term "natural" obscures the man-made dimension to this catastrophe, both in the failure to prevent the inevitable damage caused by hurricanes, and in the organized abandonment of New Orleans's population after the storm.[44] As one character states in the post-Katrina television series *Tremé* (2010), while the hurricane itself was a natural disaster, "the flooding of New Orleans was a man-made catastrophe, a federal fuckup of epic proportions and decades in the making" (qtd. in Holland n.p.). While litigating the natural and man-made components of this disaster falls outside this chapter's scope, my aim in highlighting this web of causation is to

[42] Despite local calls for repair, by 2003, the Iraq War had drawn subcontractors away from New Orleans and toward the profits of the forever war (see V. Adams 190). The long-suffering levees remained unrepaired. In 2004, the Army Corps of Engineers, responsible for building and maintaining New Orleans's levees, at last requested four million dollars from Congress to fund a study of the levees. Congress tabled this proposal due to the strained budgets of the Iraq War (qtd. in Nussbaum).
[43] Even over a decade later, it is hard to revisit this point without referring—as Nichola Mirzoeff and many others do—to the infamous photograph of then-President George W. Bush gazing down at the post-Katrina wreckage from Air Force One, an emblem for the gaze of securitization (Mirzoeff 1198).
[44] See David Harvey's *The Limits to Capital* (1982) for more on the concept of "organized abandonment" (397).

create a framework for reading natural and man-made structures and infrastructures alongside each other. Following Anthony Hoefer's lead, I read Katrina as the consequence of natural, social, and economic structures: "The attempts to control the river through a system of levees cannot be considered distinct or separate from the institutions of Jim Crow segregation, sharecropping, the Delta plantocracy, or the New Orleans elite; all are implicated in the effort to harness the economic dynamo of the River and the rich topsoil in its floodplain," he writes (552). Hoefer's claim that infrastructural systems cannot be separated from social institutions is similarly taken up by Caroline Levine, who writes of structures and infrastructures in the novel:[45]

> I want to suggest that racism, class hierarchy, and heteronormativity are exceptionally powerful structuring principles precisely because of their flexibility in moving across institutions and organizing a variety of other forms—including the pathways of infrastructural networks. If we understand all of these to be imposing order on social relations, then racism and other structural factors emerge as more infrastructural than what we typically define as infrastructures. (598-99)

Taking cues from both Hoefer and Levine, we can approach *Guantánamo Diary* and *Zeitoun* as case studies in how to read the structures and infrastructures of the war on terror and Hurricane Katrina with—rather than against—each other. Further, we can read into the question of how these structures and infrastructures become visible through Slahi and Eggers's renderings.

In Slahi's case, the geographic strands of his life—his studies in Germany, his time in Canada, and his trip to Afghanistan in the 1990s—were (mis)read as the makings of a terrorist: Slahi is eventually listed as "number 1" on the list of "The worst people in [GTMO]" (Slahi 192). One interrogator tells him, "To me, you meet all the criteria of a top terrorist. When I check the terrorist check list, you pass with a very high score […]. You're Arab, you're young, you went to Jihad, you speak foreign languages, you've been in many countries, you're a graduate in a technical discipline" (192). This set of biographical details is recast as the profile of a terrorist: typifying the relationship

[45] Here, Levine writes in reference to Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah* (2013), discussing the relationship staged in Adichie's novel between racism and the electrical grid.

between risk and suspicion reading, a paranoid over-attunement to risk projects suspicion onto the details of Slahi's life. Zeitoun lacks Slahi's "top terrorist" criteria, and prior to Katrina, Eggers emphasizes, "He had no experience with [racial] profiling" (213). Yet Zeitoun nonetheless becomes swept up in the convergence of natural disaster and the war on terror: Eggers describes in an interview, "what happened to Zeitoun could only have happened with the intersection of all of these forces" (qtd. in Suddath). As in Halaby and Brandeis's fictions, it takes a separate crisis—in this case, Hurricane Katrina—to mobilize the post-9/11 culture of suspicion. A chain of loose associations, read through the lens of racist suspicion, pulls Zeitoun and Slahi into a "perfect storm" of structure and infrastructure. The catastrophic confluence of these natural and manmade factors applies pressure to the term "perfect storm" itself. The meteorological dimensions of this term, like the post-9/11 rhetoric of "out of the blue," suggest that Zeitoun and Slahi's location in "the wrong place at the wrong time" might result from cosmic bad luck, rather than a clear set of policy decisions. The events leading up to their detention were, of course, not accidental but the predictable outcome of state failures.

The convergence of structure and infrastructure the term "perfect storm" encapsulates hearkens back to Franzen's rhetorical question, voiced through Walter Berglund's line, "Isn't that perfect?" (484). While webs of causation, rendered hyper-visible, read as somewhat facile conspiracies in the networked novel, *Guantánamo Diary* and *Zeitoun* confront forces of conspiration in the real world. While Ghosh's aforementioned commentary around the "calculus of probability […] within the imaginary world of a novel" usefully highlights the novel's frequent concealment of its networks of cause and effect to appear more believable, Slahi and Eggers's accounts run up against their own problems of believability through the in-built suspicion the testimonial genre encodes (23-24). For example, in an interview with Cynthia Banham, Siems admits that his hundreds of editorial footnotes, which mediate Slahi's text, provide not only detail, but also credibility, since "[Slahi's writing] seems

like a tall tale when you read it, it's very difficult for Americans to read this thing" (qtd. in Banham 392).

What about Slahi's memoir seems like a tall tale? The "difficult[y]" of reading *Guantánamo Diary* is located not in the inherent implausibility of Slahi's account, but in the bad readings it might be subjected to through the lens of preemptive suspicion, a form of predetermination that disrupts the possibilities of reading itself. Describing his pre-established narrative, Slahi compares the script of interrogation to "a recipe [that] was already cooked for me," and later, to a "suit the U.S. Intel tailored for me" (273, 280). This preemptive suspicion speaks to a wider context of post-9/11 doctrines of preemption, a form of risk management articulated through Donald Rumsfeld's infamous invocation of "unknown unknowns" ("Press Conference" n.p.). Former President George W. Bush voiced similar logics in stating shortly after 9/11, "I will not wait on events, while dangers gather" ("State of the Union" n.p.). Such rhetoric both shapes and reflects the ongoing policies of the war on terror, perhaps best evidenced by the case of the Lackawanna Six, in which a group of Yemeni Americans was arrested in upstate New York on the basis of preemptive suspicion: FBI Agent Peter Ahearn explained, "If we don't know for sure they're going to do something, or not, we need to make sure that we prevent anything they may be planning, whether or not we know or don't know about it" (qtd. in Purdy and Bergman 35). The authors of *Speculate This!* analyze the doctrine of preemption as having "replaced deterrence as the operative doctrine of national security […]. According to the logic of speculative security, imaginary dangers to the body politic must be thwarted in advance" (55). We might think of preemptive suspicion, then, as a form of risk-management taken to an incoherent extreme: extending Cunningham's description of "[f]orensic psychologists [who] got infected by paranoia," the circular logic produced by detention without trial becomes the source of an endlessly recursive paranoia for Slahi's interrogators (*Specimen Days* 121).

Form & Forensics

The consequences of preemptive suspicion return us to the narrative dimensions of racial profiling: racial profiling emerges as a form of bad and paranoid reading, and the state emerges as the ultimate bad reader of risk. The narratological dimensions of racial profiling appear along trails of false clues, recalling Simon Stern and Rita Felski's discussions of significant details that must be interpreted by so-called experts. One interrogator tells Slahi, "Look, we have so many reports linking you to all kinds of stuff. There is nothing incriminating, really. But there are too many little things" (211). By following what Victoria Brittain calls "the Washington script," Slahi's interrogators are reading for conspiracy, rather than investigating (112). This point on reading badly is particularly salient in revealing the farce of US intelligence-gathering in Slahi's case, a form of paranoid reading that mistakes coincidence for conspiracy, proximity for plotting, and—in a particularly Kafkaesque turn—resolves the burden of proof by suggesting that, as one interrogator puts it, "smart people don't leave any traces" (Slahi 274).[46] Lack of evidence is thus reread as evidence itself, and the absence of traces reread as traces covered. As Eve Sedgwick writes of paranoid reading, "because there must be no bad surprises, and because learning of the possibility of a bad surprise would itself constitute a bad surprise, paranoia requires that bad news already be known" (130). The state, in the first edition, ensures that readers also engage in this bad reading through arbitrary and incoherent patterns of redaction (see Trapp).[47]

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[46] Several scholars have appraised both *Zeitoun* and *Guantánamo Diary* as Kafkaesque: Masterson, Galow, and Bex, Craps, and Vermeulen, in Eggers's case, and Goyal and Korb in Slahi's. The back cover of *Guantánamo Diary* even boasts a quote from John le Carré, which describes the memoir as "A vision of hell, beyond Orwell, beyond Kafka" (back cover endorsement). In his review of Slahi's book, *The New York Times*'s Mark Danner describes Joseph K., of Kafka's *The Trial*, as one of the "great literary spirit[s] looming over these pages" (n.p.).

[47] As these redactions have been discussed comprehensively by other scholars (see Adelman, Goyal, Moore, Pappalardo, and Trapp), I will only briefly explore this feature of Slahi's text within this chapter.

Such bad reading focalizes in several instances: Slahi is interrogated for four years about the words "tea and sugar," lifted from a Canadian wiretap, presumed as codewords rather than read at their obvious surface. Similarly, Slahi jokes about deleting the "PC Laden" (German for "computer store") contact from his phone, as he knew that any reference to "Laden" would be read with suspicion (due to the homonymic echo of "bin Laden") "no matter how hard I would have tried to explain" (114-15). In perhaps the most memorable description of the absurdity of such reading practices, Slahi retells a Mauritanian folktale about a man afraid of a rooster. He describes an exchange between the man and his psychiatrist:

> "Why are you so afraid of the rooster?" the psychiatrist asks him.
> "The rooster thinks I'm corn."
> "You're not corn. You are a very big man. Nobody can mistake you for a tiny ear of corn," the psychiatrist said.
> "I know that, Doctor. But the rooster doesn't. Your job is to go to him and convince him that I am not corn."
> The man was never healed, since talking with a rooster is impossible. End of story.
> For years I've been trying to convince the U.S. government that I am not corn. (73)

This folktale, which becomes an allegory for Slahi's detention and his attempts to prove his innocence, speaks to the impossibility of justice in Guantánamo.

How does one defend against such bad reading? If Slahi's entire book is an attempt to convince his readership that he is not corn, then attempts to reason with the proverbial rooster risk unwittingly legitimizing the false trial and reproducing the very forensic mode they seek to dismantle. Anne McClintock has referred to Guantánamo as a "*theater of judicial semblance*, an elaborate *performance* of legality, an attempt to theatrically display state violence as legitimate—a perverse Alice-through-the-looking-glass simulacrum of legality where none exists," and Judith Butler has similarly described the post-9/11 state of emergency as producing "a law that is no law, a court that is no court, a process that is no process" (McClintock 67-68, Butler 62). Following McClintock and Butler, how do Slahi and Eggers (on Zeitoun's behalf) defend the accused without contributing to the trial's performance? In *Zeitoun*, Kathy articulates this question in her own terms. Eggers describes, "She could not stomach

the idea of her husband being called a prisoner. By naming him she was expanding this lie, the one being told by everyone involved in his incarceration thus far" (270). Taking seriously Kathy's proposition unfolds questions of how to reverse the lie without entertaining its logic, or returning to Slahi's words, how to prove you are not corn without validating the rooster.

Revisiting Siems's concern that Slahi's manuscript "seems like a tall tale," Siems clearly tries to disarm readers by preempting their suspicion (qtd. in Banham 392). This preemptive suspicion manifests in heavy mediation, exhaustive footnoting, and cross-referencing; and, in the case of both *Guantánamo Diary* and *Zeitoun*, prefatory notes from white interlocutors (Siems and Eggers) that authenticate both narratives' credibility. While intended to shore up the believability of these texts, it is my contention here that such forms of anticipation cannot help but entrench suspicious readings. This in-built suspicion has several consequences: first, Siems's mediation aligns the reading practices of the reader with the reading practices of the state. In his introduction to the first edition, he frames the state as another one of Slahi's editors, writing that *Guantánamo Diary* "has been edited twice: first by the United States government, which added more than 2,500 black-bar redactions censoring Mohamedou's text, and then by me. Mohamedou was not able to participate in, or respond to, either one of these edits" ("Editor's Notes" xi). Siems's description contains several contradictions that merit further attention. On one hand, he distances his intervention from the state's by describing the government's mediation as a process of "censoring." On the other, he uses the word "editing" to classify both forms of engagement with Slahi's text, creating a parallel between the editor, the reader (if Siems is to serve as our proxy), and the state. Bizarrely, then, the same readership that tries to give the detainee "a voice" is aligned with the forces that silence him.

In pursuing this line of questioning, I seek not to erase the subversiveness, the radical potential, and the real material consequences of such textual defenses, but rather to explore the constraints of the literary and legal forms available to their subjects. This exploration will involve considering the

literary forms available to *Zeitoun* and *Guantánamo Diary*'s authors, and the sorts of power arrangements such forms establish among reader, writer, mediator, and the state. Beginning with Slahi, there has been some debate over how to classify *Guantánamo Diary* generically. Scholars have written about *Guantánamo Diary* as memoir (see Pappalardo), as slave narrative (see Goyal, Korb, and McHeimech), as testimonial (see Coundouriotis), and as epic (see Siems, "Editor's Introduction" 405). Certainly, these categories are not mutually exclusive, and I raise the question of genre not to litigate how *Guantánamo Diary* should be classified, but rather to call attention to the ways literary forms and genres shape the way we read and write: form and genre do not merely reflect, but also produce, what is on the page. In Slahi's case, his testimonial narrative bears the burden of proof, as he takes on the challenge of "prov[ing]" his "innocence" (49). As Thomas Laqueur has written of the humanitarian narrative's "reliance on the detail as the sign of truth," the narrative of human suffering establishes sincerity through exhaustive documentation (177). Taking on this burden of proof, Slahi's account aims to provide the reader with what he describes as "everything (almost)" (qtd. in Siems, "Editor's Introduction" 373).

Yet Slahi's task of proving his innocence is always already impossible due to the unattainability of complete documentation, the assumption of his guilt, and the recursiveness of paranoid reading. Even as he attempts to provide an exhaustive account, Slahi confronts the futility and even the ludicrousness of complete documentation. He writes in a letter to his attorney, "You asked me to write you everything I told my interrogators. Are you out of your mind? How can I render uninterrupted interrogation that has been lasting the last 7 years? That's like asking Charlie Sheen how many women he dated" (qtd. in Siems, "Editor's Introduction" 372). As this chapter's conclusion will detail more fully, even when Slahi embarks on a project of filling in the state's redaction after his release, he runs up against the impossibility of restoring a complete account of his detention. In addition to the sheer volume of evidence in his case, Slahi also encounters what he describes as "the

American motto [that] GTMO detainees are guilty until proven innocent," as well as the broader landscape of racial profiling in which "every Arab is a terrorist until proven innocent" (49, 335). The very fact of Slahi's detention thus becomes part of the case against him. His burden of proof extends far beyond the realm of reasonable doubt, frustrating his bids to prove his innocence. Finally, Slahi's attempts to acquit himself prove Sisyphean because of the recursiveness of paranoia. As Erin Trapp describes, "there is always another question, always some way that the so-called facts don't quite add up" (68). *Guantánamo Diary* literalizes the facts not adding up when Slahi's interrogators estimate that he has "provided 85%" of what he knows, and later, that another confession "covered that [remaining] 15%" (285, 287). Despite this supposedly complete picture of Slahi's knowledge (totaling 100%), the interrogators remained unsatisfied, and Slahi remained at Guantánamo.

This abiding dissatisfaction speaks to the insatiability of paranoia itself: as D. A. Miller writes, "Surprise—the recognition of what one 'never suspected'—is precisely what the paranoid seeks to eliminate, but it is also what, in the event, he survives by reading as a frightening incentive: he can never be paranoid enough" (164). While *Zeitoun* has a different relationship to the burden of proof because of its different generic and legal positioning, Eggers's process of investigative journalism nonetheless resonates with this evidentiary mode. Responding to one of *Zeitoun*'s epigraphs, "to a man with a hammer, everything looks like a nail," Florian Sedlmeier argues that this aphorism—attributed to Mark Twain—mirrors Eggers's investigative process of "piling on non-fictional evidence for shedding light on the fallout of a political narrative that itself rests on the production of evidence" (Eggers 7, Sedlmeier 78). Both Slahi and Eggers attempt to fight the false trial with a fair trial, yet in doing so risk strengthening the equation of the real with the documented, fueling the infinite recursions of a "process that is no process" (Butler 62).

How do we as readers respond to the ways in which *Guantánamo Diary* and *Zeitoun*'s authors and mediators pile on evidence to argue their cases? If these texts function as literary trials, exonerating their subjects, then their readers function as judge and jury. Slahi is particularly explicit in framing the reader as judge. He writes, "When I began those pages, I thought I was writing for my lawyers, so they could know my story and defend me properly. But I soon saw I was writing for different readers […]. Writing became my way of fighting the U.S. government's narrative. I considered humanity my jury; I wanted to bring my case directly to the people and take my chances" (Slahi xxxix). The reader-as-judge takes Chapter Three's discussion of "everyone's a critic" to the extreme, carrying not only moral, but also legal significance. As Schaffer and Smith describe, testimonials are presented to "the court of world opinion," where the reading public recognizes rights claims within what Joseph Slaughter calls "a public, international space that empowers all human beings to speak" (Schaffer and Smith 3, Slaughter 415). *Guantánamo Diary* and *Zeitoun*'s readership thus becomes a stand-in for the "absence of a due process of law," in Slahi's words, and the post-Katrina "courts that didn't even exist," in Eggers's (Slahi 47, Eggers 281). Further, Slahi's attempts to try himself before the symbolic jury of humanity have legitimate legal force. As civil rights lawyer Clive Stafford Smith writes in his memoir *Bad Men: Guantánamo and the Secret Prisons* (2007), "Greater justice has been achieved for the Guantánamo prisoners in the courts of public opinion than in the courts of law" (x).

Guantánamo Diary and *Zeitoun*'s positioning of the reader as jury may seem harmless, particularly in light of the overwhelming evidence exonerating Slahi and Zeitoun. Yet I want to raise here the potential costs of this policing function of the reader, which reinforces the very modes of suspicious reading that led to Slahi and Zeitoun's detention, even while it appears to redeem (and in Slahi's case, perhaps even release) them. In "Terror: A Speech After 9/11," Gayatri Spivak describes, "Epistemological constructions belong to the domain of the law, which seeks to know the other, in his or her case, as completely as possible, in order to punish or acquit rationally, reason being defined

by the limits set by the law itself. The ethical interrupts this imperfectly, to listen to the other as if it were a self, neither to punish nor to acquit" (83). Extending Spivak's distinction to *Guantánamo Diary* and *Zeitoun,* the form of both texts encourages us to read epistemologically, rather than ethically. Certainly, we as readers have the agency to resist this mode of reading. Yet the genres of both narratives invite and encourage us to read both men as objects of complete knowledge and by extension, objects of judgment. Both texts call upon readers to recognize in Slahi and Zeitoun what Franklin calls narrative humanity—"the range of historically variable but persistently ideological generic and narrative conventions and codes that create understandings of the human"—and subsequently to recognize their innocence (860). Yet the courts of public opinion, while perhaps more forgiving than the courts of law, are still courts. Spivak's formulation of the epistemology of the law, which we might extend to life-writing with a legal or testimonial function, reveals the impulse to punish and the impulse to acquit as two sides of the same coin. As Trapp writes, "We can see that the conscience that grants the detainee his humanity is the same conscience that persecutes it" (73). In this sense, the epistemic demands of *Guantánamo Diary* and *Zeitoun*'s genres may hinder their ethical calls by encouraging a mode of suspicious reading that is hyper-attuned to risk. This attunement consolidates risk in the figures of Slahi and Zeitoun even as it attempts to prove their innocence, and in turn re-exposes Slahi and Zeitoun to the risks of being misread.

EXCEPTIONALITY & EXEMPLARITY

If we as readers are to serve as the consciences that grant the accused his innocence and therefore his humanity (or conversely, his humanity and therefore his innocence), then it follows that through reading, we must become character witnesses who can attest to Slahi and Zeitoun's righteousness. In the following sections, I explore the connections between the exceptional man, the state of exception, and American exceptionalism on the basis of their shared investments in innocence:

the innocence of the exceptional individual within these texts, as well as liberal myths of American innocence more broadly. Throughout this discussion, I draw on a tradition of biographical scholarship attuned to the key stumbling blocks of life-writing: in particular, as Hermione Lee writes, "that it can tend to sound too knowing and firm about the shape of its subject's life, to make it read too smoothly, to be too selective. Alternatives, missed chances, roads not taken, accidents and hesitations, the whole 'swarm of possibilities' that hums around our very experience, too often disappears in the smoothing biographical process" (2-3). In referring to this "swarm of possibilities," Lee here draws on Henry James's description of posthumous biographies, in which he describes death as "smooth[ing] the folds" of his friend James Russell Lowell: "The figure retained by the memory is compressed and intensified; accidents have dropped away from it and shades have ceased to count; it stands, sharply, for a few estimated and cherished things, rather than nebulously, for a swarm of possibilities," James writes (*Art of Criticism* 516). While such commentary maps uneasily onto the specific form of life-writing Slahi and Eggers engage around living subjects exposed to a particular form of vulnerability at the hands of the state, we might nonetheless extend this discussion across contexts. In particular, Lee's commentary helpfully illuminates the smoothing function of narrative as it applies to the lives of real subjects, which manifests in *Zeitoun* and *Guantánamo Diary* through their positioning as exemplary. Second, James's highlighting of the flattened folds and narrative closure of the dead usefully contrasts with the unfinished story of the living, where the ongoing afterlife of a living subject can more readily disturb the smoothing function of their corresponding text.

Beginning with *Zeitoun*'s appeal to the reader as character witness, Eggers establishes Zeitoun's exceptionality through the narrative conventions of the self-made man and the marriage plot. Eggers frames Zeitoun as uniquely hardworking through the eyes of Zeitoun's former boss, who catches him running to work with a bicycle on his back after getting a flat tire: "You're the only guy I've ever known who would have done something like that," his boss tells him (28). Much like the Haddads of

Halaby's *Once in a Promised Land*, the Zeitouns have achieved a version of American prosperity: Eggers writes, "To see the two of them now [Abdulrahman and Kathy], to stand back and assess what they'd built—a sprawling family, a business of distinct success, and to be woven so thoroughly into the fabric of their adopted city that they had friends in every neighborhood, clients on almost any block they passed—these were all blessings from God" (14). Eggers frames Zeitoun as exceptional not only due to his work ethic and professional success, but also due to his exemplarity as a husband and father. Eggers emphasizes Kathy's surprise that their marriage "had come to such a symbiosis," and describes Zeitoun as "everything she [Kathy] had not believed possible: an honest man, honest to the core, hardworking, reliable, faithful, devoted to family" (16-17).

Slahi emerges as exceptional primarily through his display of empathy and grace in the face of his own dehumanization. Slahi embraces the humanity and individuality of his interrogators, distinguishing between the "good, bad, and in between" and noting that "nobody is perfect" (348, 313). In this way, he manifests the very "liberal, inclusive, and democratic imagination" his captors refuse (Goyal 82). Though Slahi admits to questioning "the humane emotions [he] was having towards [his] enemies," he states throughout his writing that he pictures his guards "as good friends if we would meet under different circumstances" (309, 364). (He indeed maintains a friendship with one of his former guards, Steve Woods, which seemingly makes good on this promise, a point I will later discuss in greater detail.) Through his exemplary empathy, Slahi subtly models what it would look like for his American readership to hold space for humane emotions toward their so-called enemies, and in doing so restores personhood to what Yogita Goyal calls "the abstraction of [the] enemy combatant" (82). In a particularly striking example of Slahi's generosity, he communicates in an Author's Note in the first edition, also reprinted in the second, that he "holds no grudge against any of the people he mentions in this book, that he appeals to them to read it and correct it if they think it contains any errors, and that he dreams to one day sit with all of them around a cup of tea, after

having learned so much from one another" (369). Echoing Siems's commentary on redactions as a form of editing, Slahi here extends a remarkable invitation to agents of the state to literally edit his work.

While Slahi's exceptional strength of character is expressed by overcoming vengefulness and hatred, Zeitoun's is expressed through his heroism in overcoming the obstacles of Hurricane Katrina. Eggers evokes this heroism by framing Zeitoun as an "American Noah figure," as Sean Bex, Stef Craps and Pieter Vermeulen describe (181). As water floods New Orleans, Zeitoun "could only think of Judgment Day, of Noah and forty days of rain," Eggers writes (94). His heroism takes on a biblical status as he rescues humans and animals alike from the floodwater using only his aluminum canoe, his resourcefulness, and his insistent regard for human dignity. Zeitoun's "frontier masculinity," to invoke Keeble's phrase, has been compared to that of *The Road*'s protagonist, who shares a rugged heroism in the face of crisis (Keeble 184; see also Masterson). Rachel Luft less generously calls this brand of heroism "disaster patriarchy" (7). Both men are omnicompetent, self-reliant, pioneering protectors of the weak: in the case of *The Road*, the man protects his child, while Zeitoun protects New Orleans's elderly residents and stranded animals (again, Eggers's direct reference to *The Road* eliminates any doubt that such resonances are coincidental). Through the eyes of Kathy, one of the text's foremost character witnesses, Eggers describes Zeitoun as "one of those inexplicably solid, self-sufficient, and never-needy men who got by on air and water, impervious to injury or disease" (8). Eggers's reverence for Zeitoun is apparent within the text itself as well as within its surrounding paratext.[48] In an interview with *The Observer*, Eggers not only praises Zeitoun as "an example to us all,"

[48] Here, I draw on Gérard Genette's discussion of paratexts, in which he describes the "accompanying productions" of a text: he writes, "although we do not always know whether these productions are to be regarded as belonging to the text, in any case they surround and extend it, precisely in order to *present* it, in the usual sense of this verb but also in the strongest sense: to *make present*, to ensure the text's presence in the world, its 'reception' and consumption in the form (nowadays, at least) of a book" ("Paratexts" 1).

but also compares himself to Zeitoun, suggesting they are both "very practical" men who "build things" and "make things happen" (qtd. in Cooke n.p.). Eggers's admiration for Zeitoun is thus partially founded upon identification. Eggers romanticizes Zeitoun's choice to wait out the storm in New Orleans instead of evacuating with his family, describing, "Amid the devastation of the city, standing on the roof of his drowned home, Zeitoun felt something like inspiration. […] In a way, this was a new world, uncharted. He could be an explorer. He could see things first" (94-95). Further, Eggers lends Zeitoun's thirst for adventure gravity and legitimacy by emphasizing its underlying sense of fate: "His choice to stay in the city had been God's will," Eggers writes (110). This heroization and sense of divine calling is worthy of skepticism, as the basis of Eggers's admiration frequently appears unstable.

My interest here, in expressing wariness of Eggers's clear admiration for his subject, lies not in criticizing Zeitoun as a person, but rather in drawing attention to the problems with Eggers's heroization of Zeitoun as a character. Despite Eggers's clear investment in framing Zeitoun as an altruistic hero and even a divine savior, beneath this characterization are several less noble reasons for staying behind to face the storm: escaping women, impressing siblings, and protecting property. I highlight these obvious cracks in Eggers's idealized portrait of Zeitoun to demonstrate the narrative gymnastics Eggers must employ to construct a singular narrative of valor, with the ultimate aim of exploring why this narrative of valor is necessary to humanize Zeitoun, as well as its potential costs. Beginning with misogyny, in building a case for staying behind, Zeitoun thinks to himself, "If he left […] He would be in a home full of women, with nothing to occupy himself" (108). From the start, Kathy is positioned as a potential impediment to Zeitoun's sense of adventure. Another component of Zeitoun's staying behind involves sibling rivalry: in addition to fulfilling a sense of fate, Zeitoun also "hoped, as silly as it seemed, that his siblings might see him like this, on the water, a sailor again, being useful, serving God" (167). Zeitoun himself seems unsure about what exactly motivated him to

stay behind: he later thinks to himself, "He had risked too much in the hopes that he might do something to match the deeds of his brother Mohammed. No, it had never been a conscious part of his motivation—he had done what he could in the drowned city because he was there, it needed to be done, and he could do it" (264).[49] Eggers's turn to apophasis here—his choice to include Zeitoun's hope to "match the deeds of his brother," only to then discount this hope as unconscious—points to the slipperiness of Zeitoun's motivations and Eggers's attitudes toward them (264). Yet Eggers manages this ambiguity out of the story, conscripting Zeitoun's complex motivations into a singular narrative of an exemplary man that suits the plot of Eggers's retelling.

While Eggers's decision to highlight Zeitoun's brotherly competition only to deny it might be taken in good faith, it is difficult to read another reason for Zeitoun's staying behind—to check on his tenants—as anything but aggrandizing. Eggers overstates Zeitoun's role as a landlord and an employer, writing of Zeitoun's tenants, "Each renter was, in some ways, another dependent, another soul to worry about" and of his employees, "He felt, sometimes, as if he had not four children but dozens" (14, 19). Zeitoun's presentation as the father of his renters and laborers obscures the economic and power differentials that arrange their relationships, a dynamic that persists after the storm. When Zeitoun arrives at one of his properties, he tells a tenant, "'I came to check on the building,' Zeitoun said, smiling, knowing how ludicrous it sounded. 'I wanted to check on you'" (107). Here, Zeitoun's first response (checking on his property) blends into an expression of care (checking on his tenant). While care for people and property may not be mutually exclusive, this close reading highlights Eggers's bid to plot every aspect of Zeitoun's life within a singular narrative of altruism, heroism, and goodness.

[49] Zeitoun's brother is described as "the most famous and accomplished athlete in Syrian history**.** He was a long-distance ocean swimmer, one of the best the world had ever known" (Eggers 102).

I detail these barely concealed fractures in Eggers's idealized portrait not to reproach Zeitoun the real person, but to question why Eggers feels he must romanticize Zeitoun the character in order to frame him as worthy of rights and sympathy. In appraising the costs of discourses of exceptionality and exemplarity in both *Zeitoun* and *Guantánamo Diary*, two central problems emerge. The first issue concerns the relationship between exceptionality and innocence: in emphasizing their exceptional character, both narratives frame Slahi and Zeitoun as limit cases of worthiness, suggesting that Slahi and Zeitoun did not deserve to be detained, deprived of rights, and tortured because of their fundamental goodness and likeability. We might extend onto *Zeitoun* and *Guantánamo Diary* Mimi Lok's assessment that "Some stories can be taken as emblematic for a crisis" while "some are surprising in that this could have happened to this kind of person" (qtd. in Bex and Craps 562). Rather than representing Slahi and Zeitoun as the ordinary "everyman" (a formulation with its own problematics, as Chapter Three discussed), both *Guantánamo Diary* and *Zeitoun* seem to fall into Lok's second category, attempting to appall readers with the knowledge that something so bad could happen to someone so good. How could a "successful and well-known man" whose "name was known all over the city of New Orleans," an ideal father and husband who rescues the elderly and feeds hungry dogs, be mistaken for al Qaeda (Eggers 266)? Similarly, how could Slahi, a man who "can never help breaking into tears" upon "read[ing] a sad story or watch[ing] a sad movie," be mistaken for a terrorist (Slahi 265)? How can the best of the best be mistaken, in Donald Rumsfeld's infamous words, for the "worst of the worst" (qtd. in Seelye n.p.)?

It is easy to see the appeal of such reversals: the shock of bad things happening to good people provides an easy pathway to sympathy and an easy indictment of the flaws in a system. In *The Art of Sympathy in Fiction* (2013), Howard Sklar argues that sympathy results from not only "the heightened awareness of the suffering of another," but also "a judgment of the explicit or implicit unfairness of that suffering" (28). Extending Sklar's thinking to the life-writing at hand, the reader is seemingly

meant not only to become aware that Slahi and Zeitoun have suffered at the hands of the state, but also that their suffering is unfair, and particularly unfair because of their goodness. Returning to the questions of risk and sanctuary explored in Chapter One, there is an assumption here that the moral decency of Slahi and Zeitoun should function as a shield against the risks of the perfect storm. Several lines of inquiry emerge from this assumption: first, how might individual goodness as an exemption from risk interrupt structural critiques of violent systems? Second, and relatedly, what sorts of arguments does the division of fair and unfair suffering ignore, and even obscure? In other words, if Slahi and Zeitoun are particularly *undeserving* of such treatment, then who, in turn, is particularly *deserving*? These questions return us to the preoccupation with innocence that underpins discourses of individual exceptionality, American exceptionalism, and the state of exception.

The problem of conditionality points us to the task of disentangling questions of exceptionality, innocence, and human dignity. Such discourses are heavily knotted in both *Guantánamo Diary* and *Zeitoun*, whose investments in individual exceptionality frame superhuman altruism as the only available antidote to the narrative of the enemy combatant. As Valorie Thomas writes of *Zeitoun*, in commentary that might be extended to *Guantánamo Diary* as well, "selfless service and sacrifice functions as the immediate antithesis to the narrative of perpetual enemy agent forced on [Zeitoun] during his arrest and incarceration" (278). While I cannot make the case that such reversals are ineffective at changing the hearts and minds of (white) liberal readers, I can make the case that such binaries are costly fictions to maintain. As the title of Mahmood Mamdani's book *Good Muslim, Bad Muslim* (2004) conveys, such sorting mechanisms never fundamentally trouble the foundations of Islamophobia and racism, but rather carve out select spaces of respectability. Regardless of their ends, such discourses of exceptionality create a binary of good or bad, worthy or unworthy, heroized or demonized. These categories are ultimately two sides of the same coin that leave unaddressed the complexity of harm as well as the troubling suggestion that lesser or guiltier men might deserve such

an ordeal. One guard vocalizes this line of reasoning by tying Slahi's character to his worthiness of release: "'I care about you. I would like to see you out of jail, leading a normal life. There are some detainees I want to see stay here the rest of their lives. But you, no!' [SSG Mary said] genuinely," Slahi recounts (294).

In contrast to this conditional sympathy, my reading insists that Slahi and Zeitoun should never have been detained, deprived of their rights, and tortured, not because of their exemplary character, nor even because of their innocence, but because no one deserves such treatment. The emphasis on Slahi and Zeitoun's innocence and goodness establishes a logic of conditionality that undermines the universal human rights for which both narratives advocate. The literary implications of this conditionality might be explored by returning to the *e pluribus unum* structural mechanism of the American state-of-the-nation novel, which maps uncomfortably onto Slahi and Eggers's testimonials (see Morley 731). Rather than one representing many, one is exempted from the many through his exceptionality. We might read *Guantánamo Diary* and *Zeitoun*'s structural mechanisms as *unum e pluribus* rather than *e pluribus unum*, shifting emphasis from representativeness toward the exceptional individual. While articulating a structural critique through an individual life is not inherently problematic, the exceptionality of this individual can unwittingly exempt him from the structure in question, obfuscating the larger critique he is meant to convey.

Beyond the ways in which discourses of individual exceptionality suggest that only the exemplary and innocent deserve rights and dignity, a second problem emerges in the fundamental lack of resilience built into these idealized portraits, which compromises the structural critiques articulated through these individual stories: if one detail is revealed as falsehood, if one virtue is revealed as corrupted, the pedestal on which these men's narrative humanity rests comes crashing down. Again, the conditionality and vulnerability of exceptionalism itself points not to an inherent flaw in such forms of life-writing, but rather to the "cruel optimism" of our investments in them, our hopes for

how they will change us and our relationship to the so-called other, and how they will change the world.[50] Here, I follow John Frow in attending not to "the reality of the Other" but rather to "the circumstances of its construction and the 'we' who play and are played by this language game" (4). What, then, is the language game the reader is playing and being played by in consuming these forms of testimony? This question is not merely rhetorical, and its answer(s) might be best pursued by considering moments when the unspoken rules of this language game are broken. In what follows, I therefore turn to the controversial narrative afterlives of *Zeitoun* and *Guantánamo Diary*. In the case of *Zeitoun*, discussion of such controversy has already been rehearsed, yet I hope to redirect this controversy away from sensationalism and toward a broader conversation around innocence, exceptionality, and narrative humanity.

In the flurry of forensic inquiry that often accompanies the release of high-profile memoirs or testimonials, unflattering details inevitably emerge, though rarely at the scale and severity of *Zeitoun*'s aftermath. In March 2011, two years after *Zeitoun*'s publication, police responded to a domestic violence report at the Zeitoun's home. In February 2012, the Zeitouns divorced. Some months later, Zeitoun was indicted for attacking Kathy and soliciting her murder (see Galow 65-66 and Franklin 865). While it does not serve the aims of this chapter to detail these harms any further, it does serve to highlight that for all the resilience, resourcefulness, and rugged heroism of Eggers's Zeitoun—a characterization authenticated through the eyes of Kathy, his white, American-born wife—such idealization creates a paradoxically shaky foundation for the structural critiques Eggers offers through the portrait of one family. Kathy, in a 2013 interview, shared that while her marriage had deteriorated since Katrina, they never had a "fairytale marriage" (qtd. in Martin n.p.). In a real-world echo of

[50] In *Cruel Optimism* (2011), Lauren Berlant describes: "A relation of cruel optimism exists when something you desire is actually an obstacle to your flourishing. […] These kinds of optimistic relation are not inherently cruel. They become cruel only when the object that draws your attachment actively impedes the aim that brought you to it initially" (1).

Halaby's fictional Haddads, whose marriage worsened after 9/11 but was already "parched around the edges," crisis magnifies pre-existing fractures (Halaby vii). Eggers's writing not only obscures Zeitoun's complexity by putting him on a pedestal, but also produces a new reality through the book's material impact on the lives of the Zeitoun family. Kathy admits to hiding her husband's pre-Katrina abuse from Eggers, and testified that "pressure from friends and family, because of the book, because of the movie, because of our business reputation" prevented an earlier divorce (qtd. in Martin n.p.).[51]

While *Guantánamo Diary*'s afterlife is devoid of the obvious controversy surrounding *Zeitoun*, a few common themes nonetheless emerge around questions of narrative resilience in accommodating the complexity of the different versions of Slahi, and the gap between the detained man writing in 2005 and the man released in 2016. In particular, the emphasis on Slahi's capacity for forgiveness as crucial to his exceptionality creates future challenges for his narrative's resilience. As Rebecca Adelman has noted of Slahi's insistent renunciation of animosity, in both the original and restored versions of the text, "Depending on the reader's own beliefs about US detention practices, this might appear either as a remarkable gesture of forgiveness or a cynical feint for clemency" (96). Surely even his seeking clemency is more than just a "cynical feint." Here, it is important to recognize the limitations placed on the forms of detainee expression, and anger in particular. Adelman writes of the art produced in Guantánamo, "Any sign of detainee anger risks compromising sympathy for their plight, particularly because Muslim men are always shadowed by a suspicion of dangerousness" (86). The notable absence of anger in Slahi's memoir invites readers to engage in affective projection, allowing us "to fill in the space where their anger might otherwise be with the pleasure of our own outrage, uncomplicated by any obligation to its supposed beneficiary" (Adelman 100).

[51] Director Jonathan Demme had announced his intention to develop *Zeitoun* into an animated feature-film. According to *The Playlist*, the film continues to "percolate in development," yet may have since been pulled due to the book's surrounding controversy (Jagernauth n.p.).

What happens to Slahi's anger (who would not be angry?) after his release? He stands by his line about bearing no grudge, and in 2019 even received a high-profile visit in Mauritania from Steve Wood, one of his former guards, a reunion reported on by *New Yorker* writer Ben Taub. Yet the outlines of Slahi's anger have become slightly more visible since his release. Slahi tells Taub, "If you say that you are angry, it is understood as an emotion […]. If I say that I am angry, it is seen as a threat to national security" (qtd. in Taub n.p.). In his article, Taub describes this limited range of expression as follows: "it was as if his transfer from Guantánamo had carried with it a kind of transposition of restraint, from shackles to self-policing" (n.p.). Even after his release, Slahi appears to occupy a space of literary parole: despite the release of his book and the release of his body, he has not been released from narratives of criminalization. Taub at one point describes Slahi preparing to deliver a speech at an Amnesty International event. His lawyer, editing the speech, suggests several changes in language: "that he take out 'lynching,' for example, and make his remarks more 'gracious'—and Salahi accepted all of them," Taub describes (n.p.).[52] The censorship regime remains, as if his bid for clemency can never truly be granted, though he has already been released. Thus, in a sort of ongoing literary probation, the burden seemingly remains on Slahi to endlessly prove his innocence and goodness—in other words, to *de-risk* himself—rather than on the state to take accountability for his wrongful detention. While it falls outside the scope of this chapter to address the recent film adaptation of *Guantánamo Diary*, *The Mauritanian* (2021), this dramatization marks an important layer in the ongoing reception history of this text, which future inquiries might more fully engage.

[52] Taub describes: "Mohamedou Ould Salahi was born in late December, 1970 […]. When a nurse, who spoke only Hassaniya Arabic, filled out Mohamedou's birth certificate in the Latin alphabet, she omitted a syllable from his last name. Salahi became 'Slahi.' So began a life in which governments treated Salahi in accordance with their own mistakes" (n.p.). Throughout this project, I use the name "Slahi" in accordance with *Guantánamo Diary*'s copyright and Slahi's public profile.

The probationary relationship between Slahi and his readership manifests in commentators' investments in underscoring a series of potential reversals in the wake of *Guantánamo Diary*'s publication and Slahi's subsequent release. Though far less direct and sensational than the reversal of Zeitoun from loving husband to domestic abuser, various writers draw attention to Mauritania's long and remarkably recent history of slavery: in 1981, Mauritania became the last country in the world to abolish slavery, and only criminalized slavery in 2007. In an article reading Slahi's memoir alongside 'Umar ibn Sayyid's autobiography, Zeinab McHeimech argues that Mauritania's history "haunts Mohamedou's unsettling observation"—that "it's not the first time" his interrogators "have kidnapped Africans and enslaved them"—raising for readers "the question of African Muslims' vexed complicity in the slave trade" (Slahi 209, McHeimech 171).[53] Here, McHeimech suggests the outline of Slahi's potential reversal from alignment with the enslaved African to complicity in ongoing slavery. Taub also picks up on this idea when he describes attending an extravagant event hosted by a Mauritanian government official in which he, Wood, and Slahi are served "lavish meals by people who appeared to be slaves" (n.p.). Taub points out the "dissonance" between "Slahi's eloquent orations on fundamental human rights" and the reality of modern slavery in Mauritania, noting Slahi's "great embarrassment" (n.p.). While neither McHeimech nor Taub suggests that Slahi is personally involved in this ongoing human rights violation, this implication nonetheless hovers around their language of "vexed complicity" and "dissonance": after his release, the locus of Slahi's potential culpability seemingly shifts from his representativeness as an "enemy combatant" to his representativeness as a Mauritanian citizen. This critical interest in somewhat oblique departures from Slahi's moral purity speaks to the vulnerability of discourses of exceptionalism, which set the stage for inevitable

[53] 'Umar ibn Sayyid (also known as Omar ibn Said) was a West African Muslim scholar enslaved in the United States, who in 1831 produced the only known autobiography of an enslaved person in America written in Arabic in (see Said).

revelations of impurity; as well as the seduction of the narrative of the innocent victim, which erases complexity.

Returning now to *Zeitoun*, what remains of Eggers's narrative when the real man's imperfections and even violence emerge in the publication's aftermath? If the text has been a literary trial absolving Zeitoun in the court of public opinion, then its afterlife transforms it into a sort of literary mistrial. Having funneled Zeitoun's many complex and contradictory qualities and motivations into a single narrative of valor, Eggers's textual defense of Zeitoun as "an example to us all" struggles to hold (qtd. in Cooke n.p.). The evidence in Zeitoun's favor is now void, as the author has been, in a sense, lying under the oath of life-writing's contract. Perhaps there is something contractual about all forms of life-writing, with Philippe Lejeune's autobiographical pact (1989) serving as a sort of legal affair. As Lee asks, picking up on life-writing's judicatory nature, "What part do blame, resentment, personal affection, judgment and defensiveness have to play in the courtroom drama of life-writing?" (4). Within this extended metaphor of the courtroom drama of life-writing, I pose the question of the literary mistrial as a provocation, rather than an accusation. I raise the notion of lying under oath not to legitimate the literary mistrial as a form of betrayal, but to identify the questions the mistrial raises around life-writing. As Gillian Whitlock writes, "literary hoaxes are useful: they bring to light the investments elicited by life narrative, and they also remind us of the risks of emotional engagement for readers, publishers, and critics" (12). Following Whitlock, the afterlife of *Zeitoun* reveals many of its investments, perhaps most notably, as Franklin remarks, "how readily Eggers's narrative can be flipped, turning Zeitoun from a 'good' to a 'bad' Muslim" (866). As Elizabeth Twitchell asks of life-writing, "What happens to memoir's social agency when it's discovered that the shared history it engenders is built on a fraudulent foundation?" (633).

Though *Zeitoun* is not a memoir, Twitchell's question is useful here in reminding us that regardless of the details of the Zeitouns' particular lives, the shared history of Hurricane Katrina and its aftermath is anything but fraudulent. What I seek to convey here is in part a generic concern about the limitations of the testimonial form and the challenges of framing an individual story as representative, and in part a concern about the way the seduction of the innocent victim inevitably carries a sort of narrative fraudulence. As Franklin concisely summarizes, "Postpublication circulation of stories of the 'real' Zeitoun expose the perils of resting a structural critique on an individual life, particularly if the author represented that life as exemplary and fully known" (865). This is not to say that structural critiques cannot be articulated through individual lives due to the harm they may cause or have caused to others: rather, this is to say that structural critiques are weakened by erasing the realities of such harms, and by funneling a person's complexity and contradictions into the brittle form of a single idealized characterization. While the exceptionality of the "characters" of Slahi and Zeitoun may neutralize risk within their surrounding narratives, it does little to neutralize the risks they face in the real world. We as readers, of course, have the agency to resist the seduction of the innocent victim, and to resist the notion that state violence is only unjust if its victims are particularly exceptional, particularly worthy, and particularly grievable. The revelation of personal wrongdoing need not pull the rug out from under the "innocent" victim, invalidating the individual's spokesmanship for a structural critique. As Franklin writes, "an indictment of the war on terror need not be incompatible with Zeitoun's abuse; it might instead explore articulations between domestic and US state violence" (867). In seeming agreement with Franklin, Kathy herself has suggested that the trauma of Zeitoun's detention cannot be separated from his subsequent violence. Can our narratives handle more complexity? Can someone be legible as both victim and perpetrator, a survivor who leaves still other survivors in his wake? Such questions point to a need for more capacious stories, and more capacious accounts of harm that are divorced from exceptionality as a conduit to worthiness.

Narrating the State of Exception

In the following section, I move beyond discussions of the exceptional individual to questions of the state of exception and its connections to American exceptionalism. The post-9/11 state of exception has been well-rehearsed by Giorgio Agamben (2005), Judith Butler (2004), and Achille Mbembe (2019) among others, developing the works of Walter Benjamin (2004 [1921]) and Carl Schmitt (2005 [1922]), and therefore does not merit a full accounting here. Of particular interest at this juncture is the relationship between risk, rules, and exceptions, a relationship the state of exception attempts to reconstitute: for example, Schmitt describes sovereignty as the power to proclaim the exception ("he who decides on the state of exception") while Agamben describes the state of exception as "the dominant paradigm of government in contemporary politics" (Schmitt 5; Agamben 2). The paradigm of the state of exception crucially illuminates questions of risk in two primary ways: first, the state of exception reveals the politically contingent nature of risk perception, and the ways in which categories of risk can be expanded and contracted. Second, as I will demonstrate through readings of *Guantánamo Diary* and *Zeitoun*, discourses of exceptionality are often deployed—much in the same way as apocalyptic discourses—as a means of regulating, suppressing, and externalizing risk. In the post-9/11 context, the state of exception permitted indefinite detention through the USA Patriot Act (2001), which produced the detainee as "a legally unnamable and unclassifiable being," as Agamben describes (3). He continues, "they [detainees] are the object of a pure *de facto* rule, of a detention that is indefinite not only in the temporal sense but in its very nature as well, since it is entirely removed from the law and from juridical oversight. […] As Judith Butler has effectively shown, in the detainee at Guantánamo, bare life reaches its maximum indeterminacy" (3-4). In the following discussion, I will use the term "state of exception" to encompass a broad array of not only legal and political but also rhetorical phenomena, bringing together the concept of the state of exception with the often-siloed discussions of the exceptional character and the exceptional instance.

My purpose in bridging these forms of exceptionality across different scales—the individual, the event, and the nation—is to clarify the logics of exceptionality in order to move beyond them, and to defang the state of exception by exploring its gimmicks. The state of exception, in my view, contributes to the same ahistoricity as the post-9/11 narrative of traumatic rupture, and ahistoricity is always deeply bound up with myths of American innocence that outsource and externalize risk. In particular, I will explore three different critical maneuvers that maintain myths of exceptionality, which we might consider to be the literary or rhetorical devices of the state of exception: unseeing (via the "dark side" and the "black site"), externalizing (via the "third world"), and isolating (via the "bad apple"). By examining these mechanisms and their implications through the case studies of *Guantánamo Diary* and *Zeitoun*, I will demonstrate how discourses of exceptionality normalize violence while simultaneously framing such violence as un-American: in this way, the language of the state of exception fuels American exceptionalism.

The first maneuver, unseeing, has both infrastructural and literary dimensions that manifest through the "black site," the black bars of redaction, and allusions to the "dark side." In each iteration, the language of darkness, visibility, and invisibility recalls Michel Foucault's description of the prison as "one of the dark zones of our life" (qtd. in Elden 130). Vice President Dick Cheney famously stated on NBC's "Meet the Press" five days after 9/11, "We'll have to work the dark side if you will. Spend time in the shadows of the intelligence world" ("The Vice President"). Cheney's reference to the "dark side" works to solidify the exceptional nature of the war on terror, suggesting that this endless campaign is a break in foreign policy, rather than a continuation. Travis Linnemann and Corina Medley articulate the problem with the rhetoric of the "dark side" in the context of policing: the notion of the "dark side" "shields the institution of policing from scrutiny and fosters the myth that under some utopian system there are police who do not actively invoke the violence and coercion of the police

mandate as routine practice" (349-50).[54] At the heart of this critique is a question over exceptions and rules: the "dark side" always frames violence as the exception, rather than the rule, which serves to normalize the state's monopoly on violence. As Joseph Pugliese argues, writing in the context of law, "The danger of fetishizing the concept of exceptionalism […] is that it functions to erase the serial practices of violence actually constitutive of the internal operations of the state and their very normalization precisely through law" (18).[55]

The "black site" and the black bar of redaction mobilize similar logics of visibility and invisibility. Many scholars have pointed out the resonances between the black bars of redaction (the original edition of Slahi's book had over 2,500) and the "black sites" of the war on terror. The black site and the black bar both conceal and normalize violence, and exert a kind of epistemological and legal force by insisting "*I see there is nothing to see*" (Linnemann and Medley 354). Writing of Homan Square, a notorious Chicago prison often called a "domestic black site," Linnemann and Medley argue that the "black site" designation "invariably positions it [Homan Square] as an exceptional case and thus an aberration of what should be understood as the always lawful practices of American criminal justice," and yet "by marking some instances as exceptional, we 'black out' or redact the state's violence, hiding it and all of its banality in plain view" (349, 354). The notion of exceptionality, then, is not descriptive but ideological, and serves to normalize forms of violence that fall outside its designation. In perhaps the most illustrative linkage in the context of this chapter, one of the most infamous Chicago police officers, Richard Zuley, ran a covert surveillance operation at Homan Square,

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[54] Linnemann and Medley articulate this critique in response to Kappeler et al.'s *Forces of Deviance: Understanding the Dark Side of Policing* (1998).

[55] See Walter Benjamin's "Critique of Violence" on the state's monopoly on violence: he writes, "one might perhaps consider the surprising possibility that the law's interest in a monopoly of violence vis-à-vis individuals is explained not by the intention of preserving legal ends but, rather, by the intention of preserving the law itself; that violence, when not in the hands of the law, threatens it not by the ends that it may pursue but by its mere existence outside the law" (239).

and later oversaw Slahi's interrogation at Guantánamo Bay. Reading the crossovers between state violence domestically and abroad reveals the false binaries produced by so-called "black sites," of onshore and offshore, known and unknown, aberrant and routine.[56]

Moving now from unseeing to externalizing, another rhetorical manifestation of the state of exception concerns exporting crisis to a different place or a different time, preventing its incorporation into a vision of an American present. Through externalization, the contradictions of the exceptional and the banal are resolved through a shift in space or a shift in time. Eggers dramatizes both maneuvers when Zeitoun looks out over the wreckage of Katrina and thinks, "He could not find a place for the sight in the categories of his mind. The image was from another time, a radically different world" (148). This description encodes the temporal ("another time") and the geographic ("a radically different world") evasions that falsely imply, *this couldn't happen here* and *this couldn't happen now*. Such attempts at externalization often manifest through appeals to the so-called "third world." These detours to the "third world" have already appeared elsewhere in this project: for example, through Franzen and Halaby's emphasis on overcrowding in India and Jordan. Even Michael Cunningham, describing his research for *Specimen Days*, admits in an interview, "as I researched New York City in 1850, where the first story is set, among poor Irish immigrants, I came quickly to understand that it was a truly terrible place if you were poor and Irish. Think Calcutta; it was filthy and noisy and dangerous and there were dead dogs lying in the streets that no-one bothered to take away" (qtd. in Duggan 385). Cunningham's inability to integrate the reality of New York City into his image of America (and American exceptionalism) neatly maps onto Eggers's description of Zeitoun being unable to "find a place for the sight [of the hurricane's damage] in the categories of his mind" (148). Such detours insist that torture, violence, and abandonment, are something that happens *over there*, or

[56] See Mark Neocleous's *War Power, Police Power* (2014) for a full discussion of the entanglement of domestic policing and wars abroad.

in other words, *not here*. As Darius Rejali writes, despite the infrastructural connections between the nodes of the United States penal archipelago, few would recognize the infamous images of the "Hooded Man of Abu Ghraib" if "police used this procedure on someone in their neighborhood" (3). (Zuley's career reminds us that such procedures are indeed used in American neighborhoods.) Slahi initially shares this view of torture as external to the United States, mistakenly assuming, "I didn't believe that Americans torture" (9).

A particular investment in this "third world" externalization takes hold post-Katrina, as mainstream media outlets proclaimed that New Orleans resembled "a Third World country" or even a "Third World Refugee Camp" (qtd. in Giroux 8-9). Military officers, deployed to New Orleans after deployments overseas, contributed to this narrative. One National Guard officer likened New Orleans to "little Somalia," while a former US Army private compared the destruction to Baghdad (qtd. in Mirzoeff 1198; qtd. in De Bruyn, "The Hot War" 43). A public hospital manager told the Associated Press, "It's like being in a Third World country […]. We're all just trying to stay alive" (qtd. in "Nurse" n.p.). *Zeitoun* records the prevalence of this rhetoric. After evacuating the city, Kathy turns on the television and observes:

> The news led with reports of lawlessness and death. The media consensus was that New Orleans had descended into a "third-world" state. Sometimes this comparison was made with regard to the conditions, where hospitals were not open or working, where clean water and other basic services weren't available. In other instances, the words were spoken over images of African American residents wilting in the heat outside the Morial Convention Center or standing on rooftops waving for help. There were unverified reports of roving gangs of armed men, of guns being fired at helicopters trying to rescue patients from the roof of a hospital. Residents were being referred to as refugees. (Eggers 109)

This passage deserves close attention for several reasons. First, we see that residents become refugees: rather than framing the abandonment of citizens as a failure of the state, these citizens are instead excluded from the state's protection. As for the racism of this abandonment, Franklin crucially notes that "labeling New Orleans 'Third World,' represent[s] poor black people as non-US citizens and as not fully civilized" (861). This compromised citizenship was also propelled by narratives of

criminalization post-Katrina, where abandoned citizens were notoriously criminalized as "looters." The state thus abdicated responsibility for its citizens by criminalizing and exempting them from citizenship. Second, the above excerpt is also one of the few times in *Zeitoun* when Eggers includes New Orleans's Black residents in his account of Hurricane Katrina (fewer than ten times in more than 350 pages). As Thomas writes, "The conspicuous absence of Black people [in *Zeitoun*] demands comment" (279). This looming absence of anti-Black racism deserves our incredulity given the history and population of New Orleans, the disproportionate impacts of the storm on Black people, and the racialized dimensions of citizens' abandonment after the storm (see Gabe et al.). Perhaps, through the eyes of his Syrian American protagonist, Eggers tries to horrify his American readership with the knowledge that Zeitoun traveled all the way from the so-called third world to the so-called first, only to find that his experience "surpassed the most surreal accounts he'd heard of third-world law enforcement" (218). As Zeitoun's Syrian family tells Kathy during the storm, "How can you live in that country? […] You need to move back here. Syria is so much safer" (207).

My point here is to emphasize the porosity of the classifications of the so-called first and third world, to expose the willful ignorance (and innocence) such classifications maintain, and to frame crisis as an imaginative opportunity to reconsider the flaws in our neat analytical frames. Writing in the intervening years between 9/11 and Katrina, Butler describes, "we would be wrong to think that the First World is here and the Third World is there […]. These topographies have shifted" (49). *Zeitoun* documents not only the breaching of actual levees—echoing the collapse of barriers explored in Colson Whitehead's *Zone One*—but also, as John Masterson writes, the breaching of "conceptual barriers between what we might imagine to be discrete geopolitical, legal, and even ethical domains" (727). We might read such breaches not as failures of securitization, but as a window into the reality of radical interconnectedness and shared risk: the real-world networks through which our narratives are materially intertwined. In this sense, such fractures might serve as potential answers to Rob

Nixon's call to "breach the walls that concretize our planetary delusion that we can segregate secure communities from insecure ones long term, and separate out orderly societies from those abandoned to destitution and climate chaos," a delusion we might also think of as the promise of total risk-management (267). Yet these delusions, as *Zeitoun* and *Guantánamo Diary* demonstrate, struggle to be dispelled. Zeitoun, even after his firsthand experience with US law enforcement, is portrayed as incredulous: "Did that all really happen?" he asks, "Did it happen in the United States? To us?" (319). How do these illusions of exceptionalism persist after experiences of such intense disillusionment? As I have shown, fractures in such fantasies are excised (the "black site"), externalized (the "third world"), or, as I will discuss presently, isolated through the logics of the "bad apple."

The "bad apple" defense has a long-standing imperial history, and in the context of the war on terror, was perhaps most famously evoked in the aftermath of the Abu Ghraib scandal (see McClintock 60). Eggers invokes the bad apple metaphor when he describes interviewing Zeitoun's arresting officers. Taking at face value their claim that they "had not purposely hunted and arrested a man because he was Middle Eastern," Eggers writes, "knowing that Zeitoun's ordeal was caused instead by systemic ignorance and malfunction—and perhaps long-festering paranoia on the part of the National Guard and whatever other agencies were involved—was unsettling. It said, quite clearly, that this wasn't a case of a bad apple or two in the barrel. The barrel itself was rotten" (307). Here, Eggers seems to make a structural critique of US military and security agencies, though racial profiling is written out of his explanatory framework. Yet Eggers's later commentary raises questions of just how expansive his idea of the barrel really is. In a particularly bewildering remark, Eggers writes in an author's note:

> I visited the Elayn Hunt Correctional Center in 2008. It seemed to be a very well-run prison, a progressive and rational place with a keen eye toward rehabilitation and re-entry, and toward giving prisoners the opportunity to advance their educations [...]. And yet Abdulrahman's experience there was not acceptable. I don't intend to denounce the operation of that prison; perhaps the institution was simply overwhelmed after Katrina and fell short of its higher standards. (336)

With his rotten barrel theory seemingly abandoned, Eggers returns to the logic of the bad apple, framing Hunt as a generally "progressive" prison (surely a contradiction in terms) that erred under the isolated conditions of Katrina. It was simply one rotten apple, and rotten only temporarily.

The motif of fishing, which appeals to themes of water and to Zeitoun's own background as a fisherman, is also recruited in service of a "bad apple" narrative, serving as its rhetorical offshoot. When Zeitoun is detained at Hunt, Eggers employs the following allegory: "He thought of bycatch. It was a fishing term. They'd used it when he was a boy, fishing for sardines […]. When they pulled in the net, there were thousands of sardines, of course, but there were other creatures too, life they had not intended to catch and for which they had no use" (263). In this metaphor, Zeitoun becomes a "creature […] not intended" for capture, swept up in the carceral net of post-Katrina militarization (263). Slahi is similarly framed as being swept up into the wrong net, the "bycatch" of the war on terror. Colonel Morris Davis, who served as chief prosecutor of Guantánamo's Office of Military Commissions from 2005 until his resignation in 2007, tells Siems in an interview, "When Slahi came in, I think the suspicion was that they'd caught a big fish" (qtd. in Siems, "He Reminded Me" n.p.). Later, Slahi is told he is a "small fish," and Davis admits, "there's a lot of smoke and no fire" (Slahi 306; qtd. in Siems, "He Reminded Me" n.p.). According to this framing, there is nothing structurally wrong with the net, just as there is nothing structurally wrong with the barrel. I stay with these metaphors—rotten apples, bycatch, smoke and fire—because it is my contention that these mixed metaphors belie mixed messages, obfuscating questions of agency and accountability, and of individuals and structures.

SCANDALS & STAINS

I now return to the state of exception and shift from questioning how its logics manifest rhetorically to questioning the purpose of such logics: to normalize violence, externalize risk, and

maintain myths of American innocence. As alluded to in my discussion of the black site, the state of exception creates a spectrum of normalcy that legitimizes "ordinary violence" by contrasting it with "exceptional violence." Rendering certain forms of state violence unacceptable renders others acceptable, such that the exception proves the rule. Extending this analysis to *Guantánamo Diary* and *Zeitoun*, it is worth asking deeper questions about the seemingly exceptional horrors of Guantánamo Bay and the state response to Hurricane Katrina: were such horrors indeed exceptional failures, lapses, and descents—evoking the narrative of the fall—or were the systems that produced such violence functioning exactly as intended? This second possibility speaks to the relationship between risk and the exception: the perfect storms in which Zeitoun and Slahi were caught—storms of geopolitics, carceral infrastructures, and natural disasters—became occasions to reconstitute perceptions of risk and subsequently discipline populations in new ways, creating the expanded nets of policing in which Zeitoun and Slahi were ensnared.

The narrative of the fall also returns us to questions of innocence: beyond normalizing violence, logics of exceptionality also maintain American innocence by framing exceptional violence as un-American. Again, the exception proves a rule that does not exist. As Ann Laura Stoler reminds us, "every empire imagines itself as an exception" (12). Ultimately, it is this myth of innocence that underpins the intersecting discourses of the exceptional man, the state of exception, and American exceptionalism, which this chapter works to unite. While *Guantánamo Diary* and *Zeitoun* frame Slahi and Eggers as exceptional to prove their innocence at the scale of the individual, discourses of exceptionality also maintain American innocence at the scale of the nation. As Linnemann and Medley ask, "how is the use of coercion, torture, and murder repeatedly framed as a scandal in or stain on some imagined 'values and history'?" (348). The word "repeatedly" does a surprising amount of work here: how many scandals will it take before these imagined "values and history" lose credibility?

In many circles, such credibility has already been lost. In the wake of the revelation of US atrocities offshore and onshore—from Abu Ghraib and Guantánamo Bay to Homan Square and immigrant detention centers—critics across disciplines are increasingly questioning the framing of torture and violence as exceptional and singular. Scholars like Amy Kaplan ([2003] 2004), Michelle Brown (2005), and Anne McClintock (2009) have rather framed the atrocities of the US penal system as systematic and routine. As McClintock writes, echoing Kaplan's language of the "global penal archipelago," "Abu Ghraib is only one (accidentally illuminated) site along a vast, concealed network of paranoid violence, including Guantánamo Bay" (Kaplan 831, McClintock 64). *Guantánamo Diary* and *Zeitoun* reveal this network of violence through their attention to the historical continuity evidenced by carceral infrastructures themselves: as Angela Davis describes, "There is an unbroken line of police violence in the United States that takes us all the way back to the days of slavery, the aftermath of slavery, the development of the Ku Klux Klan" (qtd. in Jeffries n.p.). Slahi points to this unbroken line when he tells an interrogator, "it's not the first time you have kidnapped Africans and enslaved them" (209).

While Slahi reads present-day detention centers as an extension of slave plantations, Zeitoun reads Camp Greyhound as an echo of Guantánamo, connecting nodes of the penal archipelago across geographic distance. He describes the impromptu detention center, "It looked precisely like the pictures he'd seen of Guantánamo Bay" (Eggers 219).[57] A man detained alongside him "wonder[s] at what point they'd be asked to pose naked, in a vertical pyramid, and which guards would lean into the picture, grinning," suggesting further connections between Camp Greyhound and Abu Ghraib through the carceral genres of the infamous Abu Ghraib photographs (Eggers 228). It is worth noting, too, that Camp Greyhound was built through the labor of incarcerated people from the Dixon

[57] Elsewhere, Arin Keeble confirms Zeitoun's perception by describing Camp Greyhound as "modelled after Guantanamo Bay" (179).

Institute in Jackson, Louisiana, and from the Louisiana State Penitentiary in Angola, a prison "built on an eighteen-thousand-acre former plantation once used for the breeding of slaves," as Eggers notes in *Zeitoun*'s final chapter (334). Tracing these connections reveals a large web of carceral infrastructures that illuminate Guantánamo Bay, Camp Greyhound, and the American slave plantation as neither exceptional nor singular, but always already linked.

These connections and continuities, which undermine discourses of exceptionality and their attendant myths of innocence, are made visible in these texts not only through infrastructural histories, but also through literary histories. Both texts evoke the genre conventions of slave narratives, including prefatory notes that serve as authentications of credibility (see Korb, McHeimech, and Goyal), an interest in testimony and witnessing, and direct appeals to readers' sympathies. Slahi's narrative, in particular, explicitly draws these connections. He describes, "I often compared myself with a slave. Slaves were taken forcibly from Africa, and so was I. Slaves were sold a couple of times on their way to their final destination, and so was I. Slaves suddenly were assigned to somebody they didn't choose, and so was I. And when I looked at the history of slaves, I noticed that slaves sometimes ended up an integral part of the master's house" (309). We might also view the slave and detainee narrative, like the zombie narrative, as providing an account of biopolitics. Eggers describes Zeitoun being "shuttled […] between cages like an animal," and realizing people "could not see him […] as a human (332).[58] Similarly, Slahi describes his rendition as "the boundary between life and death," and later states, "I was a 'living dead'" (5, 27).[59]

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[58] In a further zombie echo, Clyde Woods writes in the wake of Hurricane Katrina of a "rarely discussed" but "omnipresent fear […] that the tortured past of Alabama, Louisiana and Mississippi is reasserting itself" (428).
[59] The resonances between Slahi's expedition and the Middle Passage recall terminology from Orlando Patterson's landmark study *Slavery and Social Death* (1982), in which he describes various modes of representing social death, whereby the slave becomes the "domestic enemy," the "enemy within," or the "insider who had fallen, one who had ceased to belong and had been expelled" (39, 39, 41). See also Colin Dayan's *The Law is a White Dog* (2011) for further discussion of "negative personhood" (39).

Goyal poses the important questions of whether "the slave narrative—a clearly bounded historical form with the single goal of arguing for abolition—enable[s] a productive sense of the relation between past and present forms of oppression" or whether "the notion of the varied afterlives of slavery serve to obscure the specificity and indeed the contemporaneity of a site like Guantánamo Bay" (71). For the purposes of my analysis, I stay with Goyal's first question, suggesting that literary form might intervene in questions of exceptionality through the continuity provided by genre itself. These echoes of the slave narrative return us to the global penal archipelago that spans across temporalities and geographies, suggesting that the continuity between the historic enslaved person and the modern detained or incarcerated person—Angela Davis's "unbroken line"—is evidenced by not only carceral infrastructures, but also literary histories (qtd. in Jeffries n.p.). If, as Franco Moretti postulates, "[f]orms are the abstract of social relationships; so, formal analysis is in its own modest way an analysis of power," then Slahi's narrative and its echoes of the slave narrative remind us that the social relationships that manifest in Guantánamo and in Camp Greyhound are neither new nor exceptional despite the specificity of their contemporary contexts ("Conjectures" 66). Attending to geography and infrastructure as well as literary form in *Guantánamo Diary* and *Zeitoun* thus reveals continuities that challenge the narrative of post 9/11 rupture as well as the overarching narrative of the state of exception, exposing the continuities between the risks of the past and the risks of the present.

Guantánamo Diary and *Zeitoun* offer case studies in the limits of exceptions as an explanatory framework, testing America's capacity for still more scandals and stains. Though Slahi's memoir functions as a literary trial, his writing also reverses the trial by subjecting the American justice system to the court of public opinion. Slahi later writes that the US government "claims to be the leader of the democratic free world, a government that preaches against dictatorship and 'fights' for human rights and sends its children to die for that purpose: What a joke this government makes of its own

people!" (254). At times, Eggers represents Zeitoun as similarly disillusioned with so-called American values. Prior to his detention, Eggers writes, Zeitoun had faith "that everything, always, would work out fairly and equitably" (286). Yet after Katrina, Eggers writes, "those hopes could be put to rest. This country was not unique. This country was fallible" (263). Here, it seems, Zeitoun loses his faith in American exceptionalism.

Despite these awakenings and losses of faith, in their very form, both *Guantánamo Diary* and *Zeitoun* solidify a sense of American exceptionalism by appealing to the same values of universal human rights around which they claim disillusionment. These appeals, as I will argue presently, make both texts vulnerable to recruitment as "soft weapons."[60] In order to make this case, I will turn first to questions of reception and readership, and second to questions of mediation. Despite Slahi's explicit condemnation of the US government, he simultaneously maintains his faith that "if Americans are willing to stand for what they believe in, I also expect public opinion to compel the U.S. government to open a torture and war crimes investigation" (364). There is a fundamental contradiction in these texts' invocation of universal ethics that should not be overlooked. In soliciting recognition from their readerships, texts like *Zeitoun* and *Guantánamo Diary* reveal the exclusions, uncertainties, and contestations around the very human rights they petition as universal. This slippage between what is already universal and what should be universal is reflected in the semantics of Canadian legal scholar John Humphrey's line, "Everyone knows, or should know, why human rights are important" (qtd. in Slaughter, *Human Rights, Inc.* 2). The gap between what we already know and what we should know reflects what Elena Coundouriotis calls the "doublespeak" of human rights' universality (1070). In *Human Rights Inc.* (2007), Joseph Slaughter sums up the fundamental contradiction of human rights

[60] In *Soft Weapons: Autobiography In Transit* (2010), Gillian Whitlock frames life narrative as a "soft weapon" because "it is easily co-opted into propaganda," which Whitlock defines as "a careful manipulation of opinion and emotion in the public sphere and a management of information in the engineering of consent" (3).

law, which "legislates as if its common sense were already commonsensical, thereby transforming its tautological propositions into teleological projections of a time when everyone will know what everyone should know" (26). Extending Slaughter's thinking from the legal context to the literary, Slahi's memoir manifests the time "when everyone will know what everyone should know" (26). The American reader is framed both as a jury, in need of convincing, and as an upholder of rights, already convinced.

Turning now to questions of mediation, Siems and Eggers's brokerage of these narratives further exposes these texts to co-optation. Returning to questions of scandals and stains, even those legal and literary witnesses who have attested to the most shameful disgraces to so-called American values seem to maintain their illusions. In his introduction to *Guantánamo Diary*'s second edition, Siems writes of Slahi's detention, "I still struggle to fathom the scope and intensity of that ordeal, and what it says about my country's commitment to the core human rights values of due process and freedom of expression" (Slahi xix). The censorship, lack of due process, and torture Slahi faced are here subsumed into the logic of slipping into the "dark side," allowing Siems to frame Slahi's ordeal as a momentary lapse in his country's commitments to human rights.[61] In this sense, the narrative misplaces nostalgia in the same way that contemporary invocations of Walt Whitman misplace nostalgia (as discussed in Chapter Three) via the false implication that "Whitman's poetic ideal was ever accomplished in the past" (Lerner, *Hatred* 64). Eggers's aforementioned commentary on the decline of American prison standards sustains the same illusions. These sorts of positive accounts of American justice are not only bad readings (and in the case of Eggers and Siems, perhaps another instance of whiteness as bad reading), but also projections of American exceptionalism and soft power.

[61] Many scholars analyzing the corpus of writing by Guantánamo lawyers have pointed out that such lawyers frequently frame habeas writs as aligned with American "core principles," and cast "the rule of law as a fundamentally *American* ideal" (Denbeaux et al. 267, Tomsky 37).

These appeals to soft power contain the central contradictions of these texts: that even while they reveal the illegitimacy of the state, their forms and marketing appeal to what Joseph Nye describes as efforts to "make [state] power seem legitimate in the eyes of others" (167).

Ultimately, hope is preempted and encoded into these narratives just as much as suspicion: despite their critiques, *Guantánamo Diary* and *Zeitoun*'s petitionary and testimonial forms preclude such narratives from fully disavowing the innocence they help restore. The forms Eggers and Slahi write within allow them to critique American exceptionalism, yet cannot fully break free of appeals to liberal optimism. By introducing life-writing as a soft weapon into the analytic coordinates of this chapter, and by reflecting on the cruel optimism of *Guantánamo Diary* and *Zeitoun*'s reception, I in no way intend to hold Slahi or Zeitoun responsible for the processes of propaganda in which their narratives may be conscripted. Rather, I return to Frow's question about language games, and those who play and are played by them. Such language games are further illuminated by attending to how these sorts of narratives circulate, and how they are read. As Gillian Whitlock documents, "Western traditions of benevolence" become "the transit lane that allows life narratives to move from East to West rapidly and to become highly valued commodities for a 'primed' readership" (13). By bearing witness in the moment of reading to the injustice Slahi and Zeitoun face, readers are rendered "enlightened, sympathetic, and politically correct" (Whitlock 15). This privileged function of the primed reader also connects to questions of soft power: as Tomsky writes, drawing on Nye, "soft power enables desired outcomes through hope and idealism rather than through critique or protest" (36-37). In my view, both of these texts resist mapping onto the facile binary of hope and idealism versus critique and protest. Yet testimonials that manifest the time "when everyone will know what everyone should know" seem to eclipse some of the risky and necessary work, on the part of these texts' largely American readerships, of examining the relationship between sympathy and complicity, and assessing where the state ends and where the reader begins (Slaughter 26).

CONCLUSION: RESTORATION & REPARATION(S)

While Frow's question about language games is a crucial one, the games in question are not only linguistic but also legal. While Slahi's writing petitions the reader for recognition, this recognition is not in itself sufficient to secure his restitution and release, revealing the gap between reparative reading and actual reparations. In this chapter's conclusion, I read the processes of restoration embedded in *Guantánamo Diary* and *Zeitoun*'s endings. Both conclusions take as their central conceit processes of rebuilding, restoration, and repair: Zeitoun's engagement with repair is in part literal, while Slahi's is textual, and both processes symbolize the forms of reconciliation and restoration that serve as narrative closure.

The ending of Eggers's book details Zeitoun watching New Orleans's rebirth in a conclusion that is worth quoting (slightly condensed) at length:

> It was a test, Zeitoun thinks. […] But now look at us, he says. Every person is stronger now. […] He must trust, and he must have faith. And so he builds, because what is building, and rebuilding and rebuilding again, but an act of faith? […]
>
> As he drives through the city during the day and dreams of it at night, his mind vaults into glorious reveries—he envisions this city and this country not just as it was, but better, far better. It can be. Yes, a dark time passed over this land, but now there is something like light. Progress is being made. It's so slow sometimes, so terribly so sometimes, but progress is being made. We have removed the rot, we are strengthening the foundations. There is much work to do, and we all know what needs to be done. We can only do the work, he tells Kathy, and his children, and his crew, his friends, anyone he sees. So let us get up early and stay late, and, brick by brick and block by block, let us get that work done. If he can picture it, it can be. This has been the pattern of his life: ludicrous dreams followed by hours and days and years of work and then a reality surpassing his wildest hopes and expectations.
>
> And so why should this be any different? (334-35)

Eggers makes two crucial moves in this passage, the first of which evokes universalist fantasies of natural disaster, and the second of which exalts disaster capitalism. These fantasies recall the disasters of Lerner's *10:04*, in which "the city was becoming one organism" around a hurricane, and of *Self Storage,* in which a fire leads to rebirth: "the areas that look the most ruined and desolate will one day be full of life, the soil nourished by what had burned there," Brandeis writes (Lerner 17, Brandeis 160-61). Like the storm in *10:04* and the fire in *Self Storage*, Hurricane Katrina becomes a uniform

hieroglyphic that erases the unevenness of risk. Only through this erasure can *Zeitoun* ultimately frame Katrina as a cleansing mechanism, for both one man and for a nation. At the level of the individual, Eggers describes, "A time like this could change a man," producing "a good man made better" (162). Eggers offers a parallel reading of the nation: "We have removed the rot, we are strengthening the foundations" (335). Like many of the texts explored in this project, the home becomes a metaphor for the nation, and a natural disaster becomes an imaginative opportunity to fantasize about the erasure of human difference in the face of a larger threat. *Zeitoun*'s conclusion mobilizes natural disaster as a crucible of personal and national betterment. Extending his penchant for rapturous endings to Zeitoun's story, Eggers conveys an optimism not that radical change will or even needs to occur, but rather that a return to normalcy is possible.[62] For all the talk of rotten barrels, *Zeitoun* suggests the rot can ultimately be removed, and Eggers's euphoric vision of Zeitoun restoring New Orleans's damage "brick by brick" emerges as a distinctly reformist one (335).

Despite these fantasies of improvement, the storm—both the event itself and its surrounding fiction—never delivers on its unifying promises, just as the uniform hieroglyphics of Chapter Three ultimately lose their signifying power.[63] In the absence of this deliverance, Eggers's text must stand in for post-Katrina repair, narratively smoothing over the unevenness of the storm's damage. This brings me to the second crucial component of *Zeitoun*'s vision of rebuilding, illuminated by a more material and infrastructural reading of the ways New Orleans was selectively rebuilt after Katrina. Eggers emphasizes an uplifting narrative of the Zeitouns' recovery of property and dignity: "Zeitoun and

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[62] Lee Siegel, in his review of Eggers's *What Is the What* (2006), points out that many of Eggers's works end with "the same Yes! to life, the same thankfulness for every simple day, the same feeling of blessedness and gratitude, the same vow of wakefulness and strength" (n.p.). This description could easily be applied to the end of *Zeitoun*, as well, and even to the endings of the Whitman-inspired intertexts of Chapter Three, recalling in particular Flan's commitment to finding her "Yes" (Brandeis 66).

[63] These false promises were articulated by then-President George W. Bush, who insisted that "the storm didn't discriminate, and neither will the recovery effort" (qtd. in "Transcript" n.p.).

Kathy began to buy houses in their neighborhood. Their next-door neighbor had fled the storm and hadn't returned. She put the house on the market and the Zeitouns made an offer. It was half the value of the house before the hurricane, but she accepted," he writes (323). The storm becomes not only an imaginative opportunity, but a business opportunity. Yet whose suffering does the upward trajectory of the Zeitouns' success story obscure? Who is included in the city's new "foundation," and who is treated as "rot" to be removed? This latter question echoes the violent rhetoric of Representative Richard Baker, who was overheard telling lobbyists after the hurricane, "We finally cleaned up public housing in New Orleans. We couldn't do it, but God did" (qtd. in Babington n.p.). We might begin to answer the question of what the language of rebuilding obscures by returning to the absent presence in *Zeitoun*, that of New Orleans's Black residents, who were disproportionately displaced by the storm. As Henry A. Giroux notes in *Stormy Weather: Katrina and the Politics of Disposability* (2006), "as many as 80 percent of the city's black residents [are] still dispersed throughout the country" (60-61). Reread in this light, the Zeitouns' success in the wake of the storm may reflect not the "ludicrous dreams" of a determined man, but rather the opportunism of disaster capitalism and gentrification (Eggers 335). In *The Shock Doctrine* (2007), Naomi Klein indirectly speaks back to Eggers's depiction of the storm as a "test" after which "Every person is stronger" (324). She writes, "[n]ot so long ago, disasters were periods of social levelling, rare moments when atomized communities put divisions aside and pulled together. Increasingly, however, disasters are the opposite: they provide windows into a cruel and ruthlessly divided future in which money and race buy survival" (413). Klein's commentary provides a contemporary intervention into risk theory itself, suggesting that in contrast to Ulrich Beck's distinction that "*poverty is hierarchic, smog is democratic*," today's crises exacerbate, rather than level, differentials of vulnerability and exposure (*Risk Society* 36).

Turning now to themes of rebuilding in *Guantánamo Diary*, the second, "fully restored" edition, published a year after Slahi's release from Guantánamo Bay after fourteen years of detention without

charge, begins with similar fantasies of the storm. Slahi opens his new introduction, "Every time we had a hurricane warning in Guantánamo Bay, I had the same daydream. I imagined the prison camp wiped away and all of us, detainees and captors alike, fighting side by side to survive" (xxi). Despite the parallels between the utopian fantasies of Slahi's imaginary storm and Zeitoun's real one, Slahi's vision of reparation involves not the reconstruction of a city, but rather the reconstruction of his text. Slahi discusses this process of rebuilding in his introduction to the second, "restored" edition: the entire revision takes the form of rebuilding. Slahi writes of the 2015 version, with its thousands of redactions, "my book, as it was originally published, was broken goods" (xlv). In response to the refusal of the US government to restore the uncensored version of the text, Slahi describes:

> I have worked with my editor Larry Siems on what we came to call this "repair," because it often felt like we were trying to restore a very ancient building.
>
> I thought at first this would be easy, a matter of reinstalling missing bricks to their proper places. […] But this quickly became complicated when it wasn't just a few words that were missing, but sentences and paragraphs, full pages even. I began with the obsession of replacing what was taken out brick for brick, tit for tat, as a kind of revenge for the censorship. But revenge is always problematic—it ends up imprisoning you. […]
>
> I found myself writing and remembering, beyond the boundaries of what I was supposed to be filling in. But it was by doing this, and not trying to confine myself to the government's prescribed blacked out spaces, that I felt myself recovering the feeling of the original pages. (l)

While both *Guantánamo Diary* and *Zeitoun* deploy metaphors of rebuilding, in the above passage, Slahi suggests that in contrast to Zeitoun's vision of restoration ("brick by brick and block by block"), his own attempts to restore his writing ("brick for brick, tit for tat") only ended up imprisoning him within his captor's prescriptions (Eggers 325, Slahi l). His concerns recall J. M. Coetzee's words: "The true challenge is: how not to play the game by the rules of the state, how to establish one's own authority" (364). Rather than attempting to merely reverse the damage done to his manuscript, then, Slahi breaks out of the "confine[s]" of "the government's prescribed blacked-out spaces" (l). Finding a more capacious form of reparation, Slahi aims not to restore the "very ancient building" of his writing to its former glory—a figurative echo of *Zeitoun*'s process of restoration—but to recover the original "feeling" while fashioning it anew.

Notably, Slahi does not hide the erasures that have turned his work into broken goods. Rather, as Siems notes of the second edition, "the lightly shaded text indicates areas of restoration and reparation, for anyone wishing to compare this version with the first published edition" (Slahi xix). In my view, Siems undersells this editorial decision here, once again reducing Slahi's work to a body of evidence to be read with suspicion, in need of authentication and cross-referencing. We might also read the shaded text of the second edition as bearing not only evidential but aesthetic value. Slahi is not only a witness but also an author: while imprisoned, he wrote not only *Guantánamo Diary* but also four additional manuscripts including, as Taub reports, "a self-help book about finding happiness in a hopeless place" (n.p.). Like Lerner's totaled art, Slahi's memoir bears its defacement openly, reminding us at every turn of the violence and censorship of the regime under which it was produced.

As this chapter has proposed, it is important to attend to the correlations between our ways of representing risk and reparation in the text and in the world. Yet simultaneously, we must attend to their divergences. In Slahi's case, I want to approach with care the difference between reparation and reparations, the textual and the material, and the aesthetics and the realities of risk. The disconnect between the release of the first edition of Slahi's story and the release of his body generates several notable consequences for reading practices and narrative form, the relationship between literature and the law, and the fantasy of closeness between writer, editor, and reader**.** Slahi recalls in his introduction to the second edition that "It's strange to realize that in those days [of writing] I may actually have been more interested in getting my story out than in getting out of GTMO" (Slahi xxxix). Rather than Whitman's fantasy, "Camerado, this is no book, / Who touches this touches a man," it is essential to remember the separation of Slahi's story and his body (Whitman, "So Long" 62-63). Unlike *Zeitoun*'s neat resolution, readers of *Guantánamo Diary*'s first edition (prior to Slahi's release) must grapple with the story's ongoingness, and the ethical demands placed on the reading present. In contrast to Chapter

Two's discussion of the zombie genre's "knack for narrative closure," narratives of indefinite detention problematize "the function of narrative closure" itself (Whitehead 130, Coundouriotis 1063).

After Slahi's release, he offers himself to the work of reparation, though of course, the harm is not his to repair. He addresses his captors, interrogators, and guards in his introduction to the second edition:

> To all of them, I wish to renew the invitation that I delivered through my attorneys in my Author's Note for the first, censored edition. In that Note, I said that I bear no judgment against anyone for my ordeal and treatment [...] I said that I dreamed of one day sitting down with all of them for a cup of tea, having learned so much from one another. I mean this still, and most sincerely, as every day teaches me even more about forgiveness. (li)

Here, he speaks in the reparative mode, suggesting the need to let go of interrogation, paranoia, suspicion, and revenge, and to rebuild relationships. Despite his release, fourteen years of Slahi's life were stolen from him. He missed the death of his mother and the birth of his son. As the film *The Mauritanian* (2021) describes in its ending credits, Slahi's family has not been able to live together due to ongoing visa issues, and Slahi is still denied a Mauritanian passport at the request of the United States.[64] How might this damage be repaired, and what reparations are owed? As Siems writes, "Mohamedou is home now, and with this edition, his long quest to tell this story is complete. Speaking not as an editor but as an American citizen, I see other reparations work that remains to be done. But Mohamedou has done his part. The rest is up to us" (xx). Life-writing exposes the gaps between reparative writing, reading, and actual reparations. While we might read Slahi's invitation to repair as reflecting in part the affect of liberal optimism, or the cynicism of self-policing, we might also read his dream of sharing a cup of tea with his captors as elevating the scales of the personal, and urging a rereading of interpersonal conflict in light of the structural violence that shapes our narratives and our lives.

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[64] As Taub reports, it is unclear "why the United States has any say in whether the Mauritanian government issues a passport to a Mauritanian" (n.p.).

Figure 3: Bedrock beneath the World Trade Center
From: www.nytimes.com/2008/09/22/nyregion/22rocks.html

CONCLUSION

"Disasters provide an extraordinary window into social desire and possibility, and what manifests there matters elsewhere, in ordinary times and in other extraordinary times."
- REBECCA SOLNIT, *A Paradise Built in Hell*

"Historically, pandemics have forced humans to break with the past and imagine their world anew. This one is no different. It is a portal, a gateway between one world and the next."
- ARUNDHATI ROY, "The Pandemic Is a Portal"

Beneath the site of the Twin Towers lies a slurry wall damming lower Manhattan against the Hudson River, held up by the floors of the World Trade Center parking garage. As engineers mapped the bedrock for the World Trade Center rebuild, they discovered carvings left by retreating glaciers around twenty thousand years ago, and an enormous geologic depression that has been called "the Grand Canyon of Lower Manhattan" (see Fig. 3) (qtd. in Dunlap n.p.). The memorial lights that commemorate the attacks each September, beaming two columns of light into the sky visible across a radius of over sixty miles, coincide with the southern migration of birds across New York City, throwing hundreds of thousands of birds off course (Barnard n.p.). The 9/11 site and memorial, like the so-called 9/11 novel, tell a story of collision between human and natural history, revealing strange assemblages that resist singular readings. To understand this story means to engage a vast archive of risk, and to change the ways we read.

The nine primary texts explored within this project teach us how to engage this vast archive, demanding forms of reading that resist singular points of reference. This thesis has engaged novels and testimonials about terrorism and climate change, overpopulation and water shortages, divorce and infidelity, zombification and cannibalism, racism and racial profiling, and detention cells and hurricanes. As this study has demonstrated, contemporary American literature urges a mode of reading that is attuned to multiple forms of risk, as well as multiple scales, temporalities, and geographies that ecological themes in particular afford. This mode of reading often runs counter to the relatively rigid

genres of literary criticism itself. Pieter Vermeulen writes that the novel "cannot remain unaffected by the recalibration of belief and feeling that is underway in contemporary life," and Peter Boxall similarly describes the need for new forms of understanding "the relationship between the material conditions of contemporary culture and the narrative forms within which such conditions come to expression" (Vermeulen 127, Boxall 17).

While these forms of recalibration are already visible in the novel, the four chapters of this thesis accumulatively suggest that we might also recalibrate our own reading protocols, and thereby the novel's attendant criticism. Attunement to risk, which cuts across interpretive categories and subdisciplines, productively troubles the perceived inevitability of our own critical reference points. As a case study in this methodology, this project has revealed the generative potential of reading across multiple forms of risk, with a particular focus on risks associated with terrorism and ecology. Heeding the interlocking quality of contemporary crisis, both in the world and as represented in the contemporary novel, this project has reread post-9/11 literature ecologically, unearthing insights in the space between these disciplines. This project resists reading its source material according to the categorical frameworks of *either* the post-9/11 novel *or* the climate change novel not merely on account of a critical prescriptivism, but also because the texts in question explicitly invite such readings. This process of reading across multiple forms of risk productively deepens, sharpens, and complicates dominant understandings of representations of both 9/11 and ecology within American literary studies over the last two decades.

In reading through this new multifocal lens, what do we see? Reading across risk has both thematic and formal implications, shedding light on the thematization and plotting of risk in the contemporary novel and in life-writing, and underlining the genre models that might encode these visions of risk. Chapter One traced how large-scale risks circulate through the networked pathways of the novel, travelling between the global and the local, and reframing the domestic as the site of risk's

arrival, rather than the refuge so often assumed, particularly in post-9/11 literary debates. However, the narrative engines of the realist novel struggle to keep pace with the representative demands of global networks. Heeding the challenges of the realist novel—in particular, its challenges of scale—Chapter Two engaged speculative fictions that turn to apocalypse to thematize the risk society. The schismatic organization of apocalyptic rupture, however, runs counter to these novels' allegorical insights about the continuous and therefore historical nature of contemporary crisis, undermining either their own apocalyptic form or their own thematic insights. Chapter Three then explored the thematic tension between risk as universal and risk as particular through novels that emerge at the junction between prose and poetry. While these texts criticize Walt Whitman's vision of democratized risk to varying degrees, their own appeals to symbols of universality—including suspicion, the storm, and literature itself—struggle not to reproduce the erasures of the uniform hieroglyphic. Finally, Chapter Four returned to questions of risk's emplotment, not in the novel but in life-writing and in the world, by investigating representations of risk as exceptional and routine through the form of the testimonial narrative. This closing chapter raised generic questions of the kinds of readings we perform on stories of detention, and the limitations of structural critiques as articulated through the exceptional character and the exceptional instance.

While the themes of terrorism and environmental destruction have anchored this particular inquiry, this thesis might also serve as a methodological invitation for an interdisciplinary criticism that combines critical categories in order to respond to the recalibrations already underway in the contemporary novel. Otherwise put, this project is interested in shifting the disciplinary contexts in which we read texts, and the texts we read side-by-side. Accordingly, each chapter has engaged questions of reception and cultural capital: Chapter One discussed the arbitrary exclusions of the category of the "Great American Novel"; Chapter Two explored whether the American apocalyptic novel can narrate planetary collapse; Chapter Three engaged the uneven risks of authorial sincerity

and naivete, and discussed the challenges of Whitman's fantasy of "inhabit[ing] all"; and Chapter Four considered life-writing as a legal instrument, where the reader is called to action with real material consequences in the world (Lerner, *Hatred* 64). Throughout this project, I have drawn texts into productively illicit combinations, reading across divisions of literary status, genre, authorial identity, and cultural positioning. Related to this interest in contexts of reception, this project also remains curious about the ways in which academic subdisciplines might overregulate our modes of generating knowledge, predetermining rather than expanding our interpretive reference points. How might we expand our reading of twenty-first-century literature to better reflect the ways in which multiple reference points meet through convergence, collision, and contradiction?

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

As I have written this thesis, another global crisis has already taken center stage: the Covid-19 pandemic, which spanned from 2019 to a date still unknown. During the pandemic, attention to multiple forms of risk has taken on new urgency as disease spreads across species and geographies. The pandemic has recalibrated the ways we read risk, animating toxic discourses and revealing the porous boundaries between nations and geographies, leading to both solidarity and xenophobia. This new crisis has taught us to read risk anew, attuning us not only to the risks we face, but also the risks we pose to each other. Simultaneously, 2020 tied for the hottest year on record in the earth's history, full of unprecedented wildfires, hurricanes, heat waves, and cold snaps. The limits of our infrastructures—from public health systems to electrical grids—were unforgivingly exposed, as was the unevenness of our social structures—from racist policing to reproductive labor. Each new crisis virally exploited the vulnerabilities of its antecedents.

Throughout the pandemic, in the United States, 9/11 remained a strange benchmark of tragedy: loss of life was often measured in public discourse in the unit of "9/11s." For example, a *Newsweek* headline predicted, "America's COVID Deaths May Be Equivalent to a 9/11 Every Day by Christmas," and indeed December 9, 2020 witnessed such a toll, as journalists marked the day when daily Covid-19 deaths surpassed 9/11 deaths (see Gander, Crist, and Togoh n.p.). In New York, first responders and survivors of 9/11 campaigned for early vaccine eligibility due to preexisting health conditions, citing disproportionate rates of disease from exposure to airborne toxins and debris (Brodsky n.p.). Simultaneously, the pandemic and climate change collided in various ways. On one hand, deforestation and habitat loss remain key drivers of pandemic risk (see Brancalion et al.). Further, the early days of the pandemic in particular saw a resurgence of ecofascist rhetoric under the banner "humans are the virus," with echoes of Walter Berglund's misanthropic cry, "WE ARE A CANCER ON THE PLANET!" (see J. Johnson n.p., Franzen 485). Against the backdrop of an increasing number of crises that collided during the writing of this project, the fact of global interconnectedness continues to emerge as one of our greatest vulnerabilities and one of our greatest potentials.

Perhaps this quality of ongoingness—a new crisis always already moving to the fore—is part of what makes it hard to write about contemporary crisis: there will always be something more contemporary. This is in part the logic of the risk society, too, that there will always be another risk looming on the horizon. What, then, is the staying power of this kind of analysis? How might the perennial destabilization of our own analytic coordinates be a source of potential, rather than obsolescence? Just as the post-Katrina novel rewrites in significant ways the post-9/11 novel, so too will crises like Covid-19 reshape literary production, building on themes of virality and global interconnectedness already present in contemporary literature. The specificity of the risks that anchor the contemporary novel may change across texts and across time. In response, this project hopes to

build a more capacious critical account of the vast scales, speeds, and, again, risks contained within contemporary literature, and demonstrate how the lens of risk might help us read across the odd and unpredictable angles at which different forms of crisis meet.

A range of worthy inquiries fell beyond the scope of this thesis. While this thesis engaged extensively with questions of scale, future scholarship on representations of risk in the contemporary American novel might grapple more fully with questions of speed, temporality, and scope. Beginning with speed, a future iteration of this project might take up questions of slow violence more explicitly, attending to how environmental crisis takes shape in the novel in unspectacular ways that merit closer readings. This engagement might take the form of, for example, a chapter comparing representations of risk in Philipp Meyer's *American Rust* (2009) and Jesmyn Ward's *Salvage the Bones* (2011) that would deal more thoroughly with questions of infrastructure, organized abandonment, and, in Ward's case, narratives of Hurricane Katrina in fiction rather than life-writing. As for temporality, future lines of inquiry might expand Chapter Two's charting of an inverse relationship between risk and deep time, exploring more broadly how a planetary perspective reformulates risk in the novel by reframing timescales.

In terms of scope, a future study would benefit from a more transnational reading of risk in the contemporary novel. While this project has focused on American literature, noting that engagements with ecology usefully destabilize the category of American literature itself, further studies might continue recontextualizing American literature according to frameworks beyond the nation. Over the last several decades, scholars writing on globalization and world literature have begun questioning the coherence of the category of American literature itself. Janice Radway, addressing the American Studies Association in 1998, contested the container model of the nation by suggesting that "territories and geographies need to be reconceived as spatially situated and intricately intertwined networks of social relationships" (5). Ecological concerns crucially intervene in the regulatory function

of the category of American literature itself. Recent works like Wai Chee Dimock's *Through Other Continents: American Literature Across Deep Time* (2006) reflect the insights an expanded scope—both temporally and geographically—might offer to American literature, and to the territorial fiction that is America itself.

In addition to the aforementioned areas, this project's findings might also be deepened by a greater attention to the connections between risk, reading practices, and theories of reading. While this thesis gestured toward these questions throughout—for example, through discussions of reading Whitman to move beyond critique in Chapter Three, and discussions of practices of preemptive suspicion in Chapter Four—such debates remained tangential to the primary focus of this study. Future scholarship on risk in the contemporary novel could put additional pressure on the connection between risk and reading from a more explicitly metacritical perspective. This project would also benefit from an inquiry into the siloing of subdisciplines within universities that might ask the questions of when, how, why, and to what effect "post-9/11 literature," and "ecocriticism" or "the environmental humanities" became institutionalized through research, teaching, and learning. As the next phase of my own engagement with the field of literature brings me back to the high school classroom, it is worth naming here my particular pedagogical investment in how we organize texts within courses, and the kinds of reading such organization demands. Rather than re-entrenching single-issue criticism, it is my hope that future students of literature are equipped with more capacious tools for reading across disciplinary boundaries. Increased attunement to contemporary novels' immanent risk criticism is one starting place for this task.

Shortly after 9/11, Ulrich Beck published an article responding to global terrorism's opening of "a new chapter in world risk society," in which he asserts, "The greatest danger […] is not the risk, but the perception of it" ("The Cosmopolitan State" 1). In this article, he describes the universalist fantasies prompted by risk: "A question repeatedly raised and discussed in the past was the following: What can unite the world? The experimental answer was: An attack from Mars" (1). This hypothetical threat makes explicit the "utopian kernel" of the risk society, a kernel encoded in all the texts this project explores (Hoydis 9). We can see the outlines of this kernel in *Freedom* and *Once in a Promised Land*'s environmental discourses, which frame humans as collectively vulnerable to the risks of water and resource shortages; in *The Road* and *Zone One*'s rejection of the wallet as a marker of anthropological distinction, which becomes irrelevant in the face of an existential threat; in *Self Storage* and *Specimen Days*'s deployment of Whitman's "uniform hieroglyphic" to diffuse social divisions; and in imaginings of the storm as a leveler of security and precarity in *10:04*'s fictionalized accounts of Hurricane Sandy and Hurricane Irene, *Zeitoun*'s account of Hurricane Katrina, and Slahi's dream of a hurricane that never arrives. Yet the "utopian kernel" of the risk society remains just that: a kernel, yet to come to fruition. Risk divides just as much as it unites, and surely there are better and nearer places to train our visions than an attack from Mars. How might we develop the germ of risk's potential at more local scales, without zooming out? How might we imagine new futures without imagining the end of the world, and transcend disaster's accompanying myths? The novel, this project suggests, might teach us to be more attuned to complex landscapes of risk and crisis in ways that help us answer and re-answer this question, as the unrealized potentialities of risk flash new futures before us, revealing the immanent possibility of the world to be other than it is.

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