The Development of the Reimaginative and Reconstructive in Historiographic Metafiction: 1960-2007

DISSERTATION

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Abstract

This dissertation argues that postmodern American fiction has strategically performed a series of rewritings. These range from a blurring of boundaries between author, narrator, and text that demonstrates the power of fiction (and calls attention to itself as such) to later pastiches of existing texts and styles. Another form of rewriting that occurs is a combination of these methods that also evokes the idea of truth and its conversion into the fictive. Meditations on history, how it is written and processed, and the kinds of narratives that have emerged as reliable, true, and “correct” are important features of this genre. Postmodern writers who deal with the historical past and engage with, rewrite, and subvert the historical fiction genre find themselves navigating boundaries. Concerned with the longing for a tangible and “knowable” history, they write to fill its absence. I am concerned with how these texts use postmodernist and metafictional strategies to explore the past and what it means to us in the present, especially with regard to the textuality of history itself.

Each of my chapters seeks out exemplary texts of a stage in the evolution of historiographic metafiction. Chapter 1 reassesses two seminal examples of the genre that date from the 1960s, Thomas Pynchon’s *V.* and John Barth’s *The Sot-Weed Factor*. They present a forked path for postmodern literature’s engagement with history. Pynchon reconstructs where Barth reimagines. Both pioneer an often absurdist, farcical “secret” history. Chapter 2 turns its focus to the innovation of alternate history, which has its
origins in science fiction. Philip K. Dick’s World War II alternate history *The Man in the High Castle* serves to illustrate how alternate history has carved out new territory within historiographic metafiction. Two later alternate histories, William Gibson and Bruce Sterling’s *The Difference Engine* and Michael Chabon’s *The Yiddish Policeman’s Union*, expand on and revise Dick’s groundbreaking work. Chapter 3 focuses on historiographic metafiction written about the 18th and 19th centuries. Dating roughly from the mid-to-late 1990s, I consider these novels—Pynchon’s *Mason & Dixon*, John Edgar Wideman’s *The Cattle Killing*, and Diane Glancy’s *Stone Heart*—to form not only a literary subgenre, but a focused reinterrogation of an era. In Chapter 4, I focus on the presentation of 20th century secret history, which first appears in Ishmael Reed’s anarchic *Mumbo Jumbo*. In *Ragtime* E.L. Doctorow provides a template for Don DeLillo’s unlikely collision of historical and pop-cultural figures that creates a parodic secret history ending in the rise of popular culture and the cult of the image. DeLillo, in *Underworld* and *Libra*, chronicles the “American magic and dread” of the 20th century’s darkest moments. My coda focuses on the emergence of the historical graphic novel. This explosion of texts both furthers the evolution of historiographic metafiction and recapitulates its progress up to this point. Ultimately, my project offers a significant new answer to the question of how postwar American fiction dealt with the nation’s history, the literary aftershocks of which continue to shape this century’s fiction.
for Kate, with all my love
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Introduction

As Julia Kristeva’s concept of intertextuality makes clear, every work of literature in the late 20th century serves as a response to those that have come before it. The timeline of literature urges into production texts that retell and re-engage the literary and historical past. Postmodern American fiction has, in challenging and transgressing literary genres and tropes, strategically performed a series of rewritings. These range from an early, Borgesian blurring of boundaries between author, narrator, and text that demonstrates the power of fiction (and calls attention to itself as such) to later parodies and pastiches of existing texts and styles that receive their power from what is in a sense suppressed on the page—or was in the originals which are incarnated once again—but calls to the reader. In each of these rewritings, metafiction is created in the emergence of a fictional text that calls its own existence into question. In the likeness and unlikeness between original and copy, parody and object of parody, is a self-reflexivity that creates new meanings.1 Another form of rewriting that occurs is a combination of these methods that also evokes the idea of truth and its conversion into the fictive. Meditations on history, how it is written and processed, and the narratives that emerged as reliable, true,

1 Aside from its status as a seminal work of historiographic metafiction and its inclusion in this dissertation, John Barth’s 1960 novel The Sot-Weed Factor is an excellent example of this postmodern form of parody coming into being. While 18th- and 19th-century literary parodies (i.e., the 1744 parody of Pamela, Shamela) lampoon their targets, postmodern parody proceeds in a new direction. In Postmodernism, Jameson states that parody, under late capitalism, “finds itself without a vocation” (Jameson 16), replaced by pastiche’s blankness, that of a “statue with blind eyeballs” (Jameson 16).

Yet I take issue with Jameson’s definition of pastiche as purely blank. Sot-Weed, while a pastiche, does lampoon received versions of history and the heroism of American origins, actually choosing to continue the project of Ebenezer Cooke’s 1708 poem, and apply it to how America circa 1960 thinks about the past. In this way it recovers parody as a task worthy of its postwar era of composition.
and “correct” are important features of this genre. In his 1966 essay, “The Burden of History,” Hayden White explained the tensions inherent in the spinning of history from the stuff of facts, the problems inherent in believing that statements about a given epoch or complex of events in the past “correspond” to some preexistent body of “raw facts.” For we should recognize that what constitutes the facts themselves is the problem that the historian, like the artist, has tried to solve in the choice of the metaphor by which he orders his world, past, present, and future (White 47).

Novelists in the postmodern era who deal with the historical past and engage with, rewrite, and subvert the historical fiction genre find themselves navigating certain boundaries and poles. Their writing seeks to deconstruct binaries while remaining aware of them: part fact, and part fiction, as are all historical accounts, novels belonging to the supergenre of postmodern historical fiction often play with the reliability of facts in several interesting ways. First, they quite simply add inventions to established facts, or reinvent—reimagine—historical facts. Second, they add these reimaginations to a brew of historical facts that are sometimes forgotten and obscure: they recover, or reconstruct. Third, and finally, they perform simultaneous variations on both of these modes of historical engagement, defamiliarizing the reader’s processing of historical knowledge. It is in these cases uncertain what events or characters in the novel are inventions, obscurities, or cunningly falsified hybrids of the two. In the traditional postmodern sense, these historical novels rejoice in instability and indeterminacy as a productive space for new accounts to emerge. Moving between the ideologies of the past and present, changing the portrayal of individuals and moments embroiled in a collective historical
change or shift, and researching existent historical accounts as any author striving for accuracy might do, the writers of postmodern historical fiction approach the responsibilities of the historical novelist with a crucial difference: a skepticism towards the reliability of historical accounts, and the knowledge that their fictional history will join previous versions that, too, are unreliable. It is in the light of this skepticism that these writers engage with and process both history and historical fiction in new ways. In this dissertation, I focus specifically on writers who occupy this position, engaging in a subversive dialogue with history.

I argue that this dialogue takes place in two main forms. They are *reimagination* and *reconstruction*. Reimagination is a manipulation of historical events that deviates from the established historical record. It often relies heavily on parody and anachronism, and emphasizes the insertion of absurd events that critique the prevailing ideology’s belief in American triumphalism. It has its point of origin in the generational contemporaries Thomas Pynchon, John Barth, and Philip K. Dick. Reconstruction is the second, more nuanced postmodern literary engagement with history, and one that has a different awareness of American identity production through history, converting historical research into a new way of viewing that history. It focuses on marginal figures and historical events, bringing them to the forefront of a new historical imagining of the period. Crucial elements of reconstructive history involve the drawing of connections between its authors’ chosen figures and events, which are—aside from their possible marginality—often purported to be lost or obscure. At other times, however, the figures

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2 This comprises the traditional, or realist, type of historical fiction as defined by Georg Lukács, with reference to what he saw as the anti-bourgeois novels of Sir Walter Scott. In this critical view, the historical crisis or moment of change is captured through the eyes of a proletarian bystander, with likeness to oral or people’s history. See Lukács, *The Historical Novel*, University of Nebraska Press, 1983.
and events are central, or even considered to be epochally defining. Their history, when reconstructed, is also that of their epoch, in which background events are moved to the foreground, or an integration of disparate events and people occurs.

Both reimagining and reconstruction create different forms of secret history. Secret history is a concept that also originates in reimagining, a fictive set of revelations that the text purportedly unearths. Some of the earliest exemplars of literary secret history dealt with hypothetical failed plots that almost succeeded, or retellings of events that exposed a crucial role played by a peripheral actor. Reconstruction, however, takes secret history more seriously—even if it is still at times the subject of parody—using it as a basis for the manipulation of historical facts and figures, as well as focused interrogations of what they mean, or might mean when secret, often conspiratorial or coincidental, connections between them are revealed. Many texts discussed in this dissertation are secret histories, ranging in chronology from early America to the Kennedy Assassination; historiographic metafiction will arguably continue to produce secret histories of contemporary political and cultural events.

Texts which attempt to reflect on history while creating a sense of self-awareness that interacts with the reader are defined by Linda Hutcheon, in *The Poetics of Postmodernism*, as “historiographic metafiction,” a term that seems to have maintained its original usage, while encompassing new kinds of texts, up to the present, though today it is often applied to less overtly metafictional texts than in the past. Hutcheon focuses on the intertextuality of history, which she defines as inseparable from “the inevitable

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3 Indeed, it could be argued that certain novels focused on in this dissertation are not metafictions. Nevertheless, my working definition of metafiction involves each text’s relationship to historical writing as opposed to fiction. Thus, their imitation of history as opposed to a certain fictional genre cements their status as historiographic metafiction.
textuality of our knowledge of the past [...] the value and the limitation of that
inescapably discursive form of knowledge, situated as it is ‘between presence and
absence’” (Hutcheon, “Parody and the Intertextuality of History,” 8). This signals that
Fredric Jameson’s definition of parodic postmodern historical fiction as pure pastiche—
parody without a target—has become less relevant to current views of the texts; instead, a
dominant critical sense echoes Hutcheon’s belief that postmodern fiction “is at once
metafictional and historical in its echoes of the texts and contexts of the past” (3). This
has become increasingly true as the novelists discussed in this dissertation phase out the
process of pure reimagination and begin one informed by reconstruction, aiming to
recapture a “lost history” or “counterhistory.” By definition, these alternate views of
history are created in response to historical yearning (DeLillo’s novels are particularly
crucial to this formation), and sometimes parodies or evokes history’s textuality.4 At
other times—especially when written about American origins, which express a longing
for a national history—they create a romantic “historical sublime,” as outlined by Amy
Elias’ 2002 Sublime Desire. Elias defines this as the product of a “post-traumatic
consciousness,” a “desired horizon that can never be reached” (Elias xviii). More
reimaginative than reconstructive, the historical sublime seeks a knowable history, but
recognizes the limitations in doing so. At other times, American history is defamiliarized
into a “weird history” that creates unlikely connections and reveals shocking or
subversive facts.5 While all these texts offer alternative views of history, alternate history

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4 DeLillo’s novels, in particular, also have a highly intertextual relationship with historical documents, incorporating them into the text in previously unseen ways.
5 The term is partially my own coinage, and partially one that appears in popular historical accounts. Usually, it offers an assortment of trivial or implausible historical facts. See John Richard Stephens, Weird History 101 (Barnes & Noble, 1997). My usage of it is closer to the “Weird Western” genre-fusion with occult or horror elements, of which Joe R. Lansdale is an exemplary author. I believe that weird history, or perhaps the “Weird Cold War,” which DeLillo writes about, by definition views its figures like J. Edgar
as a genre is also a notable deviation from this concept. It posits a history that never actually happened, but might have happened in the wake of a change of events. For instance, what if John F. Kennedy survived his attempted assassination, or the Allied invasion of Normandy was a failure that ultimately led to their loss of World War II? The creation of a historical narrative not only foregrounds the enormous impact that such events have had upon our history, but also the potential upheaval caused by events we may have considered insignificant. But what texts like Philip K. Dick’s *The Man in the High Castle* (an exemplary early alternate history) also do is critique their contemporary ideology by destabilizing a sense of American historical destiny.

Applying my definitions of the reimaginative and reconstructive to Hutcheon’s concept of historiographic metafiction forms the conceptual core of my argument that American historiographic metafiction has become less reimaginative and more reconstructive over time. I conclude that reimaginative historiographic metafiction (which forms the basis for Chapters 1 and 2, and returns in my Coda) is an at times parodic genre that is highly fictionalized to the point of emphasizing its own lack of historical reliability. It involves heavy emphasis on anachronistic or parodic elements, alternate history, or the creation of a new history inspired by fiction contemporary to or about its historical period. Reconstructive historiographic metafiction (discussed in Chapters 3, 4) takes up some of these traits, but also departs from them. Focusing on heretofore understudied parts of American history, or composing historical events and figures in new ways (especially in Reed, Doctorow, and DeLillo) to provide a new perspective on the era, the reconstructive also emphasizes the untold—or

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Hoover (rumored to be a transvestite) through a conspiratorial lens. See *The Big Book of Weirdos* and *The Big Book of Conspiracies* (Paradox Press, 1995).
unreconstructed—history of African-Americans and Native Americans, and how it is apart from the historical mainstream.

In seeking to gather together not only seminal examples of these types of historiographic metafiction but also more recent and diverse examples of its intentions and the strategies employed to achieve them, I face a twofold problem: dealing with these texts as postmodern narratives and as historical narratives. We have reached the point in literary history where writing about postmodernism has acquired a more retrospective than current status. This dissertation aims to avoid either a celebratory revisiting of past landmarks of postmodern theory and literature or a declaration of its having reached its end or irrelevance, and instead attempts a theoretical reinterrogation of postmodernism as it applies to these texts. This means that—for example—simply saying that a critique of essentialist and master narratives occurs in my chosen texts, and limiting them to this sole purpose, is not enough. Rather, by presenting a chronology of postmodern historical fiction and in-depth studies of texts that come from different eras in its development, I wish to put together a developmental retrospective of postmodern historical fictions that reassesses the corpus and the terminology used to discuss it. Going beyond the tag of the “postmodern” applied at the movement’s height, I instead want to consider the texts as concerned with something larger than the inventions of metafiction and the jouissance of the postmodern as ends unto themselves. In other words, how do these texts use postmodernist and metafictional strategies to explore the past and what it means to us in the present, especially with regard to the textuality of history itself? When at their most parodic, anachronistic, or counterhistorical, what do they advance in terms of ideology or ideological critique?
While focused on historiographic metafiction as a broad genre, my individual chapters shift to specific genre outgrowths such as alternate history, parodic and picaresque reimaginings, and the specific focus on mass culture and its treatment of history characteristic of authors such as E.L. Doctorow and, later, DeLillo. These types of historiographic metafiction, all written to explain the importance of a series of American cultural moments, represent notable deviations from an original model. What makes these texts historical in their engagement with the past merits further analysis; worthwhile, too, is probing them for indications of what turns the genre took as it grew to encompass significantly new narrative strategies. Together, these texts work at “making manifest the multiplicity of possible versions of the past and unveiling both the historian’s ideological manipulation and the impossibility of any final closure” (Juan-Navarro 47). Yet they do not stop at expressing this impossibility. In rewriting, they supply new historical visions.

Not all texts set in the past or using certain historical events as a backdrop satisfy the criteria of historical fiction, because the genre has a series of rules, however implicit, that all candidates for inclusion in the genre generally observe. These include the presence of actual historical figures and events, the assignment of a crucial role in these events to historically non-canonized “ordinary” folk, and ways of incorporating archival historical material, occasionally from actual texts that have survived the era in which the text is set. Postmodern historical fiction will by definition be seen as rule-bending, but some attention should still be paid to the level of historical accuracy—or the kind of accuracy—that is portrayed therein. For instance, late 20th-century novels dealing with the relatively distant past of the 18th century like Neal Stephenson’s *Quicksilver* and Thomas Pynchon’s *Mason & Dixon* perform my above-stated third function of
historiographic metafiction: while often picaresque and preposterous, within their genre they at times make it difficult to decide what therein is historically accurate and what is invention. At times, readers will be surprised to discover something they thought not to be true actually is. When Stephenson and Pynchon seem occupied with recovering a kind of historical truth found in the odder corners of 18th-century technologies (the Mechanickal Duck, the anachronistic resemblance between cryptography and computer programming language), it becomes necessary to ask if this sets this particular kind of historiographic metafiction apart from the rest. One such objective shared by Pynchon and his 1990s peers is the reconstruction or recovery of “lost history,” historical material not known to the general public and sometimes upset our preconceived notions about a time period. Even if some authors seek to vandalize canonized historical accounts, as first Barth and then Ishmael Reed do, they do so with an intent to upset the accepted paradigm and bring alternate accounts closer to the surface, using a multiplicity of historical accounts to their advantage. Brash, pointed, and occasionally farfetched, texts produced by these writers ask if their history is really all that far-fetched when compared to what we know.

By grouping my texts strategically, I wish to draw out correspondences and influences between them, while at the same time seeking answers to the question of an overall arc or development of the genre of historiographic metafiction, and—if we think this term, still in circulation, no longer fully adequate—what a better definition would instead be. I believe that doing so will lead to the addition of qualifiers within the term. In looking at the parallel births of reconstructive or reimaginative historical fiction, a new purpose for its strategies will be brought to light. This purpose reflects cultural shifts
towards a profound skepticism towards history, and chronicles efforts to replace a void in the reliable with new literary production.

Writing just as historiographic metafiction reaches an early peak in 1976, William F. Steuber surveys the state of the American historical novel at the nation’s bicentennial. Well aware of the “contradiction” between what is “fanciful or is presented as hard fact” (Steuber 109) in historical fiction, he is lukewarm about Doctorow’s choice of “seemingly unrelated incidents” subject to “enormous manipulation” (112) in *Ragtime*, but finds inspiration in Gore Vidal’s assertion, in his novel *1876*, that while Shakespeare’s “history is always wrong […] his characters are always right” (Vidal, qtd. in Steuber 114). While still maintaining a conservative stance on historical fiction—and writing from the perspective of a historian, not a literary critic—Steuber unwittingly pinpoints the late 20th century tension in reading American historical fiction. While aware that historical texts such as James Fennimore Cooper’s *Leatherstocking* novels, when seen as *part of* history, “helped to strengthen our national goals” (110), he is ambivalent about the state of historical fiction and its effect on U.S. culture circa 1976, though he does praise Vidal (and James Michener’s *Centennial* for its accurate portrayal of the American frontier). Steuber, when faced with a crisis in literary historicity, opts to settle for novelistic invention, but one he feels is well-researched and, in a word, respectful.

This dissertation has its point of origin in this tension, which has only increased since Steuber’s era and continued to fuel the development of historiographic metafiction within postmodern literature. Drawing on the theoretical framework of Linda Hutcheon

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6 I refer here to the early-to-mid 1970s’ publication of Pynchon’s *Gravity’s Rainbow*, Doctorow’s *Ragtime*, and Reed’s *Mumbo Jumbo*; the latter two are covered in Chapter 4.
in particular, as well as a diverse group of scholars who have followed in her footsteps, I develop an explanation of how and why these writers engage with history, breaking the rules of historical fiction in order to create their own series of dialogues with the past. My chapter organization traces the iterations of postwar America’s fascination with digging into its past, culminating in the relatively recent hauntings of the 20th century (in DeLillo’s *Underworld*), which overlap with the time frame in which several of these texts were in fact composed. This recursive process is crucial to my argument, in that it serves to close the circle of interrogations into the past, bringing to a head many of the issues present throughout all my texts, especially the longing for one’s history, to understand and possess it in the textual sense and experience closure.

Between the 1960s and the end of the 20th century, America went through many turbulent changes, to the point that saying so has become something of a cliché used by the popular media in the way it now processes history in the postmodern era. Yet it is important to see how these novels reflect these seismic changes, especially in terms of their attempts to make the past resonate with their immediate present. The historical unrest of the late 20th century have created adjustments in how the past is seen. Meanwhile, on the literary side of things, an increased routinization (to a degree) of the genre has led to the increased stability of historiographic metafiction, and an awareness on the part of such a text’s audience as to what to expect. Contemporary readers no

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7 Here, I refer readers to Santiago Juan-Navarro, John F. Keener, Martha Tuck Rozett, and Lubomír Doležel, as well as the more obvious Amy Elias and precursor Fredric Jameson.

8 William Gibson and Bruce Sterling’s *The Difference Engine* and Alan Moore’s *From Hell*—both set in 19th-century England—provide notable exceptions to this rule, yet are included for their importance in the framework to which they have contributed. Moore sets England’s Jack the Ripper as a critical figure in the dawning of the 20th century, the European conflicts of which will set the stage for international developments. Gibson and Sterling, as well, revise geographical boundaries in their alternate historical framework, destabilizing national boundaries between England and the United States in a contemporary way that reflects the information age.
longer read historical fiction with the exact expectations of Steuber: as of the early 21st century, a kind of accuracy,\textsuperscript{9} invention, and awareness of the unreliability of historical accounts can easily coexist in the same work. They do so as the innovations of postmodern historical fiction have come to dominate the sensibility of all literary historical accounts, as well as those in television and film. This dissertation traces its development and ascendance in the postwar era. I have taken a necessarily selective approach to a large universe of potential texts, choosing those that I believe to be exemplary to their genres within a supergenre.

\textit{Chapter 1: Two Seminal Metafictional Secret Histories: Barth and Pynchon}

My first chapter begins with two early works, one of them somewhat under-recognized. They mark in my study the emergence of the parodic, reimaginative historiographic metafiction and had a massive influence on succeeding generations of writers. My choice of two seminal examples of the genre that date from the early 1960s allow me to study its origins and explore the reasons for its emergence at this time: Pynchon’s \textit{V.} and Barth’s \textit{The Sot-Weed Factor}. They present something of a forking path for postmodern literature’s engagement with history. The latter takes a historical document that also serves as a literary inspiration, Ebenezer Cooke’s satirical poem that lends the novel its title, and from it extrapolates a wildly satirical farce that is of a piece with Barth’s later work (and Cooke’s) in its philosophical aims and fascination with the unstable (and untamed) origins of the pre-Revolutionary American colonies. Pynchon in \textit{V.}, while using many of the same tactics of wild and at times profane comedy, is more

\textsuperscript{9} This accuracy—or perhaps refinement—creates the impression of a reconstruction or reawakening, a way of seeing “lost” or disparate historical material through new eyes. For more information on how this develops in novels chosen in this dissertation, see Chapters 3 and 4.
interested in stitching together material from diverse historical periods, making
Pynchon’s famously copious research a much more far-ranging project than Barth’s
admittedly deep research. It also makes V. more of a reconstruction than a reimagination,
though both currents animate the work. This sets up the division between these two
impulses that are critical to this argument as a whole: is historiographic metafiction on
the whole more reimaginative than reconstructive, or is the inverse true? When does the
shift occur? I argue that the answer lies in these texts, which also both deal with another
theme of vital importance in all the texts that follow: the secret history, or revelation of
lost or suppressed knowledge that fills in various historical lacunae or (at long last)
provides a sense of closure, or parodies the desire for that sense. If The Sot-Weed Factor
has occasionally puzzled critics who have sought to define historiographic metafiction
and its ideological place as something more than bawdy schoolboy farce, V. offers a
clearer take on its author’s use of history. It is less parodic in methodology, yet both
Pynchon and Barth offer a secret origin or secret history that makes both novels’
engagement with conventional history and historical fiction deliberately parodic, while
also creating a new historical model that recasts, reinvents, and distorts. Placing these
novels first in my study also allows for a follow-up on the legacy of these writers and
how critics have used their work to define historiographic metafiction. In Chapter 4, I
provide a survey of Pynchon’s 1997 novel Mason & Dixon to fully explore how his aims
have evolved, and how it offers a response of sorts to The Sot-Weed Factor, updating its
concerns for a new audience.
Chapter 2: Alternate History: Reimagining the Historically Inevitable

Diverging from the thread of secret history is the idea of alternate history, which has its origins in science fiction. Philip K. Dick’s World War II alternate history *The Man in the High Castle* is among the earliest of his novels to show promise of directions his later work would take: a focus on ontology explored through false or competing realities.\(^\text{10}\) It is also one of the earliest of his books that has sustained wider critical attention and adoption by postmodern literary theory. I use it to illustrate how alternate history has enlarged the definition of historiographic metafiction while also becoming its own subgenre. It also was written roughly contemporaneously with *V.* and *The Sot-Weed Factor*, which situates it as a response to some of the same historical questions those texts addressed. Yet *The Man in the High Castle* is also *sui generis* in the trail it blazed in alternate historical, or counterhistorical, fiction. Looking at it as a seminal text developed parallel to the first-wave postmodern historical fictions I discuss in my first chapter is useful for revealing *High Castle* to be a product of similar postwar historical anxieties, and a critique of Cold War American politics. In terms of literary generations, I then look at Dick’s novel in the context of other subsequent alternate history novels, chiefly William Gibson and Bruce Sterling’s *The Difference Engine* and Michael Chabon’s *The Yiddish Policeman’s Union*, each of which bases its divergent take on historical events upon a more specific moment of historical crisis or development. The purposes to which these subsequent novels (and Dick’s, as well) put the subgenre of alternate history are

\(^{10}\) Dick’s 1959 *Time Out of Joint* in some ways provides a dry run for *High Castle*, but its alternate history turns out to have an in-text explanation as a false reality built around a man whose ability to predict missile attacks is needed for an interstellar war effort. The idea of a precognitive predictor of missile attacks interestingly shows up 14 years later in Pynchon’s *Gravity’s Rainbow*. See Rossi, Umberto, “The Harmless Yank Hobby: Maps, Games, Missiles and Sundry Paranoias in *Time Out of Joint* and *Gravity’s Rainbow*,” *Pynchon Notes* 52-53, Spring-Fall 2003.
important to my argument as a whole in that they both support (yet challenge) the idea of postmodern historical fiction as critiquing a transcendent historical truth. In other words, if the inevitability of such historical occurrences as an Allied victory in World War II is tested and recast as a moment of utopian desire for Dick’s lonely everymen, how does it both call into question historical accounts of the war and historical fictions that depict the crisis moment, and extrapolate from existent history to create something wholly new? By developing and exploring our reality as an alternate one probed by the psychically sensitive, Dick creates a multiplicity of histories and realities that first challenges the dominant model of history and then creates, in itself, a longing for a tangible and “knowable” history, a contemporary anxiety that critics such as Jameson have hinted at in their readings of Dick’s oeuvre.

The “new” is surely developed by Gibson and Sterling, who inaugurate (perhaps inadvertently) the “steampunk” variant of cyberpunk SF, fusing some of the techniques of secret and alternate history. In an extremely clever and skillful divergent timeline where British expansionism is driven by a steam-powered computer, past and present are analogized, thus ushering in a new and influential use of parodic anachronisms in the text: dot-matrix printers and screen-saver graphics demonstrations are evoked in a recasting of the Lumiere slideshow, while the anarchist social organizations of the then highly contemporary “hacker” subculture find their parallel—are ushered into existence—in this alternate past. The future of this imagined past is also explored, as is the reverse-engineered possibility presented by obsolete technologies, which makes the novel a unique fusion of SF concerns. Chabon, meanwhile, takes the postwar creation of the state of Israel and projects an alternate possibility in Alaska (suggested in passing in a book he
read as research for another project). Reflecting the influence of Dick and also that of
noir fiction, Chabon explores the possibilities of diasporic relocation and political strife
in his setting. He also uses Jewish religion and folklore to create in his hybrid atmosphere
and genre a story with cosmic and mythic overtones, coupling it with noir and detective
story elements so that each gains in meaning through the juxtaposition. Chabon also
creates a compelling mix of literary genre that is only natural to the characters that
populate his distinctive world.

The lineage that this novel suggests is indicative of an increasingly specific use of
source material in historiographic metafiction—to the end of a kind of parody of the
conventions of more popular genre texts—that calls for further analysis. This leads to my
conclusion that alternate history is a particular mutation of historiographic metafiction
that finds new meaning in historical detritus and fact.

*Chapter 3: The 1990s’ Romances of Science and Exploration: 18th and 19th Century Origins*

While not alternate histories, the novels discussed in this chapter contain certain
focused interrogations of historical period that those of the previous chapter do as well.
Dating roughly from the mid-to-late 1990s, thus contemporaneous with Gibson and
Sterling’s and Chabon’s novels, these novels will be considered not only as part of a
marketplace and literary or cultural trend, but also as constituting a certain type of what
Amy Elias refers to as the metahistorical romance. Pynchon’s self-consciously vast
*Mason & Dixon* presents one of these late-1990s novels’ chief fixations, on what might
be thought of as “bad” science or pseudoscience: alchemy, the body’s humors, astronomy
as a decidedly earthbound practice, and early cybernetics. Often less accessible than even
the most ambitious bestselling fiction tends to be, they represent what I claim is a late flowering of historiographic metafiction. This genre is reimaginative in incarnating past history as sublime, a time of limitless potential, yet subtly reconstructive in the true facts it brings to light to revise our accepted portrait of the period. As stated above, Pynchon forms a kind of circuit with the Barth of *Sot-Weed Factor* in *Mason & Dixon*: scatology and low comedy abound in both texts, which seem to draw parallels between sexual exploration or comic bawdiness and their scientific and geographical counterparts.¹¹ *Mason & Dixon* seems at times a more mature answer to or evolution of the Barthian and early Pynchonian project, one that clearly finds much to celebrate about America’s rough-hewn and chaotic origins, as well as the exploratory spirit of *Mason & Dixon* as when, for instance, Dixon takes a humanist, anti-racist stand against a slave auction, turning the driver’s whip upon the one who wields it. Past and present are analogized in Pynchon, as historical fact and SF-level invention are sometimes blurred. As a result, a new kind of far-fetched and madcap historical fiction emerges that is both more sublime and more vital than what has preceded it, a new answer to a historical urge that emphasizes the energy of the period.

Less self-consciously abundant and fertile is the tactically ambitious *The Cattle Killing*, in which John Edgar Wideman takes the Philadelphia-as-palimpsest topos of his 1980s chronicle *Philadelphia Fire* as the premise of another historical crisis, the Yellow Fever outbreak of 1793. Like Diane Glancy (and, to some extent, Chabon), he uses the viewpoint of the marginalized to connect the novel’s sub-plots and sections, which include autobiographical meditations on writing and interactions with the past. The journey of an itinerant preacher links his material together, as Sacajawea’s journey with

¹¹ Neal Stephenson’s *Quicksilver*, which I briefly discuss in Chapter 3, also serves as part of this overlap.
Lewis and Clark in 1804-06 does in the case of Glancy’s *Stone Heart*. By reclaiming, through experimental writing techniques, the gravity and importance of these historical figures, and in Glancy’s attempt to capture Sacajawea’s subjectivity in contrast to at times ridiculous but actual excerpts from the Lewis and Clark journals, the historical romance is extended in a new way in these texts. These novels are reconstructions, which fuse voices from different points in history to make connections and provide a new account for this era.

*Chapter 4: 20th Century Secret History Revisited: Reed, Doctorow, DeLillo*

In this chapter I return in my analysis of the theme of secret history, which turns towards parody and the farcical in Ishmael Reed’s *Mumbo Jumbo*. Reed’s story of Harlem Renaissance literature and the arts, its white patronage, and the cultural power of the mythic Jes’ Grew sets the stage for an analysis of what Don DeLillo has called the “American magic and dread” of the 20th century’s darker corners. What Reed portrays through wild metaphor, Doctorow and DeLillo capture as a kind of cultural and historical energy responsible for the 20th century’s often violent and terrifying changes. What makes these novelists writers of historical fiction—and, moreover, of historiographic metafiction—is how the moment of historical crisis or event dominates their texts, yet is subverted. The secret history theme again works to animate these texts, as they provide a basis for their historiography; each reveals an untold perspective on its period. In *Ragtime* E.L. Doctorow provides a template for an unlikely collision of historical and pop-cultural figures that creates a parodic secret history ending in the rise of popular culture and the cult of the image, which is crucial to Jameson’s formulation of postmodern historical fiction. DeLillo, taking some cues from Doctorow but applying this model to the Cold
War era, creates heightened and somewhat unrealistic reconstructions of historical events probable, real, and unlikely. DeLillo’s attitude towards source material in *Libra*, his (typically playfully complex) reconstruction of the Kennedy Assassination and Oswald’s shifting allegiances, figures here in an interesting way. Reading the entire Warren Report, carefully depicting moments captured in the few extant pre-assassination photographs of Oswald, and weaving in excerpts from interviews with Oswald’s mother all provide commentary on the role played by immersive research practices. It becomes clear that DeLillo does not seek to offer *the* historical account of the assassination, but instead to offer a meditation on the speculative energies that this cataclysmic event has unleashed. (This is similar in some ways to Alan Moore’s epilogue to *From Hell*, where he probes his own motivations and beliefs as to the identity of Jack the Ripper.) Meanwhile, *Underworld*, a project closer in concept to that of Doctorow in *Ragtime*, creates unlikely and conspiratorial connections between twentieth century figures. Yet I wish to argue that instead of vandalizing or parodying history—despite how unlikely and odd the sparks thrown off by these juxtapositions are—DeLillo cumulatively creates an analysis of the era and its images that persist into the present day, surrounding the metaphoric core of the atomic weapon and the baseball. This works as an analogic model of history and is what the writers I group together in this chapter add to historiographic metafiction as a whole.

*Coda: Directions in Graphic Historical Fiction*

The American comic book sometimes sought to deflect the stigma of its “lowbrow” pulp-literature origins by embracing educational content targeted at children and adolescents. *Classics Illustrated* and the Catholic publication *Treasure Chest of Fun and Fact* both adapted literary and religious content, with the latter engaging in some
particularly clumsy adaptation of ideologically “uplifting” stories culled from history. Without meaning to, these adaptations sometimes read like Barth and Pynchon at their most parodic and juvenile. It is only a short step from historical graphic fiction of this kind, when seen with a certain sensibility, to metafiction. Graphic novelists of the generation that postdated the rise of underground and independent comics have often playfully returned to the comics of their childhood; one aspect of this aesthetic is an eagerness to make new use of the printing processes and artistic techniques of early 20th century comic art. This also means producing new takes on certain genre stories of the medium, but is also of a piece with the project of historiographic metafiction as a style of mimicry that dates back to Barth. While Art Spiegelman’s *Maus* is a benchmark text in comics-as-historical-narrative that cannot be ignored, its influence has been followed through in different ways. One trend within contemporary graphic fiction involves the metafictional retelling of a historical narrative or play with historical setting and era. A writer-artist like James Sturm, in his *America* trilogy, exploits the possibilities of graphic fiction and the legacy of comic book fantastic elements when, among other historical set-pieces including pioneer and mining vignettes, he transplants the figure of the Jewish golem to an early 20th century baseball game.

Alan Moore creates a more traditionally Pynchonesque effect in *From Hell*, his occult-inspired revisiting of the Jack the Ripper murders as the event that birthed the 20th century, and Eddie Campbell’s stark artwork at times evokes the era’s newspaper illustrations. Kyle Baker’s *Nat Turner* is an often-wordless account of the Turner slave rebellion that metafictionally adopts comic book dynamism and horror imagery of the Will Eisner and Jack Davis schools of illustration of the 1940s and ‘50s (an era when
black faces were either racially caricatured or wholly absent from comics). It humorously borrows the comic book advertising style of the melodramatic superhero yarns in its advertisements, claiming that after *Nat Turner*, “nothing will ever be the same!” This puts Baker in a rather complex position with respect to postmodernism and history; yet it seems clear that this text wishes to recapture the impact of the Turner rebellion and its place in contemporary memory. Ben Katchor’s enigmatic *The Jew of New York* uses the history of a failed attempt at a Jewish Homeland in Buffalo, much like Chabon’s creation, to reconstruct it as a graphic narrative that uses the form of secret history.

What all these texts share is a new evolution of historiographic metafiction that is peculiar to this medium. Fusing historiographic metafiction with visual art, these writers create an often personal and idiosyncratic form of the historical account that creates new forms of remembrance. Processing the past, in this late phase of historiographic metafiction, serves as a parallel to the evolution sketched in my previous chapters, and indicate how this development might be seen as the closure of a movement, but also as indicative of its future.

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12 Eisner’s *The Spirit*, a Sunday newspaper comics supplement published from 1940-1952, drew much attention for his use of cinematic perspective and other skillful storytelling techniques. Jack Davis illustrated for EC Comics, whose horror and crime comic books caused public outcry in the 1950s. Today both are recognized as among the most influential artists in graphic fiction history, and have attracted the most critical attention.
Two early and in one case somewhat under-recognized early works in the genre of postmodern historical fiction demonstrate not only its origins but its continued preoccupations and central elements. Beginning with two seminal examples of the genre that date from the 1960s allows for a study of its origins and an assessment of its statements on both the past and present. Reading Pynchon’s *V.* and Barth’s *The Sot-Weed Factor* with knowledge of what they precipitated in literature—and their contemporary historical events—is necessary to understand their place in the emergent postmodern. While they approach the question of historical fiction with a shared emphasis on breaking from the established historical record, they present a forking path for postmodernism’s engagement with history. The questions they seek to address deal with the reliability of the knowledge received from historical accounts, and what is left out of history. Reimagining them dramatizes a break from established history that is free to invent and blur the boundaries between fact and fiction. Reconstructing, however, seeks to address gaps in our historical knowledge, creating—or unearthing—a new narrative from established history. Barth is purely reimaginative, while Pynchon shows the reimaginative’s departure into an early form of the reconstructive. Their histories are both framed as *secret history*, the revelation (in Barth) or assembly (in Pynchon) of what we did know about history until the moment of writing. Together, these two texts create a
foundation for historiographic metafiction’s rewritings of the past, two conceptual categories that are forever entwined in its evolution.

As a reimagination, *The Sot-Weed Factor* is particularly literary in its focus. This is twofold. First, the text acts as a pastiche of picaresque and satiric novels of past centuries (equal parts Fielding and Voltaire). Second, Barth rewrites from the source of a historical document that also serves as a literary inspiration, Ebenezer Cooke’s 1708 satirical poem that lends the novel its title, and from it extrapolates a wildly satirical farce that is of a piece with Barth’s later work in its philosophical aims and fascination with Maryland. Its setting is particularly important to the kind of history it tells: it uses a gap in our collective knowledge about Maryland as an opportunity for reimagination. While the novel does have a great value in the way it revises and retells historical events from the founding days of the American Colonies, it is more interested in how we—after having codified the period as an era, and ever since—have mythologized and constructed America and heroic accounts of its founding. To make his case and spin his own tall tale in response to a particularly 20th century kind of American myth, while in the process writing a prolonged biographical note to the historical figure of Ebenezer Cooke, Barth makes a cunning engagement with the art of fiction writing and history.

Pynchon, while using many of the same tactics of wild and at times profane comedy, is in *V.* more interested in stitching together material from diverse historical periods. This makes of Pynchon’s famously copious research a much more far-ranging project than Barth’s admittedly deep research. If *The Sot-Weed Factor* has occasionally puzzled critics who have sought to define historiographic metafiction and its ideological place as something more than straightforward revisionist retelling or bawdy schoolboy
farce, *V.* offers a clearer take on its author’s use of history. It is less parodic in methodology, yet both Pynchon and Barth offer an untold secret origin or “Secret Historie” that makes both novels’ engagement with conventional history and historical fiction deliberately parodic, while also creating a new historical model that recasts, reinvents, and distorts. Placing these novels first in this study allows not only a follow-up on the legacy of these writers and how critics have used their work to define historiographic metafiction, but also sets up a later survey of Pynchon’s *Mason & Dixon* to fully explore how his aims have evolved in a succeeding literary generation.

Barth and Pynchon both provide, in this pair of novels, a model for ways in which postmodern historical fiction is subversive or satiric, or posits an alternate model or understanding of history. Subversion and satire in these texts merit further attention. The subversive occurs when Barth and Pynchon challenge our understanding of American and world history, exposing the established account as limited or ideologically positioned. At the same time, subversion occurs as a thought-experiment that repositions historical attitudes; for instance, learning the ribald journal of Captain John Smith alongside Ebenezer Cooke and Burlingame in *The Sot-Weed Factor*, asks us to forget everything we know about Captain Smith as a historical figure, pretending instead that he would be renowned only for the bizarre and riotous reasons outlined in this text-within-a-text, which was not intended to serve as a record for posterity. Or, if it were, it would create a very different posterity than the one we have for Smith. In this way, historical subversion is defined more broadly as parody, when the object of parody is a sense of historical reverence and, with it, the certainty and factuality of history that it perpetuates.
Historical parody dismantles what we think we know.¹ In my argument, it is an early dismantling that bears fruit in later reconstructions of history, theorizing a view of history that removes its certainty. This provides a simple version of the alternate model further expanded on by the possibilities inherent in new subgenres or extensions of the genre that are represented in my later chapters: for instance, the alternate future works as a kind of deviation from the alternate past, or the secret knowledge of the past that would create an alternate present. Pynchon refines Barth’s reimagination into a deeper reconstruction of 18th century history, even as he uses its innovations. Later reconstructions take cues from Pynchon’s unearthing of lost or obscure historical fragments, or parallelism of disparate ideas like theoretical physics and tropes common to mid-century popular culture. But the genesis of postmodern historical fiction is first best understood in its own historical and literary context. Understanding how novels like V. and Sot-Weed were initially perceived is a necessary condition to a discovery of the movement’s underpinnings.

Before thinking of Barth and Pynchon as writers of postmodernist texts, it is necessary to consider the writers’ impact on their contemporary world. Before the postmodern became an established term, this very satiric and subversive type of fiction served as a point of origin for attempts to understand one’s place in American literature. In his 1963 New York Times review of V., George Plimpton, presented with the unenviable task of introducing Pynchon’s first novel to the American public, attempts to

¹ Historical parodies quite like those utilized by Barth and Pynchon are often a cornerstone of sketch comedy, i.e. Monty Python’s Flying Circus, Saturday Night Live, and the Firesign Theatre. Their appearance in a wildly different context—for instance, Monty Python’s characters walking directly from one time frame into another—explains their appeal of treating history with irreverence to break down its hermetic seal. Their late-1960s-1970s development parallels that of some of the texts I write about, and suggests their pointed absurdities as a response to similar historical conditions (i.e. Nixon’s America, or the intellectual counterculture).
find an emergent canonical grouping appropriate to it. Not surprisingly, he begins with touchstones of existentialist, Beat, and youth literature:

Since the war a category of the American novel has been developed by a number of writers: American picaresque one might call the archetype, and its more notable practitioners would include Saul Bellow with “The Adventures of Augie March,” Jack Kerouac, “On the Road,” Joseph Heller, “Catch-22,” Clancy Sigal, “Going Away,” and Harry [Mathews], who last fall produced a generally overlooked though brilliant novel entitled “Conversions.” The genus is distinguished by what the word “picaresque” implies -- the doings of a character or characters completely removed from socio-political attachments, thus on the loose, and, above all, uncommitted.

This is of a piece with how the review ends, with perhaps the first sketch of the mysterious author as a countercultural hero: “Pynchon is in his early twenties; he writes in Mexico City – a recluse” (Plimpton 1965). But more significant is how he continues to describe this type of novel’s generic hallmarks, as “heavily populated with eccentrics, deviates, grotesques with funny names…usually composed of a series of bizarre adventures or episodes in which the central character is involved, then removed and flung abruptly into another” (Plimpton). This sounds quite like a description of the novel as owing more to existentialism, or perhaps a more humorous take on it, than anything that had quite come before (excluding the past literary traditions to which Barth makes explicit his kinship).

One of V.’s most notorious sections (Esther’s nosejob), which I discuss later in this chapter, also appeared in (and opened) the 1965 anthology *Black Humour*, edited by
Bruce Jay Friedman. Critics like Max F. Schulz defined black humor as a 1960s phenomenon, produced by the upheavals of modern life much as modernism had been. It was, for Schulz, a genre in which a changing world produces alienation in the form of “the endless anxiety of personal incompleteness” (Schulz 234), among arbitrary societal standards—the “worship of the average” (232)—to which they cannot relate (such as the psychiatric evaluations that signify so heavily in *Catch-22*, or Vonnegut). Literature produced by 1960s counterculture novelists of contemporary life, among whom he considers Pynchon and Barth, attempts to explain this anxiety, or depict it. Its literary style will go through avant-garde fluctuations that refuse conventional literary form. In terms of black humor and what it does to conventional understandings of history, Schulz describes the Pynchon/Barth genre of large-scale satire as turning history’s “determinism into willful constructs of the human mind,” appearing in the text through “parodic catenation of epochs and literary styles [that] fix time in endless circularity, which questions the accepted view of linearity and its truth” (238). This, like Plimpton’s evocation of a cool existentialist hero, gestures towards not quite an understanding of early postmodernism but at least of the novel as celebrating a detached hero, or charting the whole, not-yet-constructed—in other words, still modernist—self through the turbulence of society.

On a more micro-level scale, however, an interesting correspondence emerges between black humor and historical fiction. Schulz identifies the hero of Sir Walter Scott’s series of *Waverley* historical-fiction novels as among the first literary protagonists to display the shade of anxiety he characterizes as producing the symptoms of literary black humor. While not picaresque as Plimpton, et al. define the genre, Scott appears to
provide a blueprint for a twentieth-century transposition of his goals of portraying the
timbre of an era through character. The latter-day counterparts of Scott’s heroes undergo
a twentieth-century version of their moments of historical crisis: “His counterpart…also
finds law and order, stability and prudence, desirable; but in today’s supermarket culture,
he is less certain of what constitutes law and order, for the stock beliefs of a corporational
society are even more beset by the winds of fashion and the chimeras of abstraction than
were agrarian societies in the past” (231). This implies that the historical novel itself is
interested in the moment of crisis, and the parodic approach taken by Barth and Pynchon
is only recovering a meaning present in the original.

But, if that is the case, then what is this model an alternative to? In other words,
what in it is subverted in the novels of Barth and Pynchon? Some additional theoretical
background is necessary to understand these novels’ place in the canon alongside
traditional historical fiction, as well as their status as exemplary first-wave
historiographic metafiction. In The Historical Novel (1955), a study largely occupied
with Scott’s Waverley novels, Georg Lukács offers a definition of historical fiction that is
compatible with his Marxist scholarship, summarized by John Bowen as an argument that
“the ability of the novel to comprehend the scope and possibilities of human lives within
their historical context is its greatest achievement, and [it] creates a powerful and
strikingly coherent history of the depiction of class struggle and national self-formation”
(Bowen 247). In other words, the moment of historical crisis of a preceding generation is
that which inspires the tale, which—through plot and characterization—attempts to bring
the past to life according to genre conventions.
Undoing the reliability of narration, uncovering ideology’s operation in the text, and “reading against the grain” has, since the rise of poststructuralism, been a modus operandi for many literary critics who work within the poststructural, or have learned some lessons from it. And while the novels of Pynchon and Barth come early in the postmodern movement, they nonetheless parody and betray the Lukácsian model of historical fiction. Barth does so by making use of stylistic hallmarks and bawdy humor from the period in which he writes, applying it as a whole to the founding days of America. In Barth, this rewrites the idea that America’s origins present a story of rugged individuals whose crises and trials tested the mettle of a nation. Pynchon, however, is more interested in undoing the idea that a clear line can be drawn through history and its people. He favors instead a conspiratorial model that emphasizes the need to decode, demystify, and work diachronically instead of synchronically. It also, however, produces its own mystifications, turning history into a densely encoded map of connections. Pynchon foregrounds the weaving process itself as he weaves his tale, through metafictional devices and Stencil’s attempts to insert himself into history in order to resolve its contradictions. This occurs in the construction of the narrative of V., promising to deliver a secret history. This comes in the form of a series of untold tales, often involving espionage, which tell a paranoid story of the 20th century. A latter-day seeker traces these interconnected episodes’ connections.

The most obvious is that both these novels are in a sense parodies. In order to unpack the types of parody employed by Barth and Pynchon, and what they mean for historiographic metafiction, I offer a taxonomy of its types. The definition of each comes from the object of parody, and the appropriate strategies associated with it as such. First
is the literary, or stylistic, parody. This is closest to Hutcheon’s definition of parody as imitation.² Barth engages in this type of parody in *The Sot-Weed Factor* as a whole, by making his text a pastiche of late 17th-century writing styles. It is revealed in the archaic language and paratext of the novel, such as its verbose chapter titles. While the language used by Barth is not anachronistic, the anachronisms of subject matter—particularly the intrusion of the bizarre or obscene when we do not expect it—shine through amidst the language. They are also connected to a different, satiric objective of the text that is directed more at events deemed worthy to be recorded by history. Thus humor is derived through a kind of juxtaposition performed by the parody. In addition, texts within a text exist as parodies of a particular genre (the historical journal, the poem) that stand out from their surrounding material. As the work of a gifted style mimic, *Sot-Weed* is rife with imitative aspects, but they are performed with a difference. In this way, it is not just a literary parody or pastiche. In Pynchon, literary or style parody is more diverse. As various sections in *V.* take place in different times and places, Pynchon’s style will occasionally alter itself to fit time and place, or instead offers disparate times and places through a Pynchonian worldview that finds conspiratorial likenesses between them. His style emphasizes absurdity in its moments of parody, incorporating tropes like the song passages common to all of his works and complex imaginary histories of character and place. Textually, *V.* is a parody of a quest narrative, one in which the placement of clues, suspense, and answers is rearranged.

In this way, Pynchon makes use of the second type of parody I define as energetic or hyperbolic parody. Closely related to the picaresque, a literary genre which is

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comprised of a series of brief, energetic, and fantastic adventures, it is applied to a larger scale in these novels, despite some strictly picaresque elements in Barth and some sections of Pynchon (those involving the character Herbert Stencil). This is the type of parody that largely animates the plots of both Sot-Weed and V., and to an especially great extent the former. Beyond its stylistic imitation, what makes Sot-Weed a parody (even if what it imitates is itself a parody) are the exaggerated aspects of its setting, characters, and action. Its status as a reimaginative text does involve this parody, but parody is not the end of its project. In other words, it would not be a reimagination without being parodic on some level: the world it reimagines is a distorted and chaotic take on the American Colonies that emphasizes trickery and theft, such as that committed by the Quaker in Cooke’s original poem who offers to trade Cooke’s goods for tobacco, then disappears with the former. Taking the poem’s description of the courts, settlers, and their lifestyle as inspiration, Barth only ratchets up the hyperbolic quality of events. Pynchon’s parody, as well, is inseparable from his text’s status as an early postmodern reconstruction. In this case, the trajectory of the quest for V., once seen as a parody, is redirected into other aspects. As the quest continues, different kinds of hyperbolic events and accounts accrue into a reconstruction of history. Pynchon captures a madcap historic energy in his account.

My third definition is a parody of historical consciousness and writing: historiographic parody. This occurs whenever Sot-Weed and V. intersect with material we know to originate in actual history. Sometimes, the accuracy of history is quite clear, such as that there was an actual Ebenezer Cooke, author of the poem Barth bases his novel upon, or when historical figures such as Sigmund Freud and Harry Houdini appear
in E.L. Doctorow and Ishmael Reed’s later *Ragtime* and *Mumbo Jumbo*. These texts are later manifestations of what both *V.* and *Sot-Weed* portray as “secret history,” the revelation of historical events that have been lost or suppressed, possibly for ideological reasons. Receiving secret history means that we now must process history in a different way; it changes our historical consciousness. But when employed parodically, secret history calls into question the reliability of known history, and also the motivations for creating it. In addition, a form of historical irony—transmitted in the differences between the history we are reading about, and the history we “know,” that has occurred then or since—exists in historiographic parody. This form of parody, which originates in Pynchon and Barth’s texts discussed in this chapter, is the most crucial to the birth and development of historiographic metafiction.

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John Barth’s 1960 *The Sot-Weed Factor* has a key position in historiographic metafiction that has not been fully recovered by critics. While Barth’s seminal 1967 essay “The Literature of Exhaustion” not only closely aligned him with incipient literary postmodernism (then emerging as a genre) but situated him alongside peers such as Calvino, *Sot-Weed* itself does not fit neatly into the timeline of the early postmodern. While its heavy use of stylistic pastiche marks it as a relative of later texts that masquerade as belonging to a previous era, its fabulation is of a different sort, having little relation to the type of Borgesian metafiction that Barth uses for a foundation for a new literature of replenishment in his essay. (Rather, a novel like *LETTERS* seems to reach towards that goal.) If anything, it has been more frequently lumped in with late-modernist satirical epics reflecting the heavy influence of Joyce, such as William Gaddis’
The Recognitions; Sot-Weed also takes Joyce’s diverse “parody of literary styles” in Ulysses as an inspiration (Schulz xiv). Its giddy defacement of historical account with vulgarity, extended stories within a larger narrative, and stylistic excess for its own sake links back to famous literary satires from the past, ranging from Rabelais, Don Quixote, and Candide to Fielding’s Tom Jones, the end result being “a burlesque mixture of myth and legend and a typically picaresque structure” (Hierl 42).

What elevates Sot-Weed above merely eccentric tribute to the literature of the past, however, is the same thing that makes it important to the lineage of historiographic metafiction. It has its point of origin in history and re-imagines the events that led up to the production of an authenticated text in the most inauthentic of ways. The end result is Barth’s creation an elaborate literary context for the historical, in which the satire arrives in the form of reportage of—and in a perverse way, authenticating the doings of—a cast of wildly corrupt comic characters and their misdeeds.

Extrapolating from the actual 1708 poem “The Sot-Weed Factor” by one Ebenezer Cooke, Barth first postulates Cooke as an innocent seeking his destiny in the founding days of the New World. As Barth explains, “The Sot–Weed Factor began with the title and, of course, Ebenezer Cooke’s original poem. . . . Nobody knows where the real chap is buried; I made up a grave for Ebenezer because I wanted to write his epitaph” (qtd. in Diser 48). On one hand, this comes off as an attempt to honor the departed in the present era, but Barth’s statement also playfully touches on a number of important issues, among them the idea of artistic commemoration of colonial heroes. Choosing a greenhorn hero and chronicling his progress from idealism to cynicism, involving a number of ridiculous circumstances to which he responds ridiculously, becomes an artistic project in
itself. An alternate account of Cooke’s life and times is now offered, but the comic and absurd, while foregrounded,³ are not the only artistic ends being sought. The same things that make *Sot-Weed* riotous and unwieldy are those that make it precursor to a postmodern view of literary history. In other words, Barth’s use of pastiche is anything but the blank parody Jameson identifies, linked as it is to more sophisticated ideas about language and the historical. These particularly deal with the idea of identity formation in three separate ways: Cooke’s progress from naïf to cynic, Burlingame’s many guises and deceptions, and the formation of American identity both historically and as it was first shaped. Recovering *Sot-Weed* and placing it in the context of historiographic metafiction illustrates this, as I will demonstrate in this section.

Barth’s stated desire to write Cooke’s epitaph presents a unique opportunity. It is an important aspect of his literary strategy of unsettling the historical canonization of American heroes by reassessing Cooke—notably not a canonized hero—then making his picaresque story a seminal one vital to understanding America’s origins. He parodically asks for a new canon that includes Cooke. As in Nabokov’s *Pale Fire*, which is constructed around a fictive poem, *Sot-Weed* subverts an already satiric poem into its own incarnated world. This makes a request to include Cooke in the canon a subversive one, a result of Cooke’s improbable biography that remakes his time period in his satiric literary image. While it gives him the ability to compose a bit of rude verse of his own—“Labour not for Earthly glory: / Fame’s a fickle Slut, and whory” (Barth, *Sot-Weed* 756)—the epitaph comes at the end of a metafictional reflection by the author of the historical account he has just presented. It begins:

³ It is with this aspect of the novel that its earlier critical studies are mostly occupied; cf. Harris, *Contemporary American Novelists of the Absurd*. 34
Lest it be objected by a certain stodgy variety of squint-minded antiquarians that he has in this lengthy history played more fast and loose with Clio, the chronicler’s muse, than ever Captain John Smith dared, the Author here posits in advance . . . that we all invent our pasts, more or less, as we go along, at the dictates of Whim and Interest; the happenings of former times are a clay in the present moment that will-we, nill-we, the lot of us must sculpt. Thus Being does make Positivists of us all. Moreover, this Clio was already a scarred and crafty trollop when the Author found her (743).

As a statement explaining Barth’s authorial strategy, this also implicates “his fellow fornicators,” speaking of the casuistry by definition involved if one hopes to “separate seducer from seduced” (743). Therefore, the fast-and-loose account, the invented grave with Cooke’s “final work” (755) of an epitaph, is in a way no less true than any historical account. Calling attention to the act of invention, in this passage, reveals that it is a necessary aspect of all historical accounts. This one just happens to lay it bare. And, indeed, the text’s incorporation of the *Privie Journall of Sir Henry Burlingame*, a warped funhouse-mirror account of John Smith and Pocahontas’ story, is primarily intended to foreground the censorship and other sanitizations of the past.4

The picaresque aspect of Cooke’s misadventures, as well as the way mounting absurdity and willful obscenity is doled out in successively bizarre portions, is part of what makes *Sot-Weed* a very funny novel. The cleverness and absurdity of the text shares a kinship with the project of black humor as a contemporaneous literary movement, and

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4 This functions in something of the same way that William Gaddis’ *The Recognitions* stages the evolution of a simple minister’s devolution from Calvinism to Mithraism as part of a spiritual quest; the discovery of origins rewrites the present and exposes its construction. Gaddis’ focus on the pagan origins of Christianity is one of the text’s major themes. A retelling of American myth and history that accurately reflects the discoveries found in the Burlingame journal similarly would reflect a progress towards derangement.
supports Barth’s inclusion among its practitioners. But another type of humor present in
the novel that is not accounted for veers towards metafictional parody. The labyrinthine
plot parodies the turgidity of historical accounts, the implausibility of fictional ones, and
even the historical novelist’s attempts to reconcile the two. The title of Book II, Chapter
14, for instance, is typical of the novel’s at times manic pacing: “The Laureate is Exposed
to Two Assassinations of Character, a Piracy, a Near-Deflowering, a Near-Mutiny, a
Murder, and an Appalling Colloquy Between Captains of the Sea, All Within the Space
of a Few Pages” (237). This is also a parody of the 18th-century novel’s chapter titling, as
found in *Tom Jones* and other texts. Elsewhere, Ebenezer’s own incredulity at the tale in
which he is caught up—and his deliberately wooden dialogue and poetry—mocks more
serious attempts at what is theorized by Lukács as the ability to “enact historical process
by presenting a microcosm which generalizes and concentrates” (Hutcheon 113). In other
words, one aspect of what Barth parodies is the classic model of historical fiction praised
by Lukács for its realization of class-consciousness. The historical moment of crisis in
which a character must act repeats itself again and again; Ebenezer is abducted,
imprisoned, instructed in the internecine plotting of one faction against another. His
world is perpetually in flux: that is what is generalized and concentrated here.

If fact and fiction are the metaphoric warp and woof of historical novelizing,
Barth creates implausible tales within a no less fabulist text at which Ebenezer marvels:
“methinks expediency, and not truth, is this tale’s warp, and subterfuge its woof, and
you’ve weaved it with the shuttle of intrigue upon the loom of my past credulity! In short,
‘tis creature from the whole cloth . . . ‘Tis a fabric of contradictories” (Barth 485).
Burlingame has a kinder view of this contradiction as it may be applied to various ends.
However, ultimately describing history as a remote, undomesticated place (which evokes depictions of the New World as very unlike the civilized world) is not exactly a compliment: “History, in short, is like those waterholes I have heard of in the wilds of Africa: the most various beasts may drink there side by side with equal nourishment” (486).

These elements of the text give us Barth at his most biting and humorous, and collude to comprise a broader argument in the novel: that America’s origins are, when uncensored, not exactly suitable for polite company. But clues to Sot-Weed’s deeper intention are found exactly when Barth, in a 1975 interview, denies that the novel is precisely a parody, despite its “element of parodying the language of the eighteenth-century English novel.” Instead, he finds a modified use of the term pastiche is more appropriate: “On the other hand what I meant by pastiche is something that is not just a parody but neither is it a kind of serious attempt at replication or imitation […] a language that the author could speak in as apart from the dialogue […] something that was partly a parody but mainly an echo and not an imitation” (Barth qtd. in Schulz xvi). Barth suggests a way of reanimating a mode of writing through creating a response to it, just as Sot-Weed the novel is a response to the poem with which it shares its title. It is an expansion of its aims that applies a parodic lens to a larger and more contemporary context. It revives the picaresque genre, applying its parody to a reimagined American history. Not the imitative “blank parody” Jameson describes but still a parody, the text approaches postmodern aims with this complex aspect of its satiric construction. As an echo is a response to a call, an answer to something stated in the original, and Barth’s use
of the echo metaphor compels a new reading of the text that emerges from the past into the present.

Strategically rewriting the storytelling codes of the past allows for dual meanings that recur. Dual meanings, or doubles, are a key aspect of the text, according to John V. Antush. He states that in Sot-Weed’s plot as well as on a textual level, Barth “uses so many forms of the double in so many different ways that he has tried to give an impression of having ‘exhausted’ its literary possibilities” (Antush 72). This links the novel to Barth’s look into the exhaustion of literature, and makes it an ironic rebirth that is aware of the potential exhaustion of its original genre. What is being parodied is itself double. The text mocks the straightforward historical epic or adventure as well as the picaresque humorous novel; the text at times reads as a lost example of the latter. In this way, the “‘stock’ characters and the ‘stock’ situations, [as well as] the elaborate plot structure with its consciously irrelevant digressions contribute to the mock-epic proportions given to the categorical self adopted by […] Cooke and the incredible number of public roles adopted by his tutor […] Burlingame” (72). The plot has a deliberately contrived-yet-formulaic quality that gives its humor another register. For instance, when Burlingame makes one of his many surprise revelations of himself to Cooke, there is a multiplicity to the hoaxes and deceptions that have accrued in the text to this point. It is also expressed as a kind of constant in Barth’s reimaginative world:

“Is’t once, or twice, or thrice I am deceived?” the poet exclaimed. Is’t Burlingame that stands before me now, or was’t Burlingame I left in Plymouth? Or are the twain of you impostors?”

38
“The world’s a happy climate for imposture,” Burlingame admitted with a smile.

“You were so much altered when I saw you last, and now you’ve altered back to what you were!”

“Tis but to say what oft I’ve said to you ere now, Eben: your true and constant Burlingame lives only in your fancy, as doth the pointed order of the world. In fact you see a Heraclitan flux: whether ‘tis we who sift and alter and dissolve; or you whose lens changes color, field, and focus; or both together” (Barth 330).

The doubling of purportedly real selves that are exposed as false leads to an exposure of the plot and its actors as always seeming to go in two directions at once, never stable or trustworthy. Philosophically, it is textually incarnated as “Geminology” (489), the “fear and reverence for twins” (494), which include Ebenezer and the sister he seeks, Anna but also extends to a cosmology in which figures ranging from the Egyptian gods to the angels Lucifer and Michael are good and evil twins, which even imagines “Jesus and Judas as hatched from a single egg” (494-495). This is an extension of the doubling parody into Barth’s genre, which Antush sees as significant in that it breaks into bold new territory beyond traditional uses of the double: “Barth’s fragmentation of Henry Burlingame into almost a dozen different characters, many of them representing opposite polarities, ruthlessly parodies to an extreme not only all such overt uses of decomposition or doubling but all searches for identity itself” (Antush 77). This anticipates a postmodern revision of identity that emphasizes the multiple and the fluid. This exists in the text itself and its take on historical events. It therefore becomes significant that the harsh satire of
the historical Cooke’s “The Sot-Weed Factor” is expressed as the doubling or split of a transition from the encomium of the Marylandiad to the “antipanegyric” that is “honest nonetheless, and may spare others my misfortunes” (Barth 499). Its honesty is now given a double, ironic register.

In a moment where Barth’s echo, which has been playing with or directly contradicting history, finally turns towards the actual account, we see the birth of Cooke the harsh satirist from a text that echoes the satire. This allows Barth to rewrite or (through the echo) reinterrogate Cooke’s actual poem, dramatizing its gradual composition and deterioration from “Marylandiad” to something else entirely. First, Barth’s Ebenezer is possessed by a silly but understandable “wrath” at “scoundrels and perverts, hovels and brothels, corruption and poltroonery,” then destroys his previous compendium of “sea-verses” in favor of “the lash of Hudibrastic [a mock-heroic poetic form used for satire, especially by Swift] as a harlot is scourged at the public post, catalogue her every wickedness, and expose her every trap laid for the trusting, the unwary, the innocent!” (Barth 457-8). The poem’s satire becomes a harsh reflection of the world Barth has created for its author.

Barth uses his own novelistic version of the Hudibrastic form. The satire found in the poem is a consequence of Barth’s version of historical events. Schulz says much the same about the way that, in LETTERS, historical facts “compromise their historical veracity by recounting the events as if they were a consequence of the thematic/rhetorical principles determining the novel’s structure,” this being a process of making “an alternative history by means of semiotic transformation” (Schulz 170). What takes place in that novel, which involves Cooke and the milieu of Sot-Weed, as well as the characters
of Barth’s other previous novels, is an interaction between characters that determines the content of the text. The story itself is determined by its characters’ awareness of their correspondence with each other. The semiotic transformation in *Sot-Weed*, however, differs but takes place within the novel. Treating Cooke’s actual poem as a historical document that is reliable in a different sense—and foregrounding it in the text as the end result after several stalled attempts, and a purge of every previously written and rewritten account—works similarly. In this case, the transformation is applied to Cooke’s poem. Its meaning changes as it becomes the root of the novel’s semiotic ideas on identity and innocence. When imagined as the result of several previous drafts and as a sort of diary of his experiences and misadventures in America, the fictional Cooke becomes a new author of the text that changes readers’ relationship to it. While *Sot-Weed* is not exactly an alternate history it is a secret history, and Barth’s presentation of the history-within-the-novel of the Burlingame novel finds the author at his most semiotically sly.

In *Sot-Weed* the vulgar satire of the plot manifests itself not only through character and event, but on a structural level, and on that of the language used to tell the story. Dualities and deceptions abound, and at several points Cooke almost—but not quite—becomes Burlingame’s enemy, then his friend again. In addition to his plot function that allows Barth to seek and finally uncover the Burlingame journal, Barth’s Henry Burlingame extends the novel’s focus on history and its con artists. Not only does Burlingame’s philosophizing and unstable shifting of guises—how he has never for a moment stopped assuming such masks as he put on while having “pretended to be both friends and enemies of Baltimore” (Barth 164)—serve as a vehicle for the shift of identity in the novel, but so does his telling reimaginative assertion that he and Ebenezer stand
before a blank canvas: “‘Tis philosophic liberty I speak of, that comes from want of
history” (165). This liberty (or rewriting of the self) also is posed as a foil to Cooke’s
desire to commemorate and experience history as Maryland’s poet laureate (while also
desiring to remain blank in another way, as a virgin). His innocence, comments Berndt
Clavier, makes him “the American Adam, the inheritor of culture and empire.
Burlingame is that myth’s debunker, continually satirizing and caricaturing the naiveté of
Cooke’s stance” (Clavier 318). Burlingame’s cosmology is one of instability and
opportunism: “one must choose his gods and devils on the run” (Barth 365).

On a more basic, thematic level, all this serves to parody the established heroic
and mythic origins of America. In response to the reliability of this history, the text
rejects it, seeming to argue that if we really want to understand an era, its fiction and
poetry offer enough of an accurate account of its spirit. This also makes of Sot-Weed a
“playful text in which plot, structure, and protagonists are characterized by their
uncertainty” (Hierl 202). Pynchon’s stylistic and structural meanings in V. are not so
occupied with uncertainty as an attempt to explain a feeling of dread that characterizes
the 20th century. They work through analogy and connection; this makes it an early
reconstructive secret history. Barth’s approach to history, however, works on a level less
analogical, one more grounded in the literary, especially the ways in which intertextuality
depends upon finding, and creating, echoes of past writing in the present. The stated
desire to write Cooke’s epitaph is for Barth the closing of a circle, and also foreshadows
ways in which Barth’s subsequent novels “have become increasingly self-conscious and
metafictional, and progressively more fabulist” (Clavier 11).
This is also relevant to, and extends, the exhaustion/replenishment metaphor Barth would later develop as a literary critic. Steven Scott points out that this often takes the simple form of “how to recycle an old story so that it seems new: this begins to take the form of exhaustion and renewal,” and that such figures as the virgin are key to these stories (Scott 91). Cooke’s desire to protect his virginity, Burlingame and others’ sexual conquests, and the once-imperiled virginity of Cooke’s love Joan Toast, all add up to a meaningful preoccupation in the novel. And play with virginity, exposing its absurdity or mythic character (and the double meanings of conquest), recurs often in Sot-Weed. For Barth, play is the answer to exhaustion, a way that points towards replenishment. The cartoonish and grotesque couplings that exist in the Burlingame journal, which is equal parts historical Tijuana Bible5 and “Secret Historie,” which tells the tale of Captain John Smith and his party in a way that reveals the true “proceeding, which was not so wondrous heroic after all” (Barth 148). The madcap tone of the journal’s excerpts, which grow increasingly more ridiculous as serialized in the novel, is established by the appearance of a set of highly anachronistic pornographic postcards in the first excerpt Cooke and Burlingame read. Like any dirty joke with the intent to startle and entertain, the account is one which disrespects and seeks to offend all parties. It is also elaborate and rich with strange detail. Witness the scene where Smith nonchalantly pretends to drop the postcards: “The Salvages at once became arows’d, and scrabl’d one atop the other, to see who s\(^{th}\) retrieve the most. Upon examining them, they found the cards to portray, in vivid colours, Ladies and Gentlemen mother-naked, partaking of sundrie

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5 A Tijuana Bible is a cheaply produced pornographic comic book that first emerged in the 1930s with the popularity of comic-strip characters. It offered the appeal of seeing these characters in a decidedly more adult way, in humorous sexual couplings. The Burlingame journal seems inspired by the Tijuana Bible motif in that it is on a basic level inspired by tropes such as the “traveling salesman” joke. See Art Spiegelman, “Those Dirty Little Comics,” Salon.com, 1997.
amorosities one with another: in parties of two, three, four, and even five” (149). The tone of disbelief, struggling as if to maintain propriety, seems crucial here, as well as the way in which certain details are left untold. But the elaborations of the account, multiplied with the recurring appearance of the aphrodisiac “egg-plant receipt” (258), continue the absurdity. At this moment, the bizarreness of the tale’s MacGuffin, strange and parodic enough, is heightened with the enjoyment that the Queen has of her sex with Smith, how “she had got love enow that night, to give her payne till the new moone” (259), is not only a commentary on sexual and imperialistic conquest but an exposure of this particular historical account as an inventive wish-fulfillment fantasy. (Pynchon prefers to focus on the polymorphous perversity of the Davy Crockett cap, while Barth uses the aggressive heterosexuality of the conqueror as an inspiration.) Using play, Barth is able to fill his novel to repletion with a metafictional pastiche of Rabelaisian satire, now coupled with a pointed, parodic historic account.

Sexuality, humor, and textual play conjoin in the journal to provide a politically incorrect, parodic distortion/affirmation of identity. This is a view of the wild America that Pynchon sets out to re-establish on more serious and socially responsible terms in 1997’s *Mason & Dixon*, which I argue in a later chapter sets out to make an unironic recovery of the humanity of slaves and their complicated place in American history. Apart from the journal, the most pure moment of textual play occurs in the seven-page name-calling contest that takes place between two prostitutes. Beginning with the anachronistic assertion that “Grace here’s a hooker” (Barth 441), the text soon loses control, spiraling into a lexical exchange of synonyms for “prostitute,” often forming a

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6 This term is credited to Alfred Hitchcock, with reference to the object whose exact nature or specificity is unnecessary, but is necessary to set the plot in motion. In an espionage thriller, it is perhaps a stolen secret code or set of plans.
call-and-response between French (the language of Voltaire, and, later, existentialism) and English. Ebenezer significantly loses authority when his appeal, “Dear God in Heav’n, cease!” (444) is ignored, while the positively Monty Pythonesque humor of seeing a long novel collapse into a long digression involving white space and short epithets creates the feeling that Barth’s narrator-character is inflicting a sort of metafictional torture on his characters. This passage is a perfect example of how Barth takes the Joycean inspiration of a sort of living, breathing text—one that takes on a life of its own by going on structural excursions--as seen in the “Circe” section of *Ulysses* and uses it for his own ends. It is also a successful use of play that prefigures the more overtly metafictional Barth.

If Pynchon’s *V.* makes closure or full access to the past impossible, Barth’s *Sot-Weed* recognizes that literature and invention are our only point of access to history, and that a truly innocent encounter with it, as represented by the virgin Cooke’s encounter with the virginal New World, is impossible. Yet Barth also seems to be saying that the historical Cooke, author of “The Sot-Weed Factor,” has produced as true a historical document of his era as might exist. Barth’s rehabilitation of Cooke as a more important author from his historical era than we might think offers a mode of parody that is used by the authors of a subsequent generation. It also appears in a different manner in *V.*, which poses some intriguing questions of its own. The next generation of postmodern historical fiction authors have in a sense all been responding to the intriguing questions posed by this pair of 1960s historical fictions from the era of the early postmodern. In these texts, parody (in its various manifestations) serves as a fertile ground for other interrogations of history and what it means to American identity.
Thomas Pynchon’s *V.* (1963) is, along with *The Sot-Weed Factor*, a kind of ur-text of postmodern historical fiction from a time before the term and its later manifestations had been defined. An exploration and revisitation of themes beginning to develop in Pynchon’s short fiction, it is also a precursor for the more developed and more labyrinthine novels (both Pynchon’s and others’) that followed in its wake. Introducing characters that later appear in Pynchon’s cross-novel continuity and outlining a world of mysterious connections through occult conspiracies in language equally baroque, it also stands as a historical account of the early twentieth century.

Hanjo Berressem, writing in *Pynchon’s Poetics*, summarizes the novel’s approach to history, as well as Pynchon’s possible motivations for his choice of period:

*V.* takes up the motif of the twentieth century’s growing decadence, which Pynchon had already used as the backdrop of “Under the Rose.” In its historiographic project, which aligns theories of history, their sociopolitical implications, and the growing mechanization of modern culture, Benny Profane and Herbert Stencil symbolize two extreme positions. Stencil is obsessed with origins and the search for the plot or cabal that would reveal the organizing principle behind his identity, as well as his time’s (Berressem 53).

Opposed to Stencil’s plunge into the *mise en abyme* is Profane’s “horizontal” movement, opposed to the “vertical” search that motivates Stencil, the “obsessed with

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* Most notably, *V.* introduces characters who appear again in *Gravity’s Rainbow*, when they are related to the German and American military. These include Pig Bodine, a sailor, and Kurt Mondaugen, whose section pertaining to German colonialism in South Africa serves as a sort of trial run for the later novel’s expansion on this historical terrain.
origins” seeker (53). In other words, both characters’ approaches to their historical moment are directly contrasted. Stencil gets several chapters of his own in which he pursues and, in a sense, moves into the past, all of which present disparate incarnations of the woman named V. Profane, meanwhile, moves the plot forward in New York City, interacts with The Whole Sick Crew, a lost-generation crew of postwar bohemians and assorted castoffs, and carries the novel forward on a horizontal axis, keeping it anchored in the present.

Profane, “schlemihl and human yo-yo” (Pynchon 1), is the antithesis of Stencil, who is obsessed with concluding his father’s quest. Both have parodic, alternative leanings towards history. Profane serves as countercultural everyman seeking to merely exist in the chaotic 20th century, while refusing a narrative of progress; an embodiment of Schulz’ “black humor” hero and counterpart to the Waverley novels’ common man. Stencil, however, adds something entirely new to this structure, as the historian seeking (through ill-fated means) to explain it. One could say that Profane’s is a knowingly cynical reaction, found in the burgeoning counterculture: “If he’d been the type who evolves theories of history for his own amusement, he might have said all political events: wars, governments, and uprisings, have the desire to get laid at their roots” (230). One could imagine this sentiment coming from a Lenny Bruce or, perhaps, the later George Carlin; in the novel, Profane serves a parodic function for Pynchon not entirely different from the comedic-barbaric Pig Bodine. Another type of parody (among many for Pynchon) articulated by Profane is found in his lackadaisical attitude towards the present, embodied through urban neurosis: yo-yoing around the city on the subway, his life is comprised of a series of misadventures, sexual and otherwise. The existence of the
Profane narrative, while subordinated to Stencil’s by those looking deeper into the text, is nonetheless important. While literary analysis has moved on from a somewhat dated reliance on “black humor” as the main trope explaining \( V \), it is nonetheless worth studying. It allows Pynchon to embed a picaresque novel among the other, more complex narratives that fill its pages, and link his version of the picaresque to the likes of Barth and the 18th-century novelists Barth emulates.

Stencil’s characterization, however, allows for access to deeper areas. A “scholarly quest” (59) in pursuit of \( V \) leads him on the trail of countless clues and secondary narratives, all of which must be reconstructed from their scattered traces. They are left across Europe in successive decades at the beginning of the twentieth century. One can imagine the readers of 1963 drawn to \( V \) by its positive reviews and Faulkner Foundation best first novel award expecting the scattered episodes to cohere in more traditional ways. But such is not the case; the figure of \( V \) as a woman is a starting point repeatedly approached and re-approached. The accumulation of historical detail and event do not add up to a coherent narrative; the pieces of the puzzle do not fit together as they might have been expected to by an audience reading the text before the dawn of postmodernism. Rather, as Stefan Mattessich puts it:

> the mystery of her identity and historical function is incarnated in a series of scenarios which provides the novel with one of its two central narrative axes. These scenarios are fictional or “Stencilized” elaborations of historical fields only partially recovered in the form of evidence or fact. […] She compels, by being absent, his imaginative distortions of the past and underwrites a strategy of “soul-
transvestism,” the effect of which is to fracture the narrative into sub-chapters, and the narrative voice into a host of different identifications (Mattessich 505).

The process of “Stenciliation,” as outlined in this account, is one in which a flight into the past is primarily imaginative. This means that we as readers become aware of Stencil’s composition of narrative throughout what remain essentially “his” chapters. Giving us windows into the V. mystery that do not seem useful in the narrative sense means that the chapters instead shed light on Stencil’s motives and conspiratorial thoughts on V.’s incarnations throughout events that determine 20th century history.

Putting on the disguises of eight different people in 19th-century Egypt who surround Victoria Wren, one of several to play the V. role, Stencil acts as author, presenting us with their viewpoints. But we as readers do not know how much invention, how much or little plausibility is a part of these accounts. Characterization is given to the past’s inhabitants as a substitution for historical knowledge, or closure. Stencil’s vertical movement, his obsession, is motivated by this lack of knowledge.

Indeed, what frustrates closure in V. is its compositional strategy; the way in which it goes around the purported object of its quest, the grail of its secret history, without ultimately unearthing it. While it is the prolonged formal experimentation in Gravity’s Rainbow that lends the book its for-devotees-only reputation among novices, especially those who make it to its second half, V. is itself a trickier book in some ways. In addition to how “anti-seriousness prevails in this novel at almost every level” (504), the use of historical moment as a strict reference point or basis for a fictional imagining is also thwarted in favor of a new model that recasts, reinvents, and distorts. The V. identity is the receptacle for this imaginative energy. In order to do this, the equivalents between
historical event and the literary creation based upon or inspired by it is rejected in favor of the erection of fanciful linguistic sand castles on the page. Mattessich sees this as evident in Pynchon’s practice as a willfully perverse prose innovator, inventive but also subject to his own “counterforce acting upon that forcefulness, interrupting its flows in particular ways—cutting into a dramatic sequence with an absurd song, modulating from a clipped comic diction and tone to epic sentences a page long, mingling tragedy with pornography, melodrama with slapstick” (503).

Applying this metaphor as a whole to Pynchon’s attitude towards the historical in his novel, I would argue that a similar force/counterforce model exists in all his fiction, giving rise to a mass of contradictions. Pynchon is a meticulous researcher who will blur the line between verified fact and fantasy, the creator of a vast mixed-form narrative from disparate parts that add up to an “anti-serious” but nonetheless historically engaged reconstructive text, even if it is one that avoids the unproblematic whole. Indeed, while postmodern in their formulation of a new approach to history that rejects the metanarrative,8 Pynchon and Barth’s novels circumvent Jameson’s definition of pastiche as blank parody. Rather, to the contrary of those who see Pynchon as more engaged in parody and play than politics, there are targets—among them imperialism, colonialism, and the accepted models of history—to Pynchon’s sustained oeuvre-long study of history. This has developed with each novel, first with the preterite vs. elect motif in GR, then the eccentric plunge into the more traditional territory of America’s slavery- and colonialism-haunted past in Mason & Dixon. In other words, V. is both a parodic take on history and a vehicle for delivering more involved ideas about it than parody can provide by itself.

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How can it do this? The answer lies first in the text’s form. What makes Pynchon’s novel an avant-garde text, and Pynchon an author grouped in with postmodernists, is the unusual ways in which he builds meaning and structure. In this case, the revelatory or mystery story narrative is rejected in favor of a semiotically complex one where closure is rendered impossible. This is accomplished through parody that uses the tropes of the former in service of the latter. As the disparate sections approach V. from different angles, no solution is necessarily offered; Pynchon presents instead a splitting of locations and characters which seem to render transparent “the fiction of continuity, the fiction of cause and effect, the fiction of a humanized history endowed with ‘reason’” (335). Pynchon and Stencil both are represented as historical bricoleurs, who must deal with the absence of a logical historical movement through the composition of a new narrative: each has accordingly, from a “grand pile of Gothic inferences” that are the result of much “hard work,” “built his own rathouse of history’s rags and straws” (243). This problem is mapped onto the political sphere, when Pynchon narrates the existence of “roughly five million different rathouses [in] the city of New York alone […] God knew what was going on in the minds of cabinet ministers, heads of state and civil servants in the capitals of the world. Doubtless their private versions of history showed up in action” (243). Here, Pynchon parodies the worldviews and philosophies that have led to twentieth century shifts in policy and conflict, and forecasts the anti-communist historical mindset that escalates the Vietnam War. It is a crucial moment in the ongoing political awareness of Pynchon that connects to his later body of work, especially *Gravity’s Rainbow* and *Mason & Dixon*. 

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Pynchon and Stencil are both composers who seek to reconstruct a history from extant traces. In doing so, they (Pynchon ironically, Stencil seriously) seek to discover the “master cabal” of the century which will lead up to and explain the present, since if V. is a “historical fact then she continued active today and at the moment, because the ultimate Plot Which Has No Name was as yet unrealized, though V. might be no more a she than a sailing vessel or a nation” (244).

In terms of plot, the overarching structure is one of disappearances and lacunae, which compel further attempts at reconstruction. But the final vanishing point is the dominant note struck by the text. Both the “V. in Love” chapter and the epilogue dramatize a disappearance “as far as anyone […] could say, from the face of the earth” (460) that is also a diffusion or vanishing: “whitecaps, kelp islands, any of a million flatnesses which should catch thereafter some part of the brute sun’s spectrum—showed nothing at all of what came to lie beneath” (547). The indeterminacy and ambiguity that fragments of the search for V. represent is only intensified when a layering of narrators occurs through “Stencilized” interior consciousness. This occurs in eight short sections that are linked by a framing device in the third chapter.

Rewriting his short story “Under the Rose” as V.’s third chapter, Pynchon now places Stencil the speculator and “impressionist” (imaginative novelist) in the driver’s seat. P. Aïeu and Yusef the factotum are the first two impressions performed by Stencil; Pynchon’s audience reads two brief sections presented from their point of view. Aïeu spies on Bongo-Shaftsbury, who is “out to seduce the girl, Victoria Wren” (63), who we are told is no innocent herself; her “anarchist sympathies” mirror those of the other spies out to assassinate her lover, whom she pretends is her husband, Sir Alastair Wren (63).
Yusef observes this play of shifting identities, a “curious tableau” (67), watching for furtive signals. Stencil’s third impression, Maxwell Rowley-Bugge, hides a “ne’er-do-well’s heart” (69) beneath his cultivated exterior. It is notable here that all of Stencil’s impressions, or reconstructions, are those of impressionists. Rowley-Bugge also draws on the repeated trope in the chapter of this espionage as “A grande vaudeville!” (77).

The fourth impersonation, Waldetar the conductor, allows Stencil to make another vertical movement into the Egyptian past, through an imagined internal digression in which he offers up some absurdist secret motivations for history: “statues talk […] some government buildings go mad and mosques make love” (78). The fifth, Gebrail, shares a name with, and reimagines, “the Lord’s angel… that dictated the Koran to Mohammad. What a joke if all that holy book were only twenty-three years listening to the desert” (84). This Gebrail shares some apocalyptic musings on the outbreak of wars to come circa the turn of the century with the reader, and inhabits a sort of worm’s-eye view among the movements of empire and colony. Girgis, a street performer incarnated in the sixth impression, witnesses Bongo-Shaftsbury’s role in the Victoria Wren plotting, and mistakenly sees it as symptomatic of mental disease: “The madman had not moved, had only continued to stare at the sky” (89). The seventh impression, of a German girl named Hanne, is a similar account of the plot by a bystander.

The eighth, shortest and most significant, is focalized upon Alastair Wren at the moment of death: “The pistol smokes….Vision must be the last to go….The half-crouched body collapses. The face and its masses of white skin loom ever closer” (96). These eight segments all are marked by a sense of impending, and finally achieved, doom. Wren’s assassination seems to evoke the Archduke Franz Ferdinand’s
assassination, but here it is part of a larger, fictionalized puzzle being solved by the Stencilized narrator. Victoria Wren’s sinister but not exactly specified role in this is one of V.’s several cameo appearances in the novel, which also foreshadows the dispersal of Tyrone Slothrop late in *GR*.

The Stencilization process, then, is an attempt to reconstruct the events leading up to Wren’s assassination, as well as to portray it from a number of different viewpoints. It is also a break with a fixed historical reference point in favor of a representation; Stencil, denied access to the past, chooses to reconstruct—trace, and, yes, stencil—it, just as Pynchon the author creates a wildly imaginative account that not only departs from actual fact but is also a series of wild departures in disparate, even contradictory directions. Yet one with a master key of sorts may decode these encodings of parodic historical account. The reconstructive intent of the author explains Pynchon’s reason for putting eight impersonations by Stencil together, as parts of a whole produced by his historical consciousness, into the novel’s third chapter. Working as a Pynchon analogue, Stencil creates shorter pastiches of various tones and types. In this way, Stencil acts as a unifying narrator within the omniscient third-person narration, like Reverend Cherrycoke in *Mason & Dixon*, the novel-length pastiche which is set in an all-encompassing past, one in which people do experience things that are startlingly pre-modern to us (such as slavery), and narrated in a style appropriate to that time. Yet by providing the novel with a main narrative line through Stencil, his quest, and the innate impossibility of searching for the “V. text” which Stencil’s discourse constructs, Pynchon is creating a ground zero for the reconstructive postmodern historical novel. The text itself contains disparate elements that are organized around a central axis.
This paradigm of “epistemological failure” (Amian 69) is where \( V \) seems to begin and end. The failure in question is the inability not only to know the past, but to reconstruct it without turning one’s reconstruction into the process of representation. Finding the missing pieces of the puzzle, completing the quest, is the end goal, but conspiracy seems to yield to deeper conspiracy, all loosely organized around \( V \). Once Stencil’s and Profane’s paths converge, Benny Profane gains control as a mouthpiece for history as seen from a postwar cynicism’s anti-scholarly stance, an era ahead of which seems to lie “abruptly absolute night” (Pynchon 506) to run into. This is an attitude appropriate to the Whole Sick Crew’s bohemian languor, a world of absurdist artworks that parody abstract expressionism, such as Slab’s cheese Danish paintings, which document a “recent obsession” (307) that parallels \( V \) despite its apparent senselessness. They represent an attempt made by aesthetes to process and understand their contemporary world that is deliberately ahistorical, perhaps parodying a ritualized exhaustion of modernist artistic methods. The paintings self-consciously represent or enact the decadence and attenuation of the modern world, attempting to portray it in a manner so ludicrous as to imply that all other such attempts for art to comment on society at the time are equally absurdist—and disconnected from historical event—but also appropriate to their era.

One of the paintings predominantly features a \( V \)-shaped “empty street, drastically foreshortened, the only living things in it a tree in the middle distance, on which perched an ornate bird, busily textured” (307). This is an artwork appropriate to the “arranging and rearranging” marked by “Decadence, but the exhaustion of all possible permutations and combinations was death” (325). But the ornate bird, perched above an exhausted

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terrain, places a profusion of ideas and symbols into infinite play. It is also a departure from realist representation, and a comment on the mass-production of pop art. One of many in a possible series, the bird on a wire is a newly-chosen “universal symbol” that intends to “replace the cross” (307). This, and the parodic way in which this symbol comments upon a master narrative of artistic uplift, rejecting it as obsolete, in favor of a new, absurd, complex symbolism in a self-sustaining way, works to create the portion of V. that is about the modern world on the point of postmodernism’s emergence:

The beauty is that it works like a machine yet is animate. The partridge eats pears off the tree, and his droppings in turn nourish the tree which grows higher and higher….It is perpetual motion, except for one thing….someday the bird will be impaled on the gargoyle’s teeth, just like the poor cheese Danish is already on the phone pole (307-8).

It is also what Stencil is rebelling against in his search for old symbols, not just to establish them but to decode them.

One cultural symbol that the novel lingers on is decidedly less parodic of the avant-garde. It is, rather, the avant-garde’s exact opposite. Pynchon gets to have some icon-toppling fun at the expense of the rise of Davy Crockett as a mass-media merchandising hero (thanks to Disney simulacra) in the 1950s, which is also part of the contemporary world Pynchon is reacting to in the novel:

Now on the radio at the moment was a song about Davy Crockett, which upset Winsome considerably. This was ’56, height of the coonskin hat craze. Millions of kids everywhere you looked were running around with these bushy Freudian hermaphrodite symbols on their heads. Nonsensical legends were being
propagated about Crockett, all in direct contradiction to what Winsome had heard as a boy, across the mountains from Tennessee. This man, a foul-mouthed louseridden boozehound, a corrupt legislator and an indifferent pioneer, was being set up for the nation’s youth as a towering and clean-limbed example of Anglo-Saxon superiority. He had swelled into a hero such as Mafia [his wife] might have created after waking from a particularly loony and erotic dream. The song invited parody” (236).

In the simplest sense, this is Pynchon the counterculture writer, riffing on the reduction of the historically wild and energetic Crockett to the most American and wholesome of symbols, through unlocking the sexual semiotics of a bushy hat and its appendage. In another sense, the hermaphrodite motif echoes the “indifferent” status of Crockett, anything but the potent trailblazer the song celebrates, which is next parodied in the intensely self-serving autobiography from the capitalist record mogul Winsome, who embodies, or Stencilizes, the Crockett role (while appropriating the Disney Crockett theme’s melody) in order to rewrite his own myth of success in the wilderness of pop music mass-production. At the same time, once Crockett has been undone, it is unnecessary to situate him in a historical metanarrative of genocidal expansion (Gravity’s Rainbow will later on also gesture in this direction and is at its most serious when entering this territory). Rather, this brisk yet devastating parody of Crockett, while not exactly established as anything but hearsay from Winsome’s boyhood, plants it on equal footing with the American legend that reinforces Crockett as a vital part of American myth (similar to the myths undone and commented on by Barth). It also implies that the decadence of the twentieth century is not a phenomenon unique to the modern era. At the
same time, the desire for a frontier hero suitable to the clean-cut 1950s appears to be a
response to cultural forces, a bit of wishful thinking that is likened to an “erotic” drive.

There is a further analogy to this critical unveiling of the Crockett mythos; ideology does not make one an interpellated follower of the inauthentic historical
narrative. This is what Tony Tanner refers to when he writes, “Pynchon’s point seems to
be to remind the reader that there is no one writable ‘truth’ about history and experience,
only a series of versions: it always comes to us ‘stencilized.’” (Qtd. in Thompson 171).
Stencil’s involvement in the process is described as a “forcible dislocation of personality
into a past he didn’t remember and had no right in, save by right of imaginative anxiety
or historical care, which is recognized by no one” (Pynchon 60). Marc W. Redfield notes
how this passage foregrounds the metafictional by making Stencil an “author surrogate
whose quest for V. organizes the text’s more or less postmodern evacuation of the
categories of identity, signification, and desire […] The possibility of substituting
Pynchon’s name for a character’s announces itself here with atypical insistence”
(Redfield 156). This emptying out of personality, a voiding of the self in search of
historical clues that exist scattered across the 1900s, 1910s and 1920s, allows Stencil to
embody a “coherent, omnisciently narrated short story bearing Pynchon’s name,
‘rereading’ and ‘rewriting’ material that Pynchon is visibly—publicly—reworking”
(156). Yet, back in the universe of the text that fulfills a narrative purpose, Stencil has
joined V. “in the realm of what-ness; his is the ego whose stable boundaries have utterly
dissolved” (Fitzpatrick 95). In other words, the process of seeking out V. has led to his
flight into the workings of history. Stencil has chosen to live in and seek out the past, at
the cost of a stable self.

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9 This story is “Under the Rose,” rewritten by Pynchon for use in V.
It may appear that Stencil’s desire both to write a text of V., pursue it to its logical conclusion, and dissolve himself into a tissue of historical quotations, is a product of his existence in the era of modern decadence embodied by the Whole Sick Crew. The novel abounds with symbols of the altered, cybernetic self: V. herself as a bizarre clockwork dummy with a mechanical eye, and two robotic creatures, SHOCK and SHROUD, which Kathleen Fitzpatrick notes are V.’s “late twentieth-century descendants” (Fitzpatrick 100), further the theme. SHOCK and SHROUD are given unnerving voices in the text. They are part crash-test dummies that can suffer injuries to their realistic internal organs, part receptacles for radiation and other fallout of postwar atomic science fiction that absorb “X-rays, gamma rays, and neutrons” (Pynchon 310). SHOCK and SHROUD’s unnerving, zombie-like “Am I dead? If I am then that’s what I mean […] Nearly what you are” (312), and Esther’s infamous nosejob exemplify this. While Fitzpatrick sees Pynchon as aligning these not only with a cultural shift into “decadence” (Fitzpatrick 91), they also are recapitulated as text. Esther’s nosejob, as plotted by Godolphin on “duplicate […] death-masks” (Pynchon 106), presents a model for editing and manipulating a text to achieve a harmony that does not exist in nature. At the same time, Godolphin’s cheekbone has its own (apocryphal) historical geneology, one marked by pillaging and violence: “Before they melted it down it was one of a set of pastoral figurines, eighteenth century—nymphs, shepherdesses—looted from a château the Hun was using as a CP” (102). This presents a model for the kind of history Pynchon is interested in telling, on which his parodic and phantasmagorical account is based and from which it deviates. And Esther’s surgery, which proceeds after she meets a “rogues’ gallery of the malformed” (107) comprised of the comically deformed, is a parodic
repetition of a wartime injury ward, but also of physical mutants who possess an “alien feeling” (105) she knows intimately. Ironically, the bizarre surgery, in which Godolphin proceeds to “saw off [her] hump” (109), results not in a state of physical harmony but rather an unlocking of a “delicious loss of Estherhood, becoming more and more a blob, with no worries, traumas, nothing: only Being…” (109). While rhinoplasties were offered as reconstructive surgeries in wartime, this surgery is less a reconstruction than a reduction. It offers and parodies another potential method of dealing with (personal) history, one step in the “successive rejection of personalities” (335) that Pynchon’s Fausto Maijstral offers up instead of a cause-and-effect development through life. Instead, it is part and parcel of the transformations of self in V, from the cybernetic V, SHOCK and SHROUD robots, to ways in which—circa 1963—“man had become something which absorbs X-rays, gamma rays and neutrons” (310). A stable self is acted upon, or perhaps eradicated, by new forms of history, and a postmodern aesthetic self is created in its place.10

The ellipsis, so characteristic of Pynchon, with which this paragraph terminates is also an opening-up of the text’s poetics. Fugue-states, chronological disruptions, and the ominous tone so prevalent in GR’s watching-the-skies first sections all share it. It functions as a textual cartilage that here gives Esther a loss of self similar to Stencil, presented in the text as a similar vertical movement to Stencil’s flights through history. But Esther’s experience is more focused on the self than on the history that exists beyond the self. Esther is given the option to keep her lump of cartilage preserved: “We’ll put it in formaldehyde, you can keep it as a souvenir if you wish” (110). It has become a part of

10 In a personal note to me, Mark Conroy noted the possible relevance of Andy Warhol’s 1957 rhinoplasty to this set-piece. I believe that this recognizes the impact of then-contemporary artistic developments on the novel.
Esther’s personal history but the genetic trait she may pass on gives it continuity in the future: “Nothing I do to a Jewish girl’s nose is going to change the noses of her children when she becomes, as she must, a Jewish mother […] small forces like me will never prevail against it. All that can is something that will change the germ plasm, nuclear radiation, maybe” (43). Thus, the “harmony and there is harmony” (106) her surgeon offers becomes ironically reversed, in that the organic world may—while mutated or subject to other ominous technological forces—survive a plunge into the heightened decadence of the face-editing to bring it into alignment with the images of mass media. As in Profane’s narrative, Esther’s loss of self is an appropriate attitude for the present, which seems all too willing to forget the past; it parallels a historical anxiety or loss of narrative. She, like V. in the past, is momentarily dispersed into the text, changing her appearance as Burlingame changes identities. The lump of gristle is a trace of the pre-alterity self that has been left behind.

The nosejob, like many other set-pieces in V., is Pynchon at his most parodic. These are perhaps the most immediately appealing and accessible sections for newcomers to his work, and also offer clues to how his authorial imagination works on a larger scale. An example of the counterforce that gleefully sabotages the text and diverts those expecting a revelation of plot or character, it therefore seems a key aspect of a text that serves as a foundation for other types of metafictional parody, both historiographic and otherwise. Another key moment in V. is the journal of Father Fairing, the insane man who seeks to convert a legion of sewer rats to Jesuit Catholicism and writes things like “Ignatius is proving a very difficult student indeed. He quarreled with me today over the nature of indulgences” (123). Aside from another reference pointing to a rat named
Veronica, the journal is a prolonged pastiche of a historical account and also a secret history. This seems a point where Barth is most directly influencing Pynchon, an influence that will return with the publication of *M&D*.

Indeed, *V.* could have relied more heavily on this level of parody: the heightened, absurd, and picaresque. Pynchon situates it in the midst of a framework of mad connections, desperate scholars, and Stencil, “the century’s child” (48), whose “animateness” depends on the quest: “To sustain it he had to hunt V.” (51). It is what Pynchon has done with the tools of the parodist, the maker of pastiches, that makes *V.* an important text in the first wave of historiographic metafiction and an arrow pointing towards its future.

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I began by offering up *V.* and *Sot-Weed* as part of the critical context into which they immediately fell: that of black humor. A more appropriate contemporary context would be the parodic, or a parodic genre that we can now see as inimical to early 1960s literature. It is worth returning to how this both addressed and failed to address what Barth and Pynchon achieved in contributing to the nascent genre of postmodern historical fiction. Indeed, doing so is necessary to solve the question of how we classify these texts today in terms of genre.

The texts are both humorous, though Pynchon’s brand of humor is less pervasive and broad at times than Barth’s. Rather, it is not humor but *energy* that seems the dominant compositional force in *V.* Energy is present in its various pastiches and styles, its collision of thematic and stylistic opposites (and characterological opposites in the characters of Profane and Stencil). If anything, a refusal to hang together as a whole is
what marks the text of V., and propels it forward. Barth, meanwhile, is driven by a distinctly different sort of energy, one decidedly more picaresque. In Sot-Weed, the dialectical tension occurs between levels of parody. George Plimpton’s review of V. does seem to beg for the inclusion of Sot-Weed among the ranks of a revitalized picaresque tradition in mid-1960s American literature. And Sot-Weed’s humor is black, too; the book itself is a celebratory tribute to a scathing satiric poem that implies that the true force and beauty in Cooke’s jeremiad is that it came from the depths of experience, depicting real life—and history—more accurately than any romantic, sweeping Sir Walter Scott historical fiction. Cooke is first a virginal innocent, then a sort of bumbling parody of a hero.

Sot-Weed rests most comfortably within the black humor taxonomy, though it is also clearly something more. Most significant is how the text appears to create echoes that resound through the logic of influence, as later novelists, including Diane Glancy in the 2003 Stone Heart: A Novel of Sacajawea, take the initial inspiration of providing corrective balance to a mythic and heroic account of the pioneers and colonists, as well as existing accounts of their Indian guide. Here, however, Glancy does not need to invent parodic sexual escapades for Lewis, Clark, and their interpreter Charbonneau to get into; she can pull actual extracts from their journals that reveal a preoccupation with venereal disease, among other matters which come off as rather unsavory to the present-day reader (and to the incredulous Sacajawea, who is depicted through second-person narration).

What Barth originates as parody repeats itself through less parodic means in later iterations of historiographic metafiction. Revealing a secret history that is especially sordid has arguably become its own subgenre. For instance, showing that the Hollywood
of times past was just as decadent as any contemporary tabloid could report, as in Jerry Stahl’s novel inspired by the Fatty Arbuckle murder case, *I, Fatty* (2004). *Deadwood* (2004-2006), too, uses lurid detail and unremitting obscenity to depict an American West that is easily as hard-core and brutal as the world of any contemporary crime drama. Yet in doing so, Glancy and *Deadwood* create a strange hybrid voice and tone, which might first be traced to Arthur Penn’s *Little Big Man* (1970). Thomas Berger’s novel, from which the film was adapted, has Barth as a possible progenitor. Also, by foregrounding the shock and stripping away the absurdist side of Barth’s literary black humor (even as others, like the Monty Python troupe, would later emphasize it), the postmodern historical narrative can engage with the possibility of telling a secret history that reveals the period with its whitewashed, sanitized face scraped away.

In *M&D*, however, Pynchon appears to return to a Barthian project, retelling its heroic and mythologized story of the development of the Mason-Dixon line, using the line itself, and copious research into what the two surveyors were like, as his starting point, and spinning from it a wild and all-encompassing novel that brims with anachronisms and portraits of a scientifically and intellectually adventurous, pre-codified, pre-Revolutionary America. But most important in denoting *M&D* as a successor to *Sot-Weed* is the stylistic pastiche; in this text, Pynchon mimics a 17th-century novel and also frames the story as an oral narrative, or bedtime story. Taking up the novel-as-pastiche and adding to it through deviations from the norm and the moments where Pynchon’s own voice shines recognizably through this narrator

The concept of the secret history seems to be a predominant unifying thread in these two novels, and is also what elevates them from being fully described by black
humor, pastiche, or playful literary parody. As Schulz defines it, black humor allows for the usage of appropriate literary techniques to describe a fragmented, industrialized world, as well as a pointed satiric retelling of a mythic and mystified past. Play with language and pastiche often take the form of literary in-jokes, or manipulations of the reader (like Pynchon’s sudden detours into song lyrics), but this style is not necessarily instrumental in building towards a coherent engagement with history. These are not tools used to illustrate what’s at stake. However, all of these elements are key components of the secret history, as Barth and Pynchon define it. Therefore, they are exemplary of the first era of historiographic metafiction: a largely parodic one.

Secret history is a retelling of the past, with new information added; it is a declassified peek at what really went on. It is also an interiorized personal creation of the past, as Stencil undertakes when performing his impersonations of those who were a part of V.’s strange twilight world. But secret history is most importantly a departure from established history. Barth and Pynchon both emphasize how history is a constructed literary narrative with inherent limitations, but also (especially Pynchon) attempt to explain it, emphasizing past events that remain important to the reconstruction of a new view of the present, such as those that occurred in Europe leading up to the World Wars. This saves their texts from a descent into not black but nihilistic humor. It also means that they do carry on the lineage of Scott’s historical fiction as defined by Lukács, even if they perform this task through unconventional and ironic means. They do not naively present historical crisis and class consciousness in the midst of it, but rather depart from this model significantly. Barth presents a deeply mythologized historical moment as one that gives birth to many of America’s darker aspects, and has a misfortune-prone
protagonist (jailed, sued, stripped of his property, constantly deceived) gradually wake up to this dark America as well as what it portends for the colonies’ future. Pynchon uses literary invention and modernist tactics to craft a wholly new and postmodern understanding of V. as the object of Stencil’s quest to find meaning in history. Profane, meanwhile, rejects this quest, and serves as Stencil’s foil until the two converge at the novel’s end, which nonetheless denies true closure in terms of plot. But V. does successfully present not a moment of crisis but a century of shadowy conspiracy, one leading towards and departing from the cataclysms of the two world wars which are given their own vehicle for Pynchon’s connective, parodic, all-encompassing energy in Gravity’s Rainbow.

The question remains: are these novels truly postmodern? What is gained, or lost, by grouping them under this genre category? (And is doing so merely repeating a mistake made by limiting them to the genre category of black humor in 1965?) I believe that Sot-Weed is not postmodern, though it is part of an important moment bridging the gap between late modernist and postmodernist fiction. This moment is, specifically, the emergence of a kind of reimaginative historical parody that survives an ironic, skeptical distance from the purported truth—or canonization of events—that animates all historiographic metafiction to the present.11 And its status as a pastiche with intentions that run deeper than displaying erudition or mimicry is truly important in the development of postmodern literature (and art). Pynchon’s V., on the other hand, does fit into the mold of early, foundational postmodern literature, especially in its deviations from realist fiction, its indeterminacy in dealing with past or present, one narrative through line or many, or a quest with a clear object versus one that spirals off into

11 For more on this, see the evolution of secret history as argued in Chapter 4, and Conclusion.
different directions. It is an attempt to create a reconstructive portrait of 20th century life, from historical traces both imagined and real, marked by violence and decadence. As its chapters set in then-contemporary New York illustrate, Pynchon sought to comment on the present-day conditions of life among his readers. That is where Schulz’s definition of black humor seems appropriate. Where it ends is where postmodernism begins.

Barth and Pynchon are both writing important texts in the development of postmodern historical fiction. Barth, too, fits Linda Hutcheon’s tag of historiographic metafiction more neatly than Pynchon does in *V.*, which makes *Sot-Weed* the progenitor of its own subgenre. In the following chapters, I will continue to chart its development and the unique ways of dealing with history that occur in each of its phases.
Chapter 2: Alternate History: Reimagining the Historically Inevitable

We can now define the central characteristics of postmodern historical fiction, based on what it meant by the end of the 1960s. For the purposes of my argument, it was typified and pioneered by Barth and Pynchon, whose texts possess all these defining aspects. These, as outlined in the previous chapter, include a picaresque narrative form often signaled by intertextuality, a paralleling of subject matter from the past and present that creates new parallels through anachronism and the diachronic juxtaposition of times and places, and an altogether parodic attitude towards the “serious” matter of historical record and reliability, as well as a similar parodic sensibility towards its intertexts. In other words, what categorizes these texts as postmodernist, parodic, or metafictional is a “play” with historical subject matter, a rearrangement of the proper design in which we are to understand historical events (as the road properly leading to present American ideological hegemony). In addition, fact and fiction’s likeness—and dissimilarity—is utilized to play up the level of invention required to create a historical/fictional account. Barth takes Ebenezer Cooke’s poem and fashions a fictional world out of it; Pynchon takes a conspiratorial view of the 20th century that his hero puts together out of scraps and clues found in secret journals. The text is the key to reimagining the past, which itself becomes a new text.

But what about a textual imagining of the future, a present that resulted from different events, or even a rearranged or changed timeline? In this genre of writing, which
we may classify as science fiction, history is used as a jumping-off point for another kind of history that belongs to the novelist's imagination. An alternate history, or schema of events leading up to or away from a defamiliarized present, is the next tier of the postmodern historical narrative, one which occupies a singular place in its evolution, yet also has a unique influence on the development of postmodern literature and its ways of telling stories. Like other tropes of science fiction literature, such as dystopian and technological/sociological defamiliarization, the alternate history has migrated into contemporary fiction and been added to its repertoire. At the same time, it has spawned its own industry within popular and military fiction, the latter being one of its most fruitful areas of growth.

In this chapter, I have chosen three key texts in the alternate-historical genre. They appear in different decades, and at decidedly unique points in the history of postwar fiction. Philip K. Dick’s *The Man in the High Castle* (1962), William Gibson and Bruce Sterling’s *The Difference Engine* (1990), and Michael Chabon’s *The Yiddish Policeman’s Union* (2007) represent unique points in the genre’s development. Three of the most notable examples of its more popular and visible entryways into the literary canon, these novels are also case studies in the portability of its tropes from science fiction and other brands of pulp literature into the larger fabric of postmodern American literature.

Part of the reason for this portability is that the first, *The Man in the High Castle,* may vex expectations of those who have first read an account or summary of the novel. Credited as the first alternate history of a World War II with a different outcome, and the work of a SF writer known for an obsession with alternate ontologies and unreliable mental worlds, one might expect either a technological or military thriller, or dimension-
hopping time-travel yarn that ties up all its loose ends in a last-chapter happy ending.¹ Rather, it is a smaller-scale novel that focuses on the personal lives of Americans who know no other world than theirs, except as glimpsed through the redemptive power of fiction. As a blueprint for the alternate history, it was imitated by authors whose purview largely remained within popular or genre fiction, but also was the first adopted or namechecked as the alternate history spread to writers outside of this territory; Dick’s propensity to provide a worm’s-eye view of his imagined worlds meant that the alternate history could be used to provide a new perspective on its subject matter. In other words, the reasons for “doing” or constructing an alternate historical account changed with Dick’s novel. Alternate history became useful as a vehicle for reflecting on historical assumptions we made on a daily basis, and critiquing the ways in which history remained written by its winners. Yet it also had deeper implications as a means to reflect on how we narrativize history.

Gibson and Sterling’s The Difference Engine took a different high-concept route to its destination: moving the date at which computer technology developed far backward, to the Industrial Revolution, the novel then presented a cheerfully imaginative rearrangement of historical pieces, with actual people and events juxtaposed with others recruited from then-contemporary fiction, as well as anachronistic terms, concepts, and other ideas recruited from our world to that of the alternate 19th century. In some ways the text is a celebration of technology, its history, and the techno-geek ingenuity of its

¹ When, for instance, on the TV series Lost, time-travel researcher Pierre Chang responds incredulously to a cohort’s question if the discovery of a way to move backwards through time means they could “kill Hitler,” the familiarity of SF time-travel tropes involving World War II is being parodied for a contemporary audience. Man in the High Castle’s refusal to strictly give its readers a better world through meddling with history, or a thriller dystopia of totalitarianism that gets overthrown, is perhaps the key to its popularity, and an explanation for its many imitations in pop culture.
authors. Gibson and Sterling delight in using modems and word-processing software to collaborate, as well as exploiting their possibility in the creation of a period pastiche that may read “straight” on the surface, but is that is filled with inside jokes and textual borrowings beneath it. This relates, indeed, to the novel’s deeper themes of the paranoia of technology and empire. Beyond this, however, what makes the novel important to the alternate-history canon is how it fuses 1980s SF “cyberpunk” with the postmodern historical narrative in order to create its own subgenre of SF that follows from the original genre.2 “steampunk,” a reconfiguration of tropes common to 19th-century adventure fiction into a SF framework that gives them a more contemporary treatment.3 One feature of steampunk that aligns it with historiographic metafiction is an ironic likeness between past and present, as well as a portrayal of present technology through a defamiliarizing lens; for instance, steampunk artwork often literally reconstructs modern technology like the personal computer through an archaic technological sensibility. This presents a version of our world with cosmetic differences, and in which the chronological development of certain inventions was shifted backwards in time. While primarily reimaginative, it does use reconstructive means, chiefly the salvaging of “lost” history, and the early intertextual works (such as Jules Verne and H.G. Wells) that influence the art of the 1980s.2 A genre which portrays the meeting of “high tech and low life,” the term was coined by Bruce Bethke as the title of a 1983 short story. It also uses noir and thriller conventions to portray intrigue in dystopian futures that evoke nightmares of the information age. Along with Ridley Scott’s Philip K. Dick film adaptation Blade Runner, its key novelistic text is William Gibson’s Neuromancer. See Ketterer, David, Canadian Science Fiction and Fantasy. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992.3 Steampunk borrows an ideology and emphasis from cyberpunk, but is described by K.W. Jeter as marked by “Victorian fantasies” including “the appropriate technology of the era”—and, often, imaginative mixtures of new technology or common science-fiction tropes with the old.

Beyond its definition as a type of science fiction (or fantastic fiction set in the Victorian era), steampunk plays on the juxtaposition or reimagining of old and new. For instance, late 2000s Internet artists have created unauthorized steampunk aesthetic redesigns of pop-cultural tropes such as Star Wars characters and PC hobbyist “case mods” that add nonfunctional tubing, valves, dials, and hardwood finishing to a desktop computer. See Shleidhower, Jesse. “Science Fiction Citations.” http://www.jessesword.com/sf/view/327. Retrieved 2009-05-30.
contemporary SF. It serves as a salient example of how the rearrangement of history can result in an implicit commentary on our present world. In *The Difference Engine*, it proves a point made by many writers of time-travel and alternate history: a system may be heading towards its own teleology, regardless of the circumstances used to get there. The novel, as a result, becomes a kind of intricate “yesternow” imagining of the steps taken on the path, with several clashes between the forces of empire and chaos in a world in which, like the 1990s, information is power.

Even by the time of Gibson and Sterling, alternate history was actively trying to avoid clichés of the worlds resulting from historical paths not taken. While World War II remained central to the alternate history, merely portraying another dystopia in which the Nazis won the war or America chose not to atom-bomb Japan was not enough. Thus attempts to find new points of historical divergence, and ways to portray them, became necessary. How else could the alternate history stay fresh, and portray new what-ifs, as opposed to the same old ones? Michael Chabon’s *The Yiddish Policeman’s Union* is a late-phase example of the genre, which represents not only its increased popularity, but a need to respond to a certain routinization of its most common divergences, i.e. the change of a “course-altering” event such as the outcome of World War II. Instead, Chabon uses the alternate history to interrogate the formation of Jewish and Jewish-American identities, especially how they pertain to geographic boundaries. Like Dick’s writing, it uses the toolkit of the alternate history, but applies it to different ends than what succeeded it: in other words, it represents a return to the genre’s original purpose, only with a more reconstructive emphasis. Also, composed by a best-selling and highly-acclaimed author of early-21st-century literary fiction, it represents a way in which
alternate history can reinvigorate literary fiction, as long as it raises the stakes in ways implicit in Dick’s foundational version. Chabon takes a seemingly bizarre-but-real abandoned plan to establish a Jewish homeland in Sitka, Alaska and uses that as his historical divergence in a way that practically seems to parody—via its intertexts—the conventions of alternate history that have codified since its emergence. This is accomplished through a traditionally Jewish sensibility that pits the lost tribe against the whims of historical fate, placing them in a perhaps undesirable locale. It is not a better or worse world, so much as a different one. Yet, much as in Dick, the inhabitants of this fictional world cannot imagine anything but the world they know; similarly, the viewpoint we are given of Sitka belongs to a hard-bitten private eye and his cohorts as he attempts to uncover a shadowy conspiracy that turns out to involve Jewish destiny and the issue of homeland. Thus the issue of Jewish exile, and the problematized homeland, becomes an inescapable destiny regardless of the historical road taken.

It is Chabon’s discussion of the condition of exile, as well as his love-letter of sorts to Yiddish as a dying language (his characters make much use of its idioms in the text), that motivates his use of alternate history. It is especially interesting to contrast his aims with Dick’s. Writing thirty-five years after Dick, he has remained within the same decade of World War II as his point of departure, is still writing about a reality-altering event of great significance, yet we can imagine the goings-on of his Sitka as being remote to American life at the time. This seems part of a strategic attempt to discard a routinized point of view of alternate history: that we should feel lucky things turned out as they did. Presenting the alternate history as a nightmare from which we awake with relief, the novels to which Chabon reacts still are those to which SF readers turn for exemplars of
the genre (and may misread Dick’s as sharing this perspective). It is replaced with a focus on the likenesses between our world and the alternate world, and what that says when put in dialogue with our culture’s hopes and fears.

As a commentary on how we view history, and what we may have missed in the established conclusions, alternate history is an important aspect of postmodern historical narrative. In many ways, it just makes more explicit the questions that Barth and Pynchon have begun to ask; thus, it makes sense to begin with Dick, one of their contemporaries.

Pynchon and Barth’s 1960s novels are works of secret history—texts that derive their meaning from their imagined status as revelations from the past. It is worth considering how the genre might be extended. Alternate historical fiction, sometimes referred to as allohistory⁴, follows the thread of secret history into the realm of the speculative. Moving from the secret to the other, by definition, involves a divergence from the historical events that resulted in our present reality. While secret history in the postmodern literary fiction genre will still usually trace the roots that terminate in the present day, changing our understanding of our time, alternate history takes us to an elsewhere as well as an elsewhen: part of its conceptual origins lie in science fiction. Some alternate histories may also involve time-travel as a plot or genre device used to alter the current state of things via a foray into the past, or else to restore or undo the accidental or deliberate vandalism that resulted in a dystopia. Most popular time-travel fiction relies upon this conceit. Other popular alternate histories, such as Alan Moore’s

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graphic novel, *Watchmen*, may not posit a deliberate, singular point of divergence that resulted in the alternate world of the text, nor do they offer a means to its undoing.5

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Philip K. Dick’s seminal 1962 novel, *The Man in the High Castle*, is not the first to posit an alternate reality produced by a new chain of historical events. Gavriel Rosenfeld locates alternate history’s origins in what historians refer to as a more scholarly and less speculative form, counterfactual history, as practiced when “Thucydides and Livy wondered how their own societies would have been different if the Persians had defeated the Greeks or if Alexander the Great had waged war against Rome” (Rosenfeld 91). France, he notes, produced the first allohistorical fiction in the post-Napoleonic era; after that, the most significant dabblings in the genre seem to exist in the time-travel tales published in 1930s pulp SF (92). Dick is, however, among a generation to make more significant—as well as politically and theoretically complex—forays into the genre, using its tools to ask vexing questions. *The Man in the High Castle* is today accorded perhaps the highest place in Dick’s far-ranging SF oeuvre, considered by his scholars and fans as initiating a twelve-year-long streak of his most creative prose, which leads into many metaphysically and even spiritually complex fictions, all of which inquire about realities beyond the one we believe to be most “real,” or stable.6

Rosenfeld’s essay on *High Castle* and several other alternate history novels is a useful introduction to the alternate history as a genre, though it is one he studies more for

5 *Watchmen*’s world, however, is implicitly an America in which the popular comic book superheroes originating in the 1940s were real, affecting historical events. This is especially true of Dr. Manhattan, an atomic Superman pastiche whose name derives from World War II’s atomic research.

6 This period ends for some with Dick’s spiritual experience, the 1974 “pink light” incident, which Dick spent the rest of his life pondering in a massive exegesis. Others, however, consider this period equally fertile, if less accessible. See Lawrence Sutin, *Divine Invasions: A Life of Philip K. Dick*, Da Capo Press, 2005.
what it says about the academic discipline of history than literature. As a result, his analysis of it and other alternate history novels is somewhat simplistic, though difficult to argue with, since he spends time focusing on texts that are part of a conservative and libertarian SF tradition. Among these are alternate histories as cautionary tales to advance that political ideology, including those written by Newt Gingrich and Pat Buchanan. However, it makes some important points necessary to an understanding of Dick’s work and its unique structural and thematic focus in the world of alternate history. He first notes that the growth of postmodernism, “with its blurring of the boundaries between fact and fiction, its privileging of ‘other’ or alternate voices, and its playfully ironic reconfiguring of established historical verities, has encouraged the rise of alternate history [and] eroded the power of deterministic worldviews” (92). Arguing as well that alternate history is “presentist” (90), always much more about our present state than the past it may occupy itself with, Rosenfeld writes that its presentism originated as an often triumphalist viewpoint that changed from “self-congratulation to self-critique” (95). Prior to this tipping point, though, alternate history often enhanced rather than undermined the seeming historical inevitability of the world we are in now, one better than many possible outcomes. Yet the rhetorical power of “fantasy scenarios” (93) is strong, and it is this that Dick uses metafictionally in his novel. Through metafiction and other devices, Dick creates a fascinating engagement with the process of historical memory, often expressed as a longing for a tangible and “knowable” history, an anxiety contemporary to his era and the following decades’. Picking up on this, critics such as Jameson have used the concept in their readings of Dick’s work, as well as all writers of postmodern historical fiction.
The Man in the High Castle posits a world where the Allies lost World War II, and one in which a novel within the novel (occasionally excerpted), The Grasshopper Lies Heavy, presents its own hopeful alternate scenario of events wherein the Allies won the war. It is composed by Hawthorne Abendsen, who remains a mysterious figure for most of the novel until Juliana Frink visits him and some revelations occur as to both his motivations as a writer and his consultation of the I Ching (which Dick himself used as a tool to make what would seem arbitrary decisions about the plot). His motivations for writing the novel remain almost mystical, and stem from chance in the I Ching ceremony, which involves the choice of yarrow stalks at random to produce hexagrams. Abendsen’s wife explains:

“I’ll tell you then, Mrs. Frink. One by one Hawth made the choices. Thousands of them. By means of the lines. Historic period. Subject. Characters. Plot. It took years. Hawth even asked the oracle what sort of success it would be. It told him that it would be a very great success, the first real one of his career. So you were right. You must use the oracle quite a lot yourself, to have known[…]

“It and I,” Hawthorne said at last, “long ago arrived at an agreement regarding royalties. If I ask it why it wrote Grasshopper, I’ll wind up turning my share over to it. The question implies I did nothing but the typing, and that’s neither true nor decent” (Dick 249-50).

This discussion, which ends the novel, is used not only to tie together narrative threads involving the I Ching—Juliana’s estranged husband, Frank Frink, for instance, consults it at the beginning of the novel to see if she will return to him—but also to foreground the idea of subjective inner reality as important. In other words, the
possibilities posed by the I Ching are pertinent because it allows Dick’s characters to not only access their metaphysical intuitions, but as a commentary on—or simultaneous secret history of—their world.

In this case, the secret history is a deviation from actual history. Yet it is placed on equal footing with Dick’s alternate historical narrative. When Juliana and Hawthorne Abendsen—at the coda of the novel—consult the I Ching together, the result, “Chung Fu….Inner Truth” (250) is telling. It leads Abendsen to ask, “It means, does it, that my book is true?” (251), which registers on different levels. On one hand it offers hope to those who populate Dick’s alternate history. Conversely however, it means that this book, this reality, also has a similar truth in ours. What makes The Man in the High Castle counterfactual but “true” occurs in the moments where the novel does the most to give its contemporary readers a chill, relating to the Axis triumph and how it occurred. By presenting an alternate reality, Dick not only challenges the inevitable and triumphalist impulses, but also presents a level of irony in its history-distorting moments where the book is at its most disturbing.

For instance, the Nazi Reiss is given an internal monologue about Grasshopper, in which he probes the ways the book “upset” him: in its depiction of “the death of Adolf Hitler, the Partei, and Germany itself….it all was somehow grander, more in the old spirit than the actual world. The world of German hegemony” (126). “Amazing, the power of fiction, even cheap popular fiction, to evoke” (124), he thinks, in another moment that allows Dick the avenue of metafictional commentary on his text as SF, or even the more pedestrian, dime-store-thriller pulp genre. Paul Alkon refers to this element of High Castle as a “droll debate over how to classify such an alternate history,” achieved through
“self-reflexivity….awareness of his story as story mainly by references to the contents of its fictive doppelganger” (Alkon 74). Dick even has a minor Japanese character opine that *Grasshopper* (and, by implication, *High Castle*) cannot be SF, due to the fact that there is “no science in it. Nor set in future. Science fiction deals with future, in particular future where science has advanced over now” (Dick 108).

The point is that, aside from serving as a vessel of hope for his characters, *Grasshopper’s* reason to exist is a bit harder to pin down, as is Dick’s novel. *Grasshopper* is utopian; *High Castle* is dystopian in a sense, but also has other purposes which the postmodern context reveals. In addition, the text has a playful way of presenting its relationship to historical inquiry that parallels its relationship with the SF literary canon. Alkon notes that Dick’s “Acknowledgements” page, presenting a list of volumes that aided the author in his research, “becomes in effect an invitation to compare Dick’s fiction with documents invoking the real past” (Alkon 74). There and elsewhere, the reader is prompted to consider whether each fact leading up to the U.S.’s disintegration into a divided set of territories is based on another, subtler deviation. And in addition, the set of events leading up to and from “Capitulation Day” is something the reader has to piece together in medias res, since the novel does not begin during or at the immediate end of the War.

This makes references such as those to “the depression years of the early ‘fifties” (Dick 13) immediately after the U.S.’s 1947 defeat part of a game Dick plays with his readership, one that has long been a part of SF. As in the case, for example, in a canonical literary SF text like Huxley’s *Brave New World* or a Ray Bradbury “Martian Chronicles” story, seeming throwaway lines of dialogue will provide clues as to how the world
deviated from ours. (How did the impulse to re-order society emerge? How did the atomic war that led humans to flee Earth for Mars begin, and when did things get really bad?) The alluded-to sequence of historical events urges the reader to compare it with what they do or do not know of the actual timeline. We are ignorant of this history, and are learning it for the first time. We also learn why, despite the desire of the novel’s Japanese to collect artifacts of a vanished pop-cultural America, communion with the pre-war past is a complex thing. As Wyndham-Matson, Frank Frink’s boss and authenticator of these artifacts puts it, “The past makes people sad” (66). But the idea of another course of events than the accepted narrative—as in the case of revisionist history—is often unacceptable, as his critique of Grasshopper makes clear. He sees events as they have unfolded as inevitable: “And no events like this guy dreamed up, this town in Russia very heroically called ‘Stalingrad,’ no holding action could have done any more than delay the outcome; it couldn’t have changed it. Listen. I met Rommel” (69).

All of these elements of the novel come into play in another aspect of how Grasshopper functions in the text. Grasshopper is a metafictional alternate history narrative which cleverly allows all its in-text readers to comment on the reality they are currently experiencing. Much as the authors of 19th-century fiction used discussions about literature and its merit to delve into character concerns, Dick cleverly places a story that more closely follows actual history into the deviant timeline to produce reactions from his cast. Rather than a straight account of America’s entry into World War II, it depicts not exactly our world but a better version of it in which not only have the Nazis been defeated and their philosophy discredited, but technological progress has put to better uses than spaceflight to dead worlds [the Nazis visit
Mars in Dick’s timeline] or commodification of life here on earth. Television, for example, is mainly employed to educate the inhabitants of undeveloped countries (Alkon 73-4).

In moments such as these, Dick leads us to question the uses history is put to, and how historical accounts are entwined with our present reality. By removing the explicit connection between an Allied victory and the best of all possible worlds, these aspects of the text highlight unintended consequences of the course of recorded history. Hidden links—not exactly lost history but submerged history—between outcomes are also established. For instance, another key aspect of *High Castle*, as noted by Rosenfeld, is that Nazism seems, when mated to it, like a natural outgrowth of American imperialism and its pageantry. The aforementioned Mars flight recalls not only the German wartime origins of the then-incipient U.S. space program, but its use as spectacle that “distracted world attention from the difficulty in Africa” (Dick 28), which refers to a planned Nazi genocide there. A similar if somewhat heavy-handed reference to “those corny U.S. Nazi Party dramatic spectacles at Madison Square Garden…. educational crap” (153), nevertheless makes its satirical point that the spectacle as seen in Leni Riefenstahl’s films had a specific goal in mind: educating its viewers as to mythic and historic sources of the Reich’s might and right. Juliana’s companion, an undercover assassin intending to kill Abendsen, even presents as part of his cover story an ideological misinterpretation of *Grasshopper* as a text. Joe argues that Abendsen starts by taking “the best about Nazism, the socialist part, the Todt Organization and the economic advances we got through Speer” and misattributing it to “the New Deal” while leaving out “the bad part, the SS part, the racial extermination” (155). The point of this critique is that anything else but
the government that led to the alternate timeline Dick presents is seen as anathema, or just plain silly. The Axis victory is a foregone conclusion.

But is the Allied victory, too? First, readers are led to consider, and reject, it as inevitable. The presence of *Grasshopper* in the text subverts the idea of the inevitable victory: it is not one in which the heroic Allies save the day and create a utopia that is our world. The presence of the alternate Allied victory in the text makes recorded history one of at least three possible outcomes. They are two deviations from our course of events. It is also, possibly, one of many more than three. What is to say that a strict causality links such events as the loss of the War and the 1947 Depression? Or that politics in Europe would play out as they did, post-war? Dick avoids the direct timeline, leaving some events intentionally vague. He also privileges multiplicity instead of the direct line, which I would argue points towards a circular model of history that owes more to “flow” than reliable causality. The mutation of our history into its alternate outcomes, as well as the indeterminacy of what in fact led to the Allied loss, create a chaotic and unmappable historical chronicle. How Dick’s characters articulate the issue of historicity supports this.

Historicity is subverted in the text. At first it appears to be inherent in an object, which explains a desire among characters to own pieces of an innocent, free prewar world. In the novel, the primarily Japanese owners who control the Pacific States of America display an intense fascination with artifacts of prewar popular culture. Dick’s character Robert Childan, an artifact dealer who stumbles upon the activity of some forgers, acts as an intermediary among the characters, which gives him time to develop his own thoughts on the matter. The collecting mania parallels a twentieth-century
nostalgia craze that was already taking root around this time, so that a desire to own “Volume One, Number One of *Tip Top Comics*” (25) or a rare Mickey Mouse watch would not seem altogether foreign to Dick’s audience. This longing is given a more pointed meaning, however, when an actual trading card set known as “Horrors of War” (made in 1938 and expanded due to popular demand and the start of World War II) is brought up by Major Humo:

“A dear friend of mine,” the major had gone on, “collects ‘Horrors of War.’ He lacks but one, now. The *Sinking of the Pinay*.[…]”

“Flip cards.” Childan had said suddenly.

“Sir?”

“We flipped them. There was a head and a tail side on each card.” He had been about eight years old (30).

Childan’s idyllic reminiscence about a carefree childhood hobby is made ironic not only by the reality of the events commemorated on these rather lurid cards, but by how these historical events are linked in a game of chance. It also is equated to the way the Germans in Dick’s timeline have sought to be “the agents, not the victims of history” (44) despite the fact that it all comes down to “Chance. One accident. And our lives, our world, hanging on it” (53).

This is one of two ways Dick problematizes these relics. The second is by introducing their forgeries into the text. Karen Hellekson explains: “The forgers [of these bits of Americana] replicate and repeat the past, but the replication is purposeless, because bits of the past are removed from their context. Some collectors have no idea what the objects they purchase are for…. In other words, Japanese collectors attempt to
evoke the American past without linking it meaningfully” to causality (Hellekson 68). At the same time, Wyndham-Matson’s extended discussion of a cigarette lighter that was in Roosevelt’s pocket at the time of his assassination, and another that was not, underlines Dick’s emphasis on historicity and the unknowability of the past:

“Look at these. Look the same, don’t they? Well, listen. One has historicity in it.” He grinned at her. “Pick them up. Go ahead. One’s worth forty, maybe fifty thousand dollars on the collector’s market.”[…]

“I don’t believe either of those two lighters belonged to Franklin Roosevelt,” the girl said.

Wyndham-Matson giggled. “That’s my point! I’d have to prove it to you with some sort of document. A paper of authenticity. And so it’s all a fake, a mass delusion. The paper proves its worth, not the object itself.” (Dick 64-5)

Hellekson quotes George Slusser to make her point, that historicity to Wyndham-Matson and in Dick is “the desire for a particular relationship between the individual and the historical act” (Slusser 203, qtd. in Hellekson 69). Dick’s solution to this arrives with awareness of the way “an entire new world is pointed to” in art (in this case, the jewelry Frank Frink decides to start making), which raises awareness of its difference from a historical artifact (Dick 172). The alternative is for an object to be “alive in the now, whereas that merely remained…the value this has in opposition to historicity” (172). The jewelry created by those with awareness of the I Ching and the concept of wu, or spiritual flow, seems to express an awareness of the constructed nature of the American world, by impoverishing it in its presence. Only by presenting an Eastern, not Western, philosophy can wu present an alternate ontology. Thus, Childan has an epiphany about the imitation
of artifacts and his contemporary world as a simulacrum: “What they say is true: your powers of imitation are immense. Apple pie, Coca-Cola, stroll after the movie, Glenn Miller… you could paste together out of tin and rice paper a complete artificial America” (112). The world that is reconstructed by America’s masters no longer exists.

Hellekson argues that Dick “sees the world as a reflection of the mind, not as something that results from historical forces” (Hellekson 62), and also that, in her taxonomy of alternate histories, Dick’s follows the “entropic” model, which is based on rejecting a direct line in favor of “disorder or randomness” (2), more like chaos theory. While I agree that the entropic has a place in Dick’s text, perhaps most notably as a model of parallel Earths (with apologies to the superhero multiverse of DC Comics7), I believe that the textual model is most important. His treatment of the artifacts of history as texts is in line with Hayden White’s assertion that history is a literary chronicle, and therefore unstable; Dick delves into the semiotics of historical artifacts, and how their meaning is constructed, in order to “unmake” their value.

At the same time, his placement of contradictory histories as part of the collective narratives that support and nourish the world of his own text is what makes his novel important to the early postmodern. Textualizing history, and bringing in his own alternate historical text-within-a-text in Grasshopper, allows Dick to probe and expose its workings. This makes High Castle exceptional among alternate histories, as its text offers a philosophical background for its form, which in turn explains its function. It is an

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7 Invented as a narrative strategy to solve the continuity problems posed by characters existing in the “Golden” and “Silver Ages” of comic books, the parallel-earth model became a way for comic superheroes to travel between different worlds. Some were alternate-historical, like “Earth-3,” where heroes like Superman and Batman were part of the “Crime Syndicate of America.”
important precursor to the different model articulated in William Gibson and Bruce Sterling’s *The Difference Engine*.

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Between 1962 and 1990, alternate historical fiction stayed mostly within the confines of popular SF literature, leading to the dominance of “what-if” military speculation like that engaged in by Harry Turtledove. One pioneering notable exception is the first adoption of post-Dick alternate history by the literary establishment, Vladimir Nabokov’s *Ada* (1969). *Ada* plays with geography and history, presenting a version of the United States settled by Russians known as Antiterra. It also utilized Dick’s trope of its inhabitants’ knowledge of our world, recast as their alternate. Brian Aldiss’ *The Malacia Tapestry* (1976) is also a notable SF alternate history which involves intelligent dinosaurs meeting mankind, and one that receives a chapter in Hellekson’s text. But the next most famous of alternate histories (also covered by Hellekson) is that which moves its evolution forward. William Gibson and Bruce Sterling’s *The Difference Engine* (1990) continues the evolution of alternate history by engaging with the several of the same starting points of other historiographic metafictions. Yet, by following cues first given by Dick and Pynchon, Gibson and Sterling create a bold new type of engagement with the past. A literary work of science fiction, *The Difference Engine* takes many of the tropes that had become associated with its development in the 1980s and early 1990s and anachronistically grafts them to a 19th century setting. “Cyberpunk,” a subgenre of science fiction known for its focus on emergent technology such as the internet and virtual reality, is merged with the spy novel or Victorian “penny-dreadful” pulp tale, resulting in what has become known as “Steampunk,” of which *The Difference Engine* is
considered a key and inaugural text. Beyond its notability in the SF literary community and the many inspirations and imitations it has launched, it is also notable in the canon of alternate history for reasons I will make clear. An alternate history that does not necessarily present its audience with a radically new alternate future or divergence point, it is a text instead in which Gibson and Sterling take one technological advancement and cross-breed it with another: the Industrial Revolution and Information Age are connected, recasting historical and literary material to connect disparate subjects. It also touches upon dystopian SF traditions in its epilogue, in which an alternate 1991 is ominously called into being by an information-collecting, sentient computer called the All-Seeing Eye, which Gibson and Sterling claim has been narrating the novel to itself. This mimics the authors’ use of technology and experimentation in creating the text, which puts the novel on another metafictional level. The result is an alternate history that is cleverly composed, or perhaps “remixed”8 from past texts and present technology.

In the novel, Gibson and Sterling accelerate technological development, the cultural shifts that accompany it, and their consequences. It is an innovative recompositional divergent timeline where British expansionism is buoyed by Babbage’s now-steam-powered computer, known as the Difference Engine when invented in 1822. The Difference Engine is not the subject of lost history, but its status as an ancestor of increasingly more sophisticated computers makes it the subject of recovery in the text. A large and complex calculator which computed mathematical functions, it was a historically significant invention in that it prefigured later developments in electronic

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8 To borrow a phrase that originates in the world of electronic music, remixing is the process of rearranging the parts of a song, or combining it with other digital excerpts taken (“sampled”) from other songs or media. Later in this chapter, I discuss Gibson and Sterling’s own analogies for the position occupied by remixing and sampling of their text.
computing. In this timeline, past and present are often analogized, as is the case in other works of historiographic metafiction that rely on parody and anachronism. The state of the art in computer technology circa 1990 meets 1855’s politics and worldview, through a romantic, espionage lens not uncommon to its own adventure novels. The use of technology in the text adds another interesting layer to the text for present-day readers; one imagines Gibson and Sterling knew that the text would age well by presenting already somewhat dated reference points such as the dot matrix printer. Meanwhile, equations are drawn between “clackers” or computer manipulators (who work via the punch cards that the earliest actual computers relied upon), and their present-day equivalents in 1991. Other parallels exist: between graphics demonstrations and kinoscopic Lumiere slideshows that replace film and accompany lectures, and between hackers and anarchists, among them Luddites, who resist governmental control and power as it is represented in this accelerated dawn of the information age. The future of this imagined past is also explored—as the terminus of this teleological narrative of technology, secrets, and power—as is the reverse-engineering possibility presented by obsolete technologies, which makes the novel a unique fusion of SF concerns. It argues that the world we are in now, as seen through a somewhat dystopian lens that focuses on the balance of power in an technologically-advanced society, could very well have come about one hundred years earlier, and through a different set of historical circumstances. This makes it postmodern in that it shrugs aside deterministic ideas about the agents of history in a similar way to its predecessor, The Man in the High Castle, but more

9 While Babbage’s work is often used to infer an “unbroken line of descent” leading to modern-day computers, the truth is more complex. (See Doron Swade, “Charles Babbage: Legacy and Legend,” http://www.computerhistory.org/core/charlesbabbage/. Retrieved 09-01-2009.) But Gibson and Sterling appear aware of this, making the anachronisms in the novel more parodic, the parallels part of its metafictional approach.
important, it evolves the focus on history as text in a different direction. Its plot and style are an excuse to engage in textual, anachronistic play, which creates continuities across centuries of literature and technology. By making these continuities appear automatic—and even the text itself, in its epilogue, as a sort of computer’s dream—Gibson and Sterling engage with issues raised by technological innovations and their emergence, particularly the sense of historical destiny posed by technology.

And there is a parallel with Barth, too, in *Difference Engine’s* literary inspiration, and its status as a response to an already existing work. One of its origin points is Disraeli’s *Sybil*, which it rewrites. Disraeli’s novel, written in 1845, is an “industrial novel about the reconciliation of the classes” (Clayton 109), from which Gibson and Sterling borrow the character of Sybil Gerard. This act is what Elizabeth Kraus calls a radical rewriting, which subverts Disraeli’s politics to argue for a now-technological meritocracy instead of an “enlightened landowning aristocracy” (Kraus, par. 2). Meant as a corrective to the politics of the Victorian era, Gibson and Sterling’s version also seizes the opportunity to deliberately alter, or profane, the idealized Sybil, “a conventional example of Victorian womanhood” (par. 9), turning another minor character in the novel into her lover and her into one of the spies whose intersections are charted by the novel (Clayton 110). Other characters, such as Mick Radley and Sybil’s father Walter, are purloined from *Sybil* and transposed into new roles and ideologies. Mick, a saintly worker in Disraeli’s text, now believes that governmental forces seeking to alter national destiny through party politics must be opposed: “the Byron men, the Babbage Men, the Industrial Radicals, they own Great Britain” (Gibson and Sterling 22). He takes Sybil under his wing as a freedom-fighting member of the “clacking confraternity” (28). It also
allows her to become initiated into a technological way of life, where the humanism of Disraeli’s novel is absent and distinctions between the human and the mechanical, what Herbert Sussmann calls “the constructed and the natural, the aircraft and the swooping birds dissolves” (Sussmann, qtd. in Kraus, par. 11).

Rewriting Sybil’s narrative, or lifting characters from it wholesale, is more a case for the novel’s literary postmodernism—its intertextuality—than its historical sort. In other words, the literary postmodern has more to do with situating the novel as an intertextual borrowing from other texts, and as a reanimated borrowing. It is textual. Historical postmodernism, however, is present in the novel in its attitude towards the function of historical accounts. While the appropriation of (in this case, public-domain) Victorian literary characters into a new story is performed by Alan Moore and Kevin O’Neill in The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen graphic novel series, who create a world in which both major and minor characters are all refugees from one of the era’s disparate literary or popular texts, many very obscure, Gibson and Sterling are working on a textual level for which hacking and the late-20th-century rise of digital sampling and word processing are an apt metaphor. This is a process which Gibson fleshes out in a 1991 interview, a type of “literary sampling” in which virtually no Victorian author Gibson and Sterling encountered remained unscathed (Fischlin, Hollinger, and Taylor, qtd. in Hellekson 81). This includes not only borrowings of character, but borrowings on a verbal level, sometimes even applied to simple matters like the description of furniture. Of this type of self-admitted “plagiarism” that also traces some of its lineage to avant-garde textual experiments10, Gibson says: “we did something really new because a great

10 This is not done with the goal of producing “nonsense poetry” like Kurt Schwitters, nor the avant-garde literary hybrids of William S. Burroughs and Brion Gysin’s cut-up method, which folded pieces of (among
deal of the intimate texture of the book derives from the fact that it’s an enormous collage of little pieces of forgotten Victorian textual material which we lifted […] [and] embedded brazenly in our text” (82). When visible, one imagines that this textual borrowing is what is behind the production of some of the novel’s more fascinating hybrids, as when Dickensian urchins are portrayed as 1990s skateboard punks, right down to a strange anachronistic, yet seemingly quite accurate, lingo: “Vinegar phiz!” (Gibson and Sterling 213). Elsewhere, the vocabulary that has evolved to depict technology is grafted to the novel’s world: “the screen’s resolution is quite modest, and the refresh-rate positively slow” (47).

Paul Alkon, putting the text in dialogue with Fredric Jameson’s definition of one of postmodernism’s hallmarks, explains that “The Difference Engine is as much alternate fiction as alternate history. Its general idioms of speech (mostly melodramatic) and plot (the same) are mock-Victorian in style: in this case what Jameson identifies as the imitation of dead styles, not […] revitalization of living modes” (Alkon 80). This is also true of the novel’s many allusions, which occasionally recall very contemporary 1980-1990s issues, such as the Iran-Contra scandal—“clandestinely arming the enemies of nations with which Britain is not officially at war” (Gibson and Sterling 108)—to female artist-activists like the Guerrilla Girls, all of which Bruce Sterling refers to as “a number of gratuitous in-joke references to our world” (qtd. in Kraus, par. 17). The ways, too, in which the novel’s coda of an alternate 1991 sentient computer is inspired by both British texts) *The Waste Land* into the Nova Trilogy of novels. Other important intertexts for Gibson and Sterling’s work are the French OuLiPo workshop of constrained writing, and the “found” poetry tradition. Both create “rules” for telling the story or composing the text, and Gibson and Sterling’s use of the concept relies heavily on the addition of electronic research and publishing technology, situating this experiment as a continuation of such projects. More important is the motivation for this compositional choice.

11 The long-distance collaboration between writers via electronic means also seems pertinent here, and makes the writing/rewriting metaphor here more potent.
Egyptology and the “pyramidal headquarters” of *Blade Runner* and other prominent SF touchstones (Alkon 80), makes present, as well as past, intertextuality an important part of the style. In addition to this, the ways in which historical difference is elided in the text are important to Alkon’s reading of Gibson and Sterling’s attitude towards historical postmodernism. He argues that the novel is “mainly parallel history very much of a piece with postmodern modes of abolishing historicity by denying essential differences between chronologically disparate times […] sameness is all” (81). Yet in his criticism of the text’s postmodernism for its paradoxical “sub-rosa recourse” to essentialist ideas about “human nature,” (81) Alkon appears to miss the point. This refers to the equation of past and present, as well as the idea of an urge for freedom to rebel against hegemony and technological monopoly. While this is a valid “read” of the novel that makes it a 1990s counterculture classic, I believe the novel is concerned much more with the computer as possessing its own kind of consciousness, or teleology, a mind of its own that makes it indistinct from humanity yet possesses a self-consciousness and desire for its accumulation of information and power. It is also equated with the narratron that composes the story, and therefore appears to dictate the novel’s outcome, making it a “power fantasy” of a sort. This power treats humans as its components, and a case of mistaken identity can be fatal. Such is the case when Mallory strides the “vast hall of towering engines,” and is told: “Hit a key-punch wrong and it’s all the difference between a clergyman and an arsonist. Many’s the poor innocent bastard ruined like that” (Gibson and Sterling 137).

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12 Although Hellekson does not make this exact connection, she does classify *Difference Engine* as teleological among her four models of alternate history fiction.
This technological power also makes humans its pawns as they attempt to master it, outthinking each other to get two mysterious boxes of punch cards, which are thought to contain a modus, or gambling algorithm. Metafictionally, the novel seems aware that much of this plot is really just an excuse for textual play, borrowings from other texts, and action and excitement. It is left unclear whether the cards actually are of use in the world of gambling, or if they contain the program for the omniscient computer/narrator. The flights to and fro, crossings and double-crossings, experienced by its characters are chaotic in design, yet also appear oddly predestined. Therefore the narrative we read seems less like the product of actors and more like lines of code in a program, or what Sterling refers to as a “narratron” studying its own origins (Alkon 85, 86), a mechanical “spinning out history” (Gibson and Sterling 4). The often chaotic plotting of the novel, according to Hellekson, involves “characters struggling with their perceptions in order to make sense of what they see” (Hellekson 83). Similarly, she argues, readers must “make sense of Difference by putting together the five [chapters, or] Iterations and the Modus and constructing a cause from the provided effect. In mixing truth and fiction, Gibson and Sterling destroy historicity and foreground the constructedness of cause and effect” (84).

In how narratron mirrors text as pastiche and tissue of quotations, the two metafictions converge to argue that the novel (the product of two authors) is a product of a postmodern world in which our history results from the forces similar to those that govern the alternate history. As Dick does with Grasshopper, Gibson and Sterling make the “making of history” a key part of their novel.

This brings up an important question: how does the novel deal with historicity? An interesting moment late in the novel, which is a key part of Hellekson’s argument, is
the one in which Lord Mallory can choose between two folders on his desk, one of which will lead to his death. Yet “that chain of events does not occur” (Gibson and Sterling 321), the narrator tells us, observing this action in programmatic terms. Similarly, the text as a product of play and systematic alteration, a “hack[ing] into nineteenth-century history” (Clayton 105), is metafictionally encoded in a historical overview of the Industrial Radical Party’s rise: “The Radicals ruled on and on, moving from triumph to triumph, shuffling the world like a deck of cards” (Gibson and Sterling 9). Elsewhere, as in Dick, the British Empire which the steam-powered computer has helped to create seems a historical inevitability: “Union, Confederacy, Republics of Texas and California—they all take a turn in British favor, until they get a bit too bold, a bit too independent, and then they’re taken down a peg. Divide and rule, dear […] If it weren’t for British diplomacy, British power, America might be all one huge nation” (32). By making the Difference Engine itself the real actor, and not the diplomacy satirized here, Gibson and Sterling are foregrounding the idea of artificial intelligence as an analog to British imperial power. Without the efforts of hackers/clackers, who might liberate information, a technocracy will cut down its foes. Like another 1990s SF hallmark, the Star Trek Borg, who proclaim “resistance is futile,” the “swift progression of Enginery [sweeps] a whole generation in its wake, like some mighty locomotive of the mind” (131). Thus, the historical actors such as Babbage, who created the first steam-computer thirty years prior to its more sophisticated offspring, are not responsible for the state of things, nor the way in which they accelerate rapidly to resemble the world of the next century. The genie has been let out of the bottle. While, according to Jay Clayton, Sussmann is “optimistic” about the novel’s embrace of technology, especially the PC, the
“decentralizing impulse” of which is can potentially “disrupt the emerging panoptic regime of modernity” (Sussmann, qtd. in Clayton 110), this reading misses the aspect of modernity’s panoptic regime being the result of the narratron/computer’s rise to power. Like the Promethean figures in Victorian science fiction, the programmers of the world, despite the clacking resistance, are creating the totalizing power that will usher in the era’s consolidations. Centralization cannot be fought, and in the world we’re shown, it is accelerating not only in speed but in centripetal force.

What historicity is appropriate for these times? Perhaps it is this accelerated pace of life in Gibson and Sterling’s 19th century that makes its people embrace Catastrophism as opposed to the then-emergent science of Uniformitarianism. Slow geological evolution suddenly seems quaint in the face of how the world is changing. Disraeli and Mallory debate this in the novel, revealing an attitude towards the past that is not entirely unlike ours:

“Truth to tell, there’s only one thing people really want to know about dinosaurs: why the damned things are all dead.”

“I thought we agreed to save that for the end.”

“Oh, yes. Makes a fine climax, that business with the great smashing comet, and the great black dust-storm wiping out all reptilian life and so forth. Very dramatic, very catastrophic. That’s what the public likes about Catastrophism, Mallory. Catastrophe feels better than this Uniformity drivel about the Earth being a thousand million years old. Tedious and boring—boring on the face of it!” (195)
The apocalyptic fervor that accompanies an examination of history also brings an emphasis on eschatology, as in this case is represented by the eschatology of a pre-Enlightenment era before the emergence of science. This means that the focus is placed upon ends as opposed to beginnings, and lineages are denied study. The world of the Difference Engine is no longer particularly interested in such questions.

Gibson and Sterling, rather, provide a different reason for latter-day readers to be interested in this alternate past. As in other parodic historical fictions, anachronism is used to deny the idea of a radical or epistemic break between past and present. It also, however, extends the device of metafiction to present what could also be seen as a form of secret history, a conspiracy as to the true, deeper origins of the computer age. Carefully researching both Victorian history and literature, then turning the results of this research into the type of “easter eggs”—hidden features in a program usually activated by a persistent user or hacker—favored by software designers, Gibson and Sterling urge the reader to do the legwork combined in decoding the history. The absence of notes or acknowledgements towards research texts, for example, is pertinent. Hiding their tracks, in a sense, makes the text into an example of the postmodern reconstructed text. It also, merging fact and fiction, borrowing and invention, past and present, creates a textual patchwork that points, via Hayden White’s formulation that “fiction and history are both constructed from language” (Hellekson 2), to the “constructed nature of all historical knowledge” (Clayton 110).

This in itself illustrates “a new way of ‘doing’ history in fiction” (McHale 222; qtd. in Clayton 110). How the novel combines science fiction and historical fiction,
resulting in a hybrid critique of our world via its imagined one, makes it a notable
departure in the alternate history genre with greater implications for literature as a whole.

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There are several reasons why I have chosen to conclude this chapter’s survey of
the postmodern alternate history genre with Michael Chabon’s *The Yiddish Policeman’s
Union* (2007). Writers, like Karen Hellekson, often devote time to detailing alternate
history’s more popular science-fictional manifestations, as do those who are interested in
a novelist’s alternate-historical foray within a larger body of work. While following the
popularization of the alternate history into the works of those like military fantasist Harry
Turtledove is a worthwhile project, I feel that the use made of the genre by Michael
Chabon is of a piece with the other texts I’ve chosen, while occupying a notable space in
popular literary fiction. At the same time, it has been honored with encomiums by both
the SF and mystery communities: the Nebula and Hugo Awards for best novel, and a
nomination for the Mystery Writers of America’s Edgar Allen Poe Award. The novel’s
simple premise—that, instead of establishing a Jewish homeland in Israel, the Jewish
Diaspora finds a temporary home in Sitka, Alaska—evidently appealed to readers, many
of whom classified it with Philip Roth’s recent (2004) alternate-history novel, *The Plot
Against America*, dealing with World War II and its affect upon Jewish-Americans from
a different angle. While providing evidence that mid-century America and the Jewish
persecution are still a rich vein for alternate history novelists, Chabon’s focus on the
unspecified time that has elapsed since the end of World War II, and the geopolitical
shakeout afterwards demonstrates the legacy of Dick. To go back a step earlier in the
evolution of postmodern historical fiction, he also shares a kinship with the project

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initiated by John Barth in my preceding chapter: intertextual inspiration. For evidence of this, I turn to an essay written by Chabon for the Library of Congress’ *Civilization* magazine, in which Chabon sketches out the genesis of his idea for the novel, prompted by his discovery of a Yiddish phrasebook and a Borges-like fantasy that it generates. The text, Uriel and Beatrice Weinrich’s *Say It in Yiddish*, becomes for Chabon the subject of a thought experiment due to its conjuring up of a historical alternative:

> At what time in the history of the world was there a place of the kind that the Weinrichs imply, a place where not only the doctors and waiters and trolley conductors spoke Yiddish, but also the airline clerks, travel agents, ferry captains, and casino employees? [Seeing the text as published] a full ten years after the founding of the country that turned its back once and for all on the Yiddish language, condemning it to watch the last of its native speakers die one by one in a headlong race for extinction with the twentieth century itself [emphasizes] the tragic dimension of the joke[.](Chabon, qtd. in Myers 584)

This makes Chabon’s inspiration via another text unique in that it treats the text like an artifact from the alternate timeline he creates in prose. This is merged with the idea of another lost strand of actual thought, that of giving exiled Jews a refugee state in Sitka, which J. Madison Davis informs us, “incredibly […] was based on an actual proposal by Harold Ickes, who was secretary of the interior in the Roosevelt administration” (Davis 11). This touches on another dimension of alternativity in the text’s history. That is to say, it crystallizes the realization that the Sitka proposal was actual, and that it was also one among many such assimilationist proposals.
Like Dick, Chabon fragmentally reveals portions of the alternate timeline that resulted in the Sitka settlement, to similar effect: rather than creating a clear point of divergence in which the alternate reality deviates from our own, the novel’s timeline is instead vague about what sense of historical destiny produced the alternate history. In Chabon’s account, Sitka begins in 1940 as a place of refuge for Jews fleeing Hitler’s Germany; this universe also alters Israel’s nationhood as the result of a lost war, turning it into a pan-Arabic landscape in which “Arab strongmen and Muslim partisans, Persians and Egyptians, socialists and nationalists and monarchists, pan-Arabists and pan-Islamists, traditionalists and the Party of Ali, have all sunk their teeth into Eretz Yisroel and worried it down to bone and gristle” (Franklin, par. 8). This removal of Israel from the world mapped by Chabon serves as an absent center that animates much of the novel’s action. William Deresiewicz, reviewing the novel for *The Nation*, makes an interpretive move that further explains how political and geographical boundaries influence the formation of Chabon’s imagined colony:

with Israel, in this universe, having lost its war of independence, the Sitka Jews, forbidden from entering the United States proper, have nowhere else to go. In their sixty years of existence, they’ve built up a complete Yiddish-speaking society on their narrow strip of gloomy coast. Since this is a hard-boiled detective story, we tend to see that society's underside: cops, gangsters, hookers and junkies [as well as invented] historical events like the Shavuos Massacre and the Synagogue Riots; Sholem-Aleykhem Park and Max Nordau Street; the Polar-Shtern Kafeteria and Bronfman U (Deresiewicz, par. 7).
The latter such events—such as the Massacre, which occurred at a restaurant and is repeatedly referenced and commemorated in the plot—are created out of the conflict between Jews and the Alaskan Tlingit, who form a second oppositional force to the establishment of a homeland. Performing an ironic reversal of ethnic stereotypes that plays with the remoteness of a dreamt-of homeland or point of exile, Chabon writes of the gap between expectations and reality for the Sitka Jews. The first settlers become known as “the Polar Bear generation,” whose ethnic dislocation is expressed parodically in their disappointment with the actual Alaska, as opposed to the one they have experienced a world away via popular culture: “disappointments [were] due to the total absence, here in the fabled north, of icebergs, polar bears, walruses, penguins, tundra, snow in vast quantities, and, above all, Eskimos. Thousands of Sitka businesses still bear bitter and fanciful names such as Walrus Drug, or Eskimo Wig and Hairpiece, or Nanook’s Tavern” (Chabon 291). Occasionally, the arbitrary nature of the Alaskan site is commented upon by Chabon’s characters, such as Landsman’s idea that “a year from now, Jews will be Africans, and this old ballroom will be filled with tea-dancing gentiles” (94-95). The impermanence of the Sitka homeland is not the only source of angst, as when Chabon depicts how the mythic image of a verdant America to be colonized is also denied the residents, replaced by the harsh reality of:

a spine of flooded mountains and fifty thousand Tlingit village-dwellers already in possession of most of the flat and usable land. Nowhere to spread out, to grow, to do anything more than crowd together […] The homesteading dreams of a million landless Jews, fanned by movies, light fiction, and informational brochures provided by the United States Department of the Interior—snuffed on
arrival. Every few years some utopian society or other would acquire a tract of
green that reminded some dreamer of a cow pasture. They would found a colony,
import livestock, pen a manifesto. And then the climate, the markets, and the
streak of doom that marbled Jewish life would work their charm. The dream farm
would languish and fail […] a mirage of the old optimism (291-292).

This alternate Jewish homeland is thus plagued by a potential utopian outcome that is
rendered impossible. It seems to present Chabon’s commentary on the contemporary state
of the Jewish diaspora, and a representation of the truism that contradicts the idea of the
inevitable historical destiny of a chosen people: “Man makes plans […] and God laughs”
(95).

Perhaps God is not the only one who laughs, but rather history itself. Just as Dick
uses the collision of Japanese and American cultures to produce a hybrid society, Chabon
also depicts the collision of Jewish and Tlingit cultural forms and traditions. The
“wrongness” of the world depicted is offered as a counterpart to our own, a way of
suggesting that our own American cultural hybrids and mutations are no less strange or
improbable. This is even truer of the Israeli experience. By using binaries between the
purported wrong and right, and the expected and actual outcomes, Chabon comments on
Diasporic existence: “The half-island they have come to love as home is being taken from
them. They are like goldfish in a bag, about to be dumped back into the big black lake of
Diaspora […] they lament the loss of […] a king who was never going to come in the
first place, even without a jacketed slug in the brainpan” (202). This jaded and skeptical
vision of the Sitka experience utilizes the hardboiled noir worldview to historical ends.
The experience of the exiled in Sitka also becomes, as in High Castle’s radically
reimaginative world, a chaotic history. When expressed metaphorically through the chessboard—central to the novel’s idea of lost messiah equally obsessed with chess and opiate self-medication—this chaos incarnates history as a series of planned but thwarted moves that do not progress to their intended destination. Towards the end of the novel, Chabon has Landsman muse over the remnants of the murder plot in equally pessimistic noir language: “Before; after. Fat; thin. Start here; finish there. Wise; happy. Chaos; order. Exile; homeland. Before, a neat diagram in a book, its grid carefully crosshatched at the black squares and annotated like a page of Talmud; after, a battered old chessboard with a Vicks inhaler at b8” (399).

All these textual strategies are used to recast a contemporary Jewish-American historical need that contrasts past and present: “the feeling that genuine Jewish life is always elsewhere: in Israel or the shtetl, among the immigrant generation or the ultra-Orthodox. Jewish culture as lived by the non-Orthodox tends to feel bland and thin even to its practitioners—the last, worn coins of a princely inheritance” (Deresiewicz, par. 6). By constructing this hybrid world, Chabon foregrounds this idea. The importance of Yiddish (itself a polyglot language) in particular is key, given the textual inspiration of *Say it in Yiddish*.

Emphasizing the forgottenness of certain corners of our own history, and the contingency of history in general, Chabon sets the Sitka settlement in contrast to the enduring Zionist dream of a separate, pure homeland created by the idea of historical destiny: “The Holy Land has never seemed more remote or unattainable than it does to a Jew of Sitka. It is on the far side of the planet, a wretched place ruled by men united only in their resolve to keep out all but a worn fistful of small-change Jews” (Chabon 17). The
phrase “small-change,” with its evocation of “two-bit hoods,” is worth paying attention to, as is the prose that surrounds this excerpt. This is a digression within Chabon’s borrowing of hard-boiled prose idioms from detective fiction, most notably Dashiell Hammett and Raymond Chandler, which impart a kind of noir bleakness to their world. Indeed, the plot of the novel largely concerns a conspiracy of Zionists to murder a zaddik, or young holy man, and cover up their alliance with Christians who want to “blow up the Dome of the Rock, rebuild the Temple, restore the sacrificial service, and seize Palestine from the Arabs” (Myers 587).

Yet the details of the plot, and protagonist Meyer Landsman’s unraveling of it, are portrayed in familiar detective thriller language, with the familiar down-on-his-luck musings of the noir antihero used to parody the historical notions of biblical prophecy being lived out and consummated in today’s world. This is a fallen one in which the zaddik is a chess- and drug addicted gay prodigal son, and a hard-bitten sense that “exile is the proper Jewish condition” (587) dominates. Landsman’s cynicism then becomes a deeper cultural and religious commentary. “Fuck what is written […] I don’t care what supposedly got promised to some sandal-wearing idiot whose claim to fame is that he was ready to cut his own son’s throat for the sake of a hare-brained idea. I don’t care about red heifers and patriarchs and locusts. A bunch of old bones in the sand” (Chabon 368). This also serves as a rejection of the historical import and cyclical view of premodern and modern time that is essential to prophecy. The belief that ancient writings are prophetic, that they contain references that will connect past and future, is cynically debunked here. It is also heavily implied that at least one of those behind the plot “never expected to believe the nonsense that [his backers] believed”:

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Where they saw the fruit of divine wishes in a newborn red heifer, he saw the product of $1 million in taxpayer dollars spent secretly on bull semen and in vitro fertilization. In the eventual burning of this little red cow, they saw the purification of all Israel and the fulfillment of a millennia-old promise; Litvak saw, at most, a necessary move in an ancient game—the survival of the Jews (345).

The red cow to be sacrificed is, indeed, an object of parody in that it shows a modern attempt (as is done somewhat differently in the case of Dick and Gibson/Sterling) to make history, as well as the true motives behind it for one of the plot’s masterminds. Like Dick’s forgers, Chabon’s characters show the intent and value behind the forging of historical significance. And this is not as far-fetched a proposal as it might appear: actual millenarians, such as the Temple Institute, have attempted to breed the red heifer, or to conduct a search for its ashes.

If the use of pulp and conspiratorial thriller tropes serves to ground the mysticism of these plot elements, a science-fiction metaphor is also briefly used to introduce them. This recalls the Jewish-American myth into which Chabon has recast such pulp characters as Superman\(^\text{13}\), as well as the alternate-history conceit itself. The alternativity of the Sitka homeland goes beyond the strictly alternate-historical dimension, and extends into the fracture of diasporic relocation. The choice of Sitka not only strips away the inevitability and logic of the choice of Palestine (as opposed to Madagascar, Uganda, or Sitka), but also specifies an otherness to the concept of neo-homeland. Chabon references

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\(^{13}\) Rocketed to Earth from his doomed planet of Krypton, Superman is seen by academics today as a figure for the Jew in exile, an ancestral memory of his young creators. Jewish mythological creatures like the Golem are also seen to have inspired comic-book descendents, and provide a major theme in Chabon’s *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay* (2001).
not only the science-fictional trope, but the erasure of boundaries, or emphasis on the
place between the dividing lines: “The street grid here on the island is still Sitka’s, ruled
and numbered, but apart from that, you are gone, sweetness: star-shot, teleported, spun
clear through the wormhole to the planet of the Jews” (101).

In addition to these stylistic moments of intertext and parody, the remoteness and
isolation of life in Sitka enables many gags and clever fusions of its indigenous culture
with that of its new inhabitants, as well as an “entirely imaginary” Yiddish that, if not
necessarily accurate, is filled with wordplay, as critics like D.G. Myers note (Myers 586).
Such fusions are both natural and unnatural, indicative of the postmodern world and this
imaginary culture’s obsession with the irreconcilable parts of its whole. Colorful
characters and their views of each other abound. One such is the “ancestral bear bulk” of
Detective Meyer Landsman’s half-native partner Berko, who wields an unusual weapon
that serves as a totem of Sitka tensions:

And he carries in his right hand the uncanniest hammer any Jew or gentile is
likely to see. It’s a replica of the one that Chief Katlian is reported to have swung
during the Russian-Tlingit war of 1804, which the Russians lost. Berko fashioned
it for the purpose of intimidating yids when he was thirteen and new to their
labyrinth […] The head is a thirty-five-pound block of meteorite iron that Hertz
Shemets dug up at an old Russian site near Yakovy. The handle was carved with a
Sears hunting knife from a forty-ounce baseball bat (Chabon 103).

In one sense, the zaniness of this portrait, as well as the novel’s premise, serve as a
response to the “What If?” question that promises to take us in unexpected directions. At
the same time, though, it (like Pynchon) includes a return to forgotten corners of history,
and manages to yoke them in a unique way. The reference to the Russian-Tlingit war, like many others here and elsewhere, encourages the reader to seek out answers about this conflict: is it real, and is its outcome the same in this history as in recorded history? Alaska, too, becomes a uniquely ripe site for the exploration of alternativity, its origins, status as a state, and ownership. From its purchase from the Russians, who might not have vacated to sell it to the Americans, to a still somewhat active secessionist fringe, Alaska is still a frontier of sorts which presents a vexed identity to the public, and seems partially “unwritten” by the historical record.

The depletion of many alternate-historical ideas, to the point at which they are no longer novel or shocking, results in a subtle parody of alternate-historical writing for Chabon, or at least one that has a sense of humor about its own pretensions. In other words, it provides metafictional commentary on alternate history, and views it from a vantage point that is aware of its audience’s expectations. Rather than making his deviation a large-scale one, such as an Axis World War II victory, Chabon makes a shift in scale that reconstructs his world from subtler intersections. This accomplishes a few different aims. First, it seeks to recover Dick’s pioneering attitude towards history: focusing on the human experiences of Jews in Alaska who can see no other world than theirs, it comments on a different sense of historical destiny for the Jewish Diaspora. Second, it marks the move towards reconstruction as opposed to reimagination, using obscure historical reference points and reconfiguring them in a new way to provide an enlightening take on the present and its history.

Chabon is responding to other currents in alternate history, and appears to be giving them an affectionate parodic nudge. For one thing, the somberness that might be
expected in an alternate history dealing with the Diaspora is altogether absent; Chabon
seizes on the possibilities of a transplant to a new homeland and uses them to craft an
alternate history that moves in a different dimension. I believe that Chabon’s position as a
late-phase author in the genre uniquely allows him to harness not only an inspiration in
pulp, detective, and alternate-history literature to explore Jewish identity, but also
reconstruct the diasporic experience in a way that allows a new understanding of it.¹⁴ Yet
this still qualifies as a serious and meaningful treatment of history and its concerns. At
the same time, the basic premise of alternate history is there, but what distinguishes
Chabon’s writing from his predecessors is how history is here only “slightly askew,
though it has enormous consequences” (Davis 11). Their enormity may not be seen on
the world-historical scale, but is present in the experiences of his characters. This, again,
represents a return to the exemplary strategies employed by Dick.

The question remains, however, of how to contextualize Yiddish Policeman’s
Union in the wake of the other texts. What does its popularity mean for the status of
alternate-history fiction early in the 21st century? Its methods and purposes indicate a
look to the past, first-wave postmodern fiction, but also serve as a response to the
possible exhaustion of the genre. The result is a use of its conventions that goes deeper in
its recasting. The specificity of focus, which comprises its alternate history, is unlike
High Castle and Difference Engine in that it has found a new focus for the alternative in
its history, and ways of expressing it. It turns its lens to an attempt to “make history” or,
perhaps, restore it to its natural state. Its world is one of overlapping narratives: the
Biblical, the Jewish ancestral, the Alaskan, the Zionist. All are exposed as contingent;

¹⁴ A similar function is portrayed by one of the text’s possible inspirations, Ben Katchor’s graphic novel
therefore, Chabon has created not just an alternate timeline but also a crossroads of contingencies. This is what makes it a culmination of the alternate-historical, and an extension of Dick’s alternate history. Its engagement with history ranges wider.

Ultimately, despite its reconstructive status, The Yiddish Policemen’s Union does not offer the possibility of reconstruction for its Diaspora in the way that, for instance, a pan-African reintegration is crucial to Ishmael Reed’s Mumbo Jumbo. At the same time, however, its usage of lost history in its reimaginative strategy does connect it to the aims of reconstruction. It then becomes an update of High Castle’s project. It is a text about the hopes and dreams of a people, and by presenting another possible alternate world that does not fully realize these hopes, engages in dialogue with actual history. Like Dick, Chabon interrogates the idea that alternate historical fiction is used to create a better possible world, or a historical nightmare. Seeing our history depicted through the distorted alternate lens radically defamiliarizes it.

* These examples of the alternate history illustrate not only separate uses to which it may be put, but its most relevant influences outside of the SF origins of the genre. Applying the model of postmodernism to the alternate history allows for several theoretical moves to be made, which characterize and specify the way history is treated in the narrative. Hellekson categorizes the types of alternate-historical narratives that exist, and her categorizations can apply to other kinds of postmodern historical fiction. I propose the creation of new definitions that are applicable to a wider range of literature, thus illustrating what methods utilized by alternate-historical fiction have a ripple effect upon the larger body of literature that I am studying in this dissertation. Broadly, the
types of historical engagement are chaotic/random, teleological, and anachronistic/asynchronous. The first and the last may overlap; the second stands by itself but may also use techniques associated with the third.

The chaotic, or random, model posits that historical events are made up largely by chance, and could thus have developed along other routes. Dick’s *The Man in the High Castle* foregrounds the issue of chance throughout the novel, even creating it within the text as a pathway to the realization of a better world (through the I Ching, and the hope represented by the novel-within-a-novel, *The Grasshopper Lies Heavy*). At the time of its publication, perhaps the most radical possibility of applying this model was that it gave the lie to American exceptionalism; the idea of historical or even moral-religious destiny as applying to America’s victory in WWII was contrasted by this alternate narrative. By not presenting a narrative exit to the Axis victory, but presenting a glimpse of an alternate universe to *this* alternate one, Dick uses the device to destabilize the historical model that privileges causality and coherence. By defamiliarizing our history with the narrative’s focus on prewar artifacts and their forgeries, he vexes the idea of historicity and historical significance.

While this is not necessarily an overly common way of presenting history in a novel, it is followed up on in Don DeLillo’s *Underworld*, E.L. Doctorow’s *Ragtime*, and other chaotic/synchronic 20th century historical novels. DeLillo creates a sense of electricity or even madness afoot in the related events of the Cold War, as well as detailed, otherworldly portraits of figures like J. Edgar Hoover and Lee Harvey Oswald. Doctorow, too, picks key historical figures, seemingly at random, recovering them from one kind of historicity, while creating another (see Chapter 4). While not strictly chaotic,
connecting these events in an accelerated and (metaphorically) chaotic time period allows these authors to narrativize history of the period, and offer a form of alternate history that does not strictly diverge from recorded events, but rather reconfigures them, often relying on hidden connections and aspects as presented in a focused, differently parodic form of the secret history that uses some of its techniques. This is known as counterhistory, and there is arguably a counterhistorical element latent in all three texts discussed in this chapter, one which becomes explicit in Doctorow, Reed, and DeLillo’s take on the 20th century (see Chapter 4).

The teleological model is represented in Gibson and Sterling’s *The Difference Engine*. Their ultimate point in the novel is to chart the forward motion of technological progress—as presented via a large-scale anachronism that “ports” computers, hacking, and high-tech espionage to the 19th century “platform.” The sense of destiny that the text presents in such concepts as the emergence of artificial intelligence and the power-relations model that entwines technology and empire are appropriate concerns for a future-historical SF narrative. As SF set in the possible future—or what has become a certain “yestermorrow” like Orwell’s *1984*—defamiliarizes our present by casting it as a possible future, Gibson and Sterling defamiliarize present into past. They have simply moved up certain events of progress on the historical timeline, and portraying how they might have existed amidst the backdrop of British Empire and its growth. This draws a parallel between technologically advanced multi-national corporations and the hackers who antagonize them and the war waged in the novel by Luddites and “clackers.”

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15 These terms originate in software engineering, and thus seem appropriate to the ways Gibson and Sterling use technology, in practice and in metaphor. To “port” means to convert or translate a version of a program to a different type of hardware “platform.” It can also result in the reverse-engineering of software to run on a newer “machine,” through the process of emulation.
This model is also utilized by Chabon in *The Yiddish Policeman’s Union*, in which an alternate Jewish homeland is presented as a temporary reprieve from the Jewish condition of exile. Chabon’s refusal to make of his text a utopian alternate history—and use of an implausible rejected plan as the starting point for his narrative—makes it a late commentary on the genre itself, which uses its tropes much as it does the detective fiction conventions embedded in the text for a higher purpose. It also applies to the concept of secret history, in which an alternate teleology is presented to explain the state of things as we now know it. The secret history is often parodic, obscure, or bizarre—the Sitka homeland seems rather Pynchonesque in coming across as the historical tidbit unearthed by research. Again, a future chapter will discuss the evolution of teleological historical fiction and the alternate past it presents.

Lastly, the anachronistic or asynchronous model is present in moments of parody or yoking together of historical eras. Alternate history must have a certain explanation, related to the larger concept of the way the timeline has diverged from our own. Yet within the larger framework of the postmodern historical narrative, no such explanation is necessary; other explanations may exist for the presence of the anachronism or momentary foray into another time period. Most often, the anachronism is a move from past into future; this not only works to contradict the notion that one time period is radically distinct from another, but to parody the purported historical accuracy of other novels set in the past and woven between real events and persons. Broad or centrally-located anachronism seeks to expose others’ more subtle literary inventions as the constructed result of research. While not entwined as deeply within the alternate-history
framework as the prior two models, it still is important as a strategy for creating tension with the alternate or secret history and those eras outside of it.

Thus, the alternate history genre is a significant entry in the world of postmodern historical fiction. While not always parodic, it does vandalize the history we know, or think we know. At its best, its bold reimagining of history has forged pathways utilized by writers in the larger genre.
Chapter 3: The 1990s’ Romances of Science and Exploration: 18th Century Origins

The type of literary secret history originated by Pynchon and Barth enjoyed a revival in the 1990s. Their synchronic/diachronic split remained consistent, as secret history was again applied largely to two time periods: the 18th and 20th centuries, as discussed at length in both this chapter and Chapter 4. Their poetics are reimaginative in that they offer secret history, like Barth and the earlier Pynchon, but are distinct from those texts discussed in Chapter One because they share a unity developed from a late-20th-century perspective on advances in science, medicine, and exploration, as well as a reconstructive emphasis on subversions of fact and the recovery of American people’s history, especially that of minorities. Lost history, incorrect science, and myths both past and present motivate their focused interrogations of period. The beginning of this trend—but it is not merely a trend—is contemporaneous with Gibson and Sterling’s novel, which offer a starting point by innovating a reimagination of the 19th century that remakes its technology in the image of the 20th century’s information age, but instead constitutes a new type of metahistorical romance (as defined by Amy Elias). As in the case of alternate history itself, Gibson and Sterling’s science fiction influenced historiographic metafiction as a whole: in the texts discussed in this chapter, its collagist, defamiliarized gaze is projected onto the past. Focusing on the Enlightenment and New World’s stranger corners, this exploratory historical-romantic sensibility, I argue, represents a literary lens through which we have come to view the era.
It is perhaps impossible to explain this sensibility’s perspective on the past’s science and history (and myths) without reference to a favorite topic of postmodernist academics in the 1990s,¹ the Museum of Jurassic Technology, a small storefront curiosity shop that is part elaborate art installation and part hoax. Opening in 1989, the museum specializes in clever forgeries of historical and scientific fact, and real, strange-but-true documents, such as a series of letters which catalogue “eccentric theories, pseudo-scientific information and cosmic visions”² written to the Mount Wilson Observatory. As Susan Crane argues, the museum presents a series of exhibits which “playfully combin[e] real and imaginary natural-imaginary objects which defy expert analysis” (Crane 51). This effect “produces distortion—when not only are expectations not met, but they are also unpleasantly, disturbingly confounded” (49). Other examples of this include ways in which the exhibits, to use Peter Hill’s term, act as superfictions: information presented about the works of art will often create counterfactual stories that are as much a part of the aesthetic experience as their formal artistry.

A 1996 audio documentary on the Museum features the following conversation between its founder, David Wilson, and Lawrence Weschler, author of *Mr. Wilson’s Cabinet of Wonders*, a 1995 book that profiles the Museum:

WILSON: There are some people who, for reasons we don't entirely understand, come to the museum and in our introductory slide show begin to laugh, and laugh uproariously through the entire museum, laugh at every exhibit. We don't object

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¹ A subject of periodicals, NPR features, and science-fiction fan websites, the museum most auspiciously opens Paula Geyh’s introduction to the *Norton Anthology of Postmodern American Fiction* (New York: W.W. Norton and Co., 1997). It has become a sort of hipster-academic tourist destination, located in the vicinity of considerably more slick Los Angeles attractions in Culver City, CA.

to this, but we don't exactly understand why. On the other end of the spectrum we have people for whom the museum is a much more solemn and serious place. We remember fondly a man called John Thomas, who when he first came to the museum spent at least three hours in the back, and when he came out he leaned his head against the wall and cried inconsolably for at least three minutes. My wife went over to him, and he said that he realized that it was a museum but to him it was like a church.

WESCHLER: One day, for instance, when I was talking with David at his front desk, a visitor emerged from the maze-like alcoves stupefied. He stopped for a moment and gazed on the rotary pencil sharpener on David's desk. He stared at it, manipulated the rotor, dumbfounded. Like he'd never seen anything like it in his life. It was just an ordinary pencil sharpener. […] We feel that confusion can be a very creative state of mind. In fact, confusion can act as a vehicle to open people's minds. The hard shell of certainty can be shattered, and once that certainty is shattered, then I feel people are more open to broader influences (Weschler, par. 50-51, 54).

By providing a focused experience of carefully crafted confusion, the Museum of Jurassic Technology can then redefine its visitors’ understanding of its contents, as well as everyday objects like the pencil sharpener described in Weschler’s anecdote. It provides a reconstructive experience, its unique sensibility a bricolage of voices, objects, and temporal aura.

The distortion Crane speaks of is akin to that produced by all historiographic metafiction. The reader sets out to detect forgeries, distortions, and downright lies in the
text, and to question their purpose. But more importantly they retrace the author’s steps in researching the historical period and make unanticipated discoveries. This has become an increasingly large part of the reader’s experience in the 1990s and 2000s, and has in turn produced texts that court this sort of audience (of which Neal Stephenson is a prime example). Television, too, has exploited its possibilities. An episode in the third season of the AMC Network’s 1960s period piece *Mad Men*, for instance, focuses on the legwork conducted by an ad campaign to bring Pepsi’s first diet cola, Patio, to the masses. Viewers born after the early 1960s first assumed this was created for the show, but thanks to Wikipedia and other such resources, discovered that Patio actually did exist. Annotating the show—and looking for other such now-forgotten but seminal details from advertising and pop culture—became part of the fun and the meaning.3

Such is also true of the prodigious 1997 Enlightenment-era epic of Thomas Pynchon that marked his return to the scale of *Gravity’s Rainbow* after the shorter, 1960s-via-the-1980s-based *Vineland*. Published as the Internet was in transition from a repository of information dominated by a committed, techno-savvy few to a more communal space with sophisticated publishing technologies, Pynchon’s *Mason & Dixon* shared an audience with science fiction, computer games, and the information junkies who annotated it and other authors’ books (like Neal Stephenson’s) on the Web. Its strategies of engaging with history are common to *The Difference Engine*. The latter’s creation of steampunk (discussed in Chapter 2) recurs in Pynchon’s focus on technology and cartography, and how they anticipate or match up to late 20th-century reference points. Pynchon, however, extends it into a fixation on what might be thought of as “bad”

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science or pseudoscience: alchemy, the body’s humors, astronomy as a decidedly
earthbound practice, and early cybernetics. Often less accessible than even the most
ambitious bestselling fiction tends to be, Pynchon and the other texts discussed in this
chapter represent what I claim is a late flowering of historiographic metafiction. *Mason &
Dixon* is also exemplary of a return to the scatology and low comedy of Barth, which
draws parallels between sexual exploration or comic bawdiness and their scientific and
geographical counterparts. It, too, engages deeply with mythic America, again rewriting a
highly romanticized canon to bring the extremely peripheral—whom some would believe
to be fictional—figures of Mason and Dixon in from the margins. The novel’s
commentary on the unreliability of history is found in its acknowledgement of myth, its
recasting of history as the spinning of tall tales.

Yet *Mason & Dixon* in particular seems at times an answer to or evolution of the
Barthian and early Pynchonian project, one that clearly finds a lot that is admirable about
America’s rough-hewn and chaotic origins, as well as the exploratory spirit of Mason &
Dixon and, for instance, the latter’s contemporary stand against a slave auction and
generally progressive politics, which strike the reader as unexpected in their anticipation
of contemporary attitudes. Past and present are analogized here, as historical fact and SF-
level invention are sometimes blurred. As a result, the voice of the past narrator is
revitalized; a new kind of far-fetched and madcap historical fiction emerges that is
analogous to the mock-curatorial (but also *actually* curatorial) role played by the Museum
of Jurassic Technology. It also creates a syncretic space in which all myths and fantastic
events are equally “true,” as reflected in the *Harry Potter* novels with their unified magic,
and in Mike Mignola’s *Hellboy* comics with European and worldwide folklore.
Less self-consciously abundant and fertile is the formally ambitious *The Cattle Killing*, in which John Edgar Wideman takes the Philadelphia-as-palimpsest topos of his 1980s chronicle *Philadelphia Fire* as the premise of another historical crisis, the Yellow Fever outbreak of 1793. In the latter novel, the moment of historical crisis is the MOVE bombings, the result of a radical Afrocentric group’s clash with city officials; *The Cattle Killing* takes the 20th century former South African President Nelson Mandela’s Xhosa heritage as a starting point, applying its scope to Africans who arrived in America via slavery’s middle passage. Like Diane Glancy in *Stone Heart* (and, to some extent, Chabon), he uses the viewpoint of the marginalized to connect the novel’s sub-plots and sections, which include autobiographical meditations on writing and interactions with the past. For the first time in this study, we encounter a text that moves radically between times and places, while attempting to anchor them in an aesthetically radical poetics. This is significant to Wideman’s aims in chronicling urban and African-American experience, and creating a new historical tradition, or a new way of seeing the received tradition. Prophesy and racist pseudoscience loom large in the text, which is especially critical due to the fact that these are discourses which are—to some degree—abandoned in the present. In other words, Wideman is preoccupied with discarded narratives, and their consequences.

The journey of an itinerant preacher links his material together, as Sacajawea’s journey with Lewis and Clark in 1804-06 does in the case of Glancy’s *Stone Heart*. Both Wideman and Glancy reclaim, through experimental writing techniques, the gravity and importance of these historical figures. It is therefore crucial to their projects that they see something very much worth holding onto, or reviving through reimagination. Showing us
the historical period through their eyes becomes a project of recovering subjectivity. Glancy indeed foregrounds Sacajaewa’s innocent, wise, spiritual subjectivity in contrast to at times ridiculous-seeming but actual excerpts from the Lewis and Clark journals. As she ponders the nature of their journey and experiences ancestral memory, the explorers for whom she is supposed to serve as a noble aide-de-camp make obscure notations about subjects like cures for venereal diseases. *Stone Heart* and *The Cattle Killing* are typographically sparse and stylistically experimental where *Mason & Dixon* is dense. The former take advantage of the contrast between period writing and postmodern prose innovations, where Pynchon is more interested in creating an even more anachronistic update of Barth’s stylistic pastiche. But all these texts share a fascination with early America, and seek to write and rewrite accounts of its origins.

The metahistorical romance is extended in a new way in these texts. It is also, in Wideman’s case, a point of departure. As Amy Elias defines it in *Sublime Desire*, this genre blends a heightened emphasis on the historical and fictive with a sly awareness of how history is idealized or romanticized in more conventional historical fictions. Elias founds her categorization of the metahistorical romance on the postmodern. Key to this idea is the paradoxical, “oxymoronic” (Dekker, qtd. in Elias 5) nature of the term itself, which signals contradictory impulses towards fabulation and historiography. Yet the historical novel will always contain more of the former than the latter, however scrupulous their research, or earnest their intent. All metahistorical romances are postmodern “in the epistemological sense, for they almost always criticize, undermine [...] or try to position themselves against the precepts of Enlightenment modernity” (Elias ix). However, they have an important geneological precursor in past historical
fiction; rather than a distinct break from them, Elias posits that historiographic metafiction often recovers romantic characteristics extant in historical fiction since at least Sir Walter Scott’s conjuring of the sublime in “historical romances [where] the past is unknowable precisely because it is expired, vanished, and overridden by the forces of a new, modern paradigm” (15). This idea is extended in Elias’ formulation of how postmodern historical narrative “reverses the dominant focus of the classical historical romance genre from history to romance […] it turns from belief in empirical history to a reconsideration of the historical sublime” (xi).

All the novels which I cover in this chapter perform this very function, despite a tendency to extend it in different ways. By focusing on American origins and exploration, they reveal a search for knowledge in post-1960s fiction, which Elias shrewdly points out; rather than a mere obsession with irony, these novelists’ metafictions “search for an escape from irony into a genuine yet mature universe of belief,” representing a “strain of inquiry into the notion of origins” (46). While my own conceptualization of the postmodern historical narrative is broader than Elias’, I note that she connects it with areas of territory focused on in my other chapters: “metafictionality, achronology, use of popular culture genres, and carnivalization […] force readers to think about history in new ways” (46). In this particular subset of the metahistorical romance, novelists in the 1990s push their audience towards seeing the Age of Reason, “the birth time of late modernity” (149), from the other side: that of what modernity attempts to banish, myth. By strategically acknowledging both myth and the partiality of then-current knowledge, some of which was blatantly incorrect, the texts discussed in this chapter blur distinctions between real and unreal. They themselves are poised at times between the reimaginative
and reconstructive, but offer a marked turn towards the latter. They curate history and reshape it new directions.

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John Edgar Wideman’s 1996 *The Cattle Killing* is part of a long African-American literary tradition that explicitly foregrounds the idea of its own literary and historical ancestry. From the moment black writers reflected back upon slavery or early American origins from a contemporary vantage point, they did so with a consciousness of reconstruction or restoration to the victims of slavery and lynching, who foremost were separated from their families and homeland. But at the same time, it departs from this strict emphasis on people’s history into a deeply experimental postmodern/poststructural literary fragmentation. Yet this fragmentation is treated in reconstructive rather than reimaginative terms. Wideman takes the reconstructive project of African-American fiction (heightened in Ishmael Reed’s *Mumbo Jumbo*; see Chapter 4) and applies it in a new way to his engagement with history. *The Cattle Killing* is a highly metafictional historiography that emphasizes its author’s quest to make sense of the tragic events that create the sedimentary layers of African-American history in Philadelphia.

Rather than inventing fictional connective tissue to yoke together his events, Wideman thinks up an innovative way of linking events and characters. He creates a slippery literary voice that can move, disembodied, between speakers and consciousnesses. *The Cattle Killing* is less concerned with historical fact or its violation (though the novel “samples” actual texts, and is roughly historically accurate) than the interiority of those who inhabited the past. In this way it seems to respond to critics like bell hooks and Henry Louis Gates, whose 1990s-era questioning about African-American
literature’s tenuous relationship with postmodernism and theory urged an embrace of postmodern theory in order to “open up our understanding of African-American experience” (hooks 28). American identity is a central concern for the likes of Pynchon and Barth’s seminal, exploratory texts, and that remains an important aspect of Wideman’s. However, his focus on African-American identity requires a new style and subjectivity. In this way, Wideman can write a text that is “about” several different narratives and several histories, and thus creates the necessary form and structural innovation to do so. This makes it a metahistorical novel, in that it fuses several different chronologies over a recurrent setting for Wideman, Philadelphia. (Pittsburgh is also the setting for the prologue.) But he does so not as a celebration of history’s chaos, or ultimate unknowability; the chaos is, for African-Americans, marked by violence which precludes its celebration. However, the focus on the marginal and almost otherworldly, as well as touches of magical realism shared with Charles Johnson’s *The Middle Passage*—in which a captive African god is transported on a slave ship—make it clear that it takes some inspiration from this genre, while he encompasses multiple periods.

If the metahistorical romance tag seems a bit ill-fitting, then it makes sense that, in its stead, critics have appraised the novel as “almost a textbook example” of the principles outlined in Linda Hutcheon’s historiographic metafiction (Birat 630). I agree, but also believe that labeling it strictly with this tag is limiting. The novel is metafictional,

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4 In his 1973 book *Metahistory*, Hayden White offers a “*history of historical consciousness in nineteenth-century Europe*” (White 1) regarding the ebb and flow of “realism” that affected it. In his third section, White explains a nineteenth-century European order of things that all metahistory and historiographic metafiction deviates from: “As an art form, historical writing might be ‘lively’ and stimulating, even ‘entertaining,’ so long as the artist-historian did not presume to utilize anything other than the techniques and devices of traditional storytelling” (137).

Wideman is writing another sort of metahistory in that he does offer a history of African-American historical consciousness—which necessarily cuts across time and place—but uses fiction as a the tool to do so.
but what Wideman accomplishes with the form makes its telling of its histories take on a new shape. Birat summarizes Wideman’s aims as “a deconstruction of American history, a gradual disassembling of the discourse which made the black man an empty signifier,” with a particular emphasis on blurring the boundaries between different discourses of fiction and history (630). She notes the polarity between Wideman’s text and famous slave and emancipation narratives such as that of Frederick Douglass, in which literacy and discourse play a vital role. Following her lead, I would argue that Wideman is interested in a postmodern remixing of this narrative tradition, focusing on the tensions posed by epistemology and religion, as well as the dehumanizing racial politics of the time period, which represent an epistemological failure.

The text features multiple narrators. They have in common a spatial location, and are separated by time; Philadelphia of 1793, at the outbreak of a yellow fever epidemic, is the site for most of the novel’s action, where a nameless itinerant preacher is taken up from slavery to preach the word of God, at the behest of his master, actual historical figure George Stubbs. As in Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*, an ongoing part of Wideman’s authorial project is to treat historical suffering appropriately and to give voice to the dehumanized, while exploring the grim ironies of slavery and manumission: “Mr. Stubbs compensated the church for its expenditures upon me, gained in turn the right to work me to death” (Wideman 104). The narrator is eventually freed by Stubbs, who receives him “as a birthday gift” (115) from his father. Under Stubbs he describes learning artistic skill and having “Remade myself,” but still rests at the mercy of a “cruel god” in whose domain “one beast must devour another to survive” (104-106). Wideman’s interpolation of religious rhetoric through his narrator is rich with such ironies, especially as the
narrator refuses to renounce the spirituality of his ancestors. Thus he experiences a DuBoisian double consciousness, represented by the cracked-in-half plate bearing an abolitionist motto that is a gift from Stubbs. The narrator does not, however, have to go far back in his broken lineage to experience another form of religious belief, incarnated in the figure of in his father:

   My father was a renowned wizard. I would have been raised to succeed him.
   Molded to be worthy of assuming his mantle. My formal initiation had not yet begun. I recall only a great spotted cape, fear and respect of my father’s powers. How he could change his shape or disappear instantly. How he could be many different places at once (104).

In a sense, this father-image is crucial to the narrative strategy with which Wideman opens the text. Just as the space-mastering wizard can appear in different places, and the African spirit Nongqawuse (recipient of the prophesy that gives the novel its title) can appear in the form of an African girl orphaned in Philadelphia, Wideman draws on fiction’s power to yoke together disparate moments, spaces, and times. Moreover, by making his narrator aware of this power, as well as his own fictionality, he makes him its inheritor.

Before we meet the preacher, we encounter the first narrator, who is introduced in The Cattle Killing’s dense introductory/framing sequence, which is quite unlike the bulk of the 18th-century narrative that it precedes. In it, we meet a metafictionally aware Wideman stand-in who is composing this book while reflecting on his youth in 1960s Pittsburgh, while doubling—and occasionally slipping into the voice of—Wideman’s son in the 1990s. First, we meet the narrator, on his way to “his father’s house”: “He is not
himself. Only a character in a story someone else was writing. Why he is so sure of this would be another story, and if he paused to ruminate about other stories he’d never make it up the hill […] You are young again in this city. Eye again. Coming up, everybody called you Eye” (Wideman 3-4). He is then traced back to his father, denying his true whereabouts on a night where he has snuck out to a “party where you go to rub bellies with fine bitches and end up alone in a corner drowning in a bowl of potato chips” (4). This reminiscence of sexually charged youth is then replaced by “gunshots like virtual reality leaping from the hip-hop soundtrack of one of the tunes they dance to now […] Fire in the hole. Fire in the hole. […] Somebody’s dead. It might be you in one of those trifling juke-joint-for-a-night shacks up on the hill as you climb to where your father lives alone” (5-6). From here, Wideman boldly jumps right to the historical parallel of latter-day urban nihilism and violence, the Xhosa people’s murder of their cattle, in response to a false religious prophesy that promised their salvation: “Black boys shoot each other. Murder themselves. Shoot. Chute. Panicked cattle funneled down the killing chute […] The cattle are the people. The people are the cattle […] Xhosa killing their cattle, killing themselves, a world coming apart” (7). The homonymy between “shoot” and “chute” triggers the transition, and similar techniques exist throughout the text, fusing time and space.

This is the compositional strategy of the novel in miniature, as further clarified when Wideman’s narrator then muses, “If he could, he’d set his eighteenth-century boy walking in streets as real as these Hill streets. But he didn’t know those other streets, quiet now two hundred years […] He hears the pulse but cannot name it” (12). Another fatherly summoning prompts an answer to the novelist yearning for a response from
history’s dead voices, or at least a sounding board: “He would read to his father. Or offer to read. His father not an easy man” (14). Wideman here shares a voice with his narrator, who implores his audience to follow the difficult strands of a story that necessarily moves “Backward to go forward. Forward to go back. Yes. Please be patient with me” (54). Wideman’s uses of experimental chronology and prose style, when taken together, present a way of working out his ambivalence towards his role as a historical novelist. His solution to the problem is to inhabit his narrators’ voices and restore their humanity.

Sheri L. Hoem notes the presence of the ancestral in the novel, and argues that another similarity that Wideman’s writing has with Morrison’s is the use of the figure of the ancestor “as a means of negotiating the presence of the past” (Hoem 249). Yet she argues that the ancestor figure is not used unproblematically, as a nostalgic return to a world in which postmodernity has not impinged upon race and history. Instead, responding to New Historicists like Hayden White and Stephen Greenblatt, who tell us that “we only know the past by means of texts,” Wideman’s postmodern poetics displays “self-reflexive awareness of its own complicity in the act of re-presentation of events and personages into ‘fictional’ discourse” (250). Wideman portrays this not only through his narrators and structure, but also in the itinerant preacher’s language, which is itself enmeshed in discourse. The most important discourse is the Biblical, which is mapped onto the new world in unexpected ways. Yet just as it offers little spiritual consolation for the sufferings of slavery, it also is wholly inadequate to describe the horrors of actual life: “I can say the word plague to you and you shudder as I shuddered hearing it before I had lived through a plague. Now the word for me is merely a word” (Wideman 31). This is an ironic play on the racism which constituted 18th century epistemology. Practices like
Physiognomy were used to make inference into Africans as a race, and have been seen with historical hindsight as attempts to justify racist ideologies. The most famous example of this is the quote from Thomas Jefferson who stated he never knew any Negro who was capable of a thought other than plain narration of reality. Poets like Phillis Wheatley tested this belief, and spurred a desire to debunk their work as clearly not a product of their inferior minds. Wideman makes reference to “the African girl Phillis,” believed that “she could not possibly have learned” (184) to read or write, let alone compose original thoughts. The narrator describes his tutelage as follows: “In twelve months I’d mastered reading, writing, and sums tolerably well, had committed innumerable passages of scripture to memory, though I often had no notion of the meaning of the orphaned words I’d parroted for my tutors” (111). In this case, the suspected ignorance of the black subject prefigures a later understanding, an epistemological breakthrough that is impossible under such constraints.

Wideman makes possible an escape, an alternative way of understanding the world, through a parodic alternative creation myth, in which the narrative voice assumes a travesty of black dialect:

Sometime I looks at the sky and close my eyes I see the whole world startin over again. New day, Reverend. Clean. See a black man and a black woman and a white man and a white woman laid side by side fresh out of the oven and theys the only people God done made.

Black man he wake up first this time. Remember everything. Quick. Grab ax. Chop white man head.
Then it the first black man and he butt naked and reared over the first white woman and she butt naked too with her legs cocked wide open and that thang down there wide open [...] but the black man he got this plug of mud he sticks up in there first. [...] so ain’t gone be no more white peoples (66).

Language is power in this scenario. It is foremost an ironic reversal of the noble yet ignorant slave who sees the light of Christianity. Giving his narrator the ability to invert such a discourse of shock and rage appears as a reclamation of subjectivity; he now no longer passively receives a story but tells it, and with a difference. Wideman’s narrator, in this package, turns a passively received creation myth into an actively rewritten one; he has the subject of the discourse start making his own history, one that changes the outcome henceforth. The narration then takes on another voice that expresses mourning and tenderness. Since physical suffering escapes linguistic assessment, and as words accrue, they only lead away from the immediacy of the sought-after African girl’s battered body:

I know there will be a point when the image of those tender, bruised feet materializes. They implore me to deal with them, stir me as they did that day. Then I must choose to go on with my story or digress. Endlessly digress, because if I follow where her feet lead, I will enter her skin and then there is no end, only the maze of her in which I lose myself forever.

So I will not call the feet hers. Just feet (38).

At the same time, the threat of mortality—whether from the encroaching plague or other dangers—gives an urgency to the preacher’s story: “I can’t bear to think this single
telling is my last chance” (39). As a marginal historical figure lost in a sense to time, this urgency carries over to Wideman. But still a story is just a story, and some elements of it may very well have died with its narrator; the marginality of Wideman’s narrator is inescapable in the account, which lends its telling a greater urgency.

Hoem also sees the ancestral’s manifestation in terms of “irony,” resulting from tension between a desire to “establish relations and strengthen cultural identity” and a “resistance to essentialize that identity” (Hoem 250). As Wideman is rewriting a black historical consciousness that draws heavily on prophecy and myth, I see the best example of this irony in how the text approaches prophecies. Here, just as in Chabon’s the Yiddish Policeman’s Union (discussed in Chapter 2), prophecy is a way of looking at—of ordering—history. Birat explains: “Prophecy assumes an originating will, the intentions of which can be ‘recovered’ in the proper reading of events, making it possible to ‘see’ forward into the future […] Wideman’s black preacher, as product of the discourse of Puritanism and its 18th-century descendent […] subscribes to this epistemological distinction” (Birat 634). It allows for a cause-and-effect view of history, as opposed to one of senseless destruction. So the Xhosa, who kill their cattle as the result of a false prophecy, are equated with African-Americans: first in their appeal to an indifferent Christianity, then to a nihilistic ritual suicide spurred on by dislocation.

The preacher-narrator is not a prophet who can necessarily foresee our future, but Wideman (or rather, Wideman’s fictionalized “writer” of the metafictional text) allows him to extrapolate from time to time to present events, and allows him to possess what is often an anachronistic and highly literary interior voice. But a scientific explanation of his prophetic powers is given when we realize he suffers from epilepsy, which has long
been associated with visions or fugue states: “My African brethren believed I was
touched by something not of this world. And I was. But not in a manner anyone need fear.
The fits I suffer produce no supernatural powers, no tongue of flame. Only a brief, sweet
clarity” (Wideman 73).

Despite the rage that fuels his condemnation of the false prophecy, the narrator
has to admit that the plague it foretold has come. (Perhaps it arrived because of the cattle
killing, not in spite of it.)

Spiritually traveling back to Africa, he is allowed passage back to the homeland
of the African girl-spirit he has tracked around Philadelphia. Now he listens as she is told
that, among the Xhosa, “only those who kill their cattle will be welcomed” into a
peaceful afterlife, evoking a paralleled Christian atonement for “those who have forsaken
His ways”; however, despite this cruel trick, the truth remains that “This evil world is
dying. A new one is on its way” (146). And realizing this incarnates a vision of the
nightmare of history, doomed to repeat itself:

I found in that city of brotherly love the country of sickness and dying the African
woman’s dream foretold. And Philadelphia was a prophecy of other cities to
come. […]

Circles within circles. Expanding and contracting at once—boundless,
tight as a noose. God’s throat, belly, penis, cunt, asshole, the same black ditch.
The people an unbroken chain of sausages fed in one end and pulled out the other.
A circle without and within, the monstrous python swallowing itself, birthing its
tail (149).
So, while this is a blasphemous condemnation of the “rigid interpretation of scripture [that] relied on an equally rigid temporal, spatial, and social framework” (Birat 635), it now presents an ontology that derives strictly from the discourse of Biblical prophecy. This discourse is one from which the preacher cannot escape, even as the obscenity of the language and suggestions of future Philadelphia’s urban space hint at anachronism. There is a prophecy, a mythic vision of Ouroboros (the serpent which eats its tail), which explains history on a deeper level.

The only alternative to this soul-crushing vision of the future occurs in the novel’s leap to the 20th century, in which opposition is incarnated through the metaphor of torch-passing between crucial African and African-American figures of the 1980s and 1990s. This results in “funerals and rallies and each is a story, a celebration and mourning and letting go and gathering, different stories over and over again that are one story” (Wideman 207).

Still, the question remains of how Wideman treats the key canonical events of 18th-century African-American history in The Cattle Killing. As it evokes or “samples” texts like Olaudah Equiano’s slave narrative, does it rewrite them? By emphasizing the role of language and myth in constituting the subject’s view of the world, and its history, Wideman creates a bridge towards a new African-American identity: “In the clearing I witnessed two roads crossing. One for people like us, who worshiped at St. Matthew’s. The other a thoroughfare frequented by our ancestors, our generations yet to be born. […] Perhaps seeing the spirit road and those who traverse it meant I was on my way to join them” (76). This passage presents the narrator’s taking part in a generational historical

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5 This has itself been the subject of some controversy relating to its authenticity in the early 2000s. See Gary Younge’s article “Author Casts Shadow Over Slave Hero,” the Guardian, September 15, 2005.
consciousness, a unified African-American experience that acknowledges tragedy, prophecy, and myth (as do all the novels discussed in this chapter).

* If Wideman’s *The Cattle Killing* is a heterogeneous text that refuses to stay rooted in the same time or place for very long, it still stands as an interrogation of America’s racial past. Its choice of historical moment, portraying chaos afoot in 1793 Philadelphia, a time period that immediately postdates Revolutionary historical mythmaking, is telling. His choice of time period is notable for being left out of myth: its political unrest, Yellow Fever epidemics, and riots. Wideman’s strategy is to break apart the past and treat it as a site where (to paraphrase music critic Nick Tosches) dead voices gather. Sacajawea’s journey with Lewis and Clark in 1804-06, in contrast, is among the most heavily mythologized journeys in American popular history. It is utilized to interrogate myth and its intersections with reality in Diane Glancy’s 2003 novel *Stone Heart*. Through a different set of experimental writing techniques, though an often similar narration (which uses the second person), Glancy reclaims the gravity and importance of Sacajawea’s subjectivity in contrast to a running commentary of excerpts from the Lewis and Clark journals. Spatially, Glancy accomplishes this by dividing the page: on the right are boxed-off, closely printed extracts of the journals, sometimes chosen for their reference to Sacajawea and Otter Woman, two “wives to our interpreters” (Lewis, qtd. in Glancy 21). Their eccentricities in spelling and grammar are preserved; while this is done for accuracy, and many of the “mistakes” we perceive in them are not actual mistakes according to the era’s conventions, they still appear occasionally amusing to a present-day reader. For instance, the disparity between Lewis and Clark’s spelling of
“interpreter,” among other irregularities, seems intentionally left in by Glancy when Clark describes Sacajawea’s suffering: “The interpreters wife verry sick so much so that I move her into the back part of the covered part of the Perogue which is cool” (Clark, qtd. in Glancy 46).

But this passage would lack much of its impact were it not offset by Sacajawea’s interiority, depicted in the second-person by Glancy’s narrator, in usually short sentences with much blank space (though sometimes the journal excerpts come more than one to a page). For instance, the above passage is set alongside the following interior second-person narration, among the novel’s most poetic:

When you sleep

The animal beings nuzzle you.

But you see it is Clark.

He wants you to live.

The explorers want you to ask the Shoshoni for horses.

Now there is some connection to them.

These-men-that-take.

You walk as one of them (Glancy 46).

All three voices (considering Lewis and Clark’s as distinct; each excerpt is introduced with their bracketed name) produce meaning through juxtaposition. A textual divide makes it impossible for Lewis and Clark to know Sacajawea’s thoughts, and her concerns are usually a world apart from theirs. Lewis attempts to capture what he perceives as her very simple thought processes when he writes:
Minnetarees pursued, attacked them killed 4 men 4 women a number of boys, Sahcaghgarweah o[u]r Indian woman was one of the female prisoners taken at that time; tho’ I cannot discover that she shews any immotion of sorrow in recollecting this event, or of joy in being again restored to her native country; if she has enough to eat and a few trinkets to wear I believe she would be perfectly content anywhere (Lewis, qtd. in Glancy 66).

But Sacajawea’s voice is very different indeed: “You dream your legs are oars. You are rowing, running from the Hidatsa. It’s the ghost horses you see again. They take you from the Shoshoni. The horses are cutting you in half. You cry in a place the men cannot see” (Glancy 66). Here the dual meaning of “place” extends to the interior, and from Lewis and Clark’s epistemology to hers. Her native voice is the antithesis of the colonial, in that it presents the colonized’s reaction to a strange new influence. Glancy attempts to be as direct as possible in capturing this experience of the world, while remaining authentic to this worldview. This refers to the reconstructive purpose in the novel, as outlined by Glancy in her introduction when she states the historical facts: “Sacajawea had given birth two months before the expedition left, and was intermittently ill on the journey and often beaten by her husband. Her role in the expedition was not as the guide depicted in legend; in fact, she receives scant mention in the Lewis and Clark journals” (7). As a paratext that guides the reader about how to approach the novel, it is then significant that the “resilience and courage” (8) of Sacajaewa is the note on which Glancy ends.
Yet this is not a novel with the goal of pure historical accuracy. Literary style informs the second-person narration, and also occurs when moments of accidental poetry occur in the journal excerpts. The collision between the two represents how a 21st-century novelist must approach the source material; Glancy occupies a unique perspective in her knowledge of both Sacajawea and Lewis and Clark’s dual accounts. Looking down from atop this great divide, she could take the opportunity to create a faithful historical account of the expedition, but chooses instead to leave some mysteries intact, and to preserve their mythic character. In doing so, she protects what Don DeLillo refers to as our “unknowing” that secret history involves. This makes the novel the creation of a fiction rather than a historical narrative. Despite Glancy’s desire to do justice to the historical Sacajawea, and her stated desire to do so in fiction, it is important for a critical response not to take this purpose at face value. Yet as an exploration of myth and how it affects how we see Sacajawea today—not entirely distinct from Glancy’s statement of intent—the novel does succeed. This is what extends Stone Heart’s metahistorical romance in a new way, as Glancy’s efforts to steer clear of myth in the manuscript—before succumbing to its powerful lure—indicate:

When I wrote Sacajawea, I wanted to get rid of the myth. I was tired of the “great leader” of Lewis and Clark. It was the genius of those men that led them upriver. Sacajawea did not know. But I was going to write a practical, ground-root story about everything she did, which was not much, other than walk and carry her child. But myth began to creep back into that story. (Andrews 646).
In this interview, Glancy describes her process as a novelist, which began with a reenactment of sorts. Listening to the Lewis and Clark journals on audiotape on two trips “along different parts of the Lewis and Clark expedition,” she had experiences which she found “eerily similar” (Glancy 151). Glancy narrates her experience of traveling the Missouri and Columbia Rivers in a playful way that vexes the idea of the historical novelist conducting her research. Yet at the same time, it reincarnates the research as part of the journey, in spiritual terms. Just as the reader might ask why Glancy found it necessary to go on the journey, and its influence on her style, she explains, “It was the poetry that I picked up from the land” (Andrews 646). This process is explained as a spiritual ritual, a kind of communion with the ghosts of Native American culture that keeps them alive. Glancy explains her initiation ceremony of “baptizing” the text, while imagining a dream Sacajawea’s grandmother might have had on the occasion of her birth (Glancy 152), which involves the mythic importance of the symbol of a white beaver. The beaver does not have sharp teeth or a tail, because it does not need them for its traditional functions; rather, the beaver’s job is to go on a long journey, and it “had a stone heart because it had a long journey to walk” (41). The inspiration for this new myth comes to Glancy while on her travels:

When I began to write the book, I stopped along the Missouri River, and I washed a little bit of the river over the manuscript, and right there was a rock. I picked it up. It was the stone beaver that appears in the cover. The grandmother had a dream of a stone beaver without a tail or teeth, because her granddaughter, Sacajawea, would go places the Shoshone had not been. She would not build a dam, but she would walk a long way. […] The stone informs the whole novel.
And throughout the book, whenever she’s near death, the dream world comes in and she sees the ghost horses, she sees animals, she sees the stone beaver (Andrews 646-7).

In *Stone Heart*, myth acts as a focused version of metahistorical romance that interrogates its origins. The end result is a mythic historiographic metafiction that genealogically derives from the romance as Elias sees it.

Glancy concludes that myth cannot be kept out of the novel, despite her attempts to remain detached; communing with the earth via the stone and its myth/metaphor is the only way to perhaps understand Sacajawea’s experiences, which were themselves informed by narrative and myth. In other words, accessing the same language Sacajawea herself may have used to understand the world helps to reincarnate her consciousness. But more important is how Glancy is able to capture an incarnation of the land, what she describes as “the creative consciousness of a continent, [which] is in the land […] a containment of the voices that have crossed it. It is where I picked up Sacajawea’s voice” (Glancy 152).

It is also where Lewis and Clark’s voices originate, though they already exist textually, and therefore are not necessarily “picked up”; Sacajawea’s is created through absences in their text. Their voices have also achieved canonical status in the historic record, despite their tendency to distortion. So it is that Glancy’s narrator, moving as this voice periodically does outside of Sacajawea’s consciousness—between voices—states early on that “You know the explorers will change what you are, that you will be taken into them, that they can look past you without thinking” (14). Such is true of both their response to her and their textual record of her. Of the former, consider how they receive
her efforts at translation, which Sacajawea is aware are imperfect: “You try to translate for Lewis and Clark, but your voice is a river through a narrow canyon with sharp rocks in it. The rocks tear your words” (72). At the same time, the textual divide depends upon the irony between what is on Sacajawea’s mind and the explorers’. On the left half of the following page, Sacajawea questions the future of her family, as it too is torn apart by dual commitments: “You adopt your sister’s son. You want to stay with the Shoshoni and raise Jean Baptiste and your nephew, but you know Toussaint won’t let you” (73).

Meanwhile—on the right half—Lewis appears to be occupied with more prurient thoughts, and advances a scientific theory to which time has not been kind: “I was anxious to learn whether these people had the venereal, and made the enquiry through the interpreter and his wife; the information was that they sometimes had it but that I could not learn their remedy; they most usually die with it’s effects. This seems a strong proof that these disorders bothe ganaraehah and Louis Venerae are native disorders of America” (Lewis qtd. in Glancy 73).

Scientific discovery is thus made an object of parody in the text. While Glancy does acknowledge the explorers’ courage, she voices through Sacajawea that their understanding of the world is not only inadequate, but a scientific myth of its own. When the party reaches the Yellowstone River, a monumental rock formation which Clark christens “Pompy’s Tower […] 200 feet high and 400 paces in secumpherance” (Clark qtd. In Glancy 132) is another space for their competing narratives to collide. First, the rock serves as a discursive space, a palimpsest of glyphs to which Clark adds his own: “The nativs had ingraved on the face of this rock the figures of animals &c. near which I marked my name and the day of the month and year” (132). While each consciousness
treats the Tower with a kind of reverence, Sacajawea finds in it a double, the pillar a
“stone heart standing across the river from the cliffs […] The pillar is a mountain-lion’s
heart. Clark tells you the river cut the pillar away from the cliffs, but you know the pillar
was thrown by the spirits. […] It is called the Place-Where-the-Mountain-Lion-Dwells by
the Crow” (132). In addition to taking measurement and recording its presence in a
verifiable fashion, scientific understanding here also functions as a narrative—a story of
time and erosion that tries to give the tower a history. But the Native interpretation seems
to act outside of time. Thrown by the spirits, its ontology changes into an ahistorical one.
This is what Glancy expresses when Sacajawea marvels at Lewis’ “selestial observation.
He even writes the stars” (88).

Rather than telling the hitherto untold story of the expedition, Glancy responds to
a condition Gerald Vizenor describes as “the ruins of representation,” in which the
exposure of representation (which Linda Hutcheon proposed) is itself an “invitation [that]
uncovers traces of tribal survivance, trickster discourse, and the remanence of intransitive
shadows” (Vizenor 7). From these ruins, new literary imaginings emerge; Vizenor speaks
of a new emergence of postmodern Native American literature that delivers new ways of
telling the past’s stories, which place an emphasis on tribal/oral traditions. These reflect
to him, an “epistemological” awakening that responds to past, invalidated histories and
“cold” works of literature; he also cites Hutcheon’s understanding of how “accession to
the past in fiction and histories is through the traces” left behind in the form of documents
or other accounts (Vizenor 7-8). This serves as a parallel to what Glancy describes as a
failed effort to keep myth out of her text until she realizes its necessity. Reviving myth as
an alternative to cut-and-dry historical account allows writer and reader alike to “reach
over presence and absence to the shadows of trees, water, air, and hear stone, hide, and paper, as words have been heard forever in tribal stories” (10).

This is what makes *Stone Heart* a metahistorical romance. It must establish itself in contrast to existing accounts, while acknowledging their weaknesses and its own—it cannot “do” what they do, yet can provide an alternate view of established history. There are some alternatives among the historical accounts, or traces. On one hand stand the Lewis and Clark journal extracts, which are the closest present-day readers will get to knowing or understanding the real Sacajawea. This account, which we have already established leaves much to be desired, is the “accurate” corrective to the popular myth that treats Sacajawea as a pop-cultural Indian princess, a loving guide who directs these American heroes on their way (and into the historical-heroic canon). But beyond their differences, what these accounts have in common is that they are written, and not part of the Native American oral tradition.6 This connection, or collision, between ways of writing and thinking about experiences is one Glancy seems to hint at when her narrator writes, “If you could write, you would say, *early in the morning, the spirits are still on the earth*” (Glancy 35). This is a way of contrasting what is known—or felt—with what is written about it; it is also a sly joke that acknowledges that the gap between the historical Sacajawea(s)—those of various myths and historical accounts which borrow from myth—and the one that Glancy incarnates.

Earlier, she has Sacajawea turn a critical eye in the opposite direction, knocking written language—and Lewis and Clark’s obsessive scientific focus on “notes and drawings […] more observations, and more notes” (36)—off its epistemological perch:

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6 One ironic statement Glancy makes in her interview with Andrews is that, by listening to the written journals on tape, she absorbs them in a traditional oral way. This makes them into raw material for a future oral-into-written account.
“They come to look at the land. But they do not see the spirits. They write in their journals. But they do not know the land. They give the animals names which do not belong to them. Which do not say what they are. Which do not fit” (24). She is metafictionally aware that, as an Indian woman, “Lewis and Clark write her in their words. But they do not think why” (81). But Glancy does think why, and offers an account to challenge what has been written before, while engaging with it, working it into her tissue of quotations.

In the same way, Sacajawea’s occupation of—and flight across—multiple territories allows Glancy to make a similar strategic move in what she says about America. First is that patriarchy transcends tribes and immigrant cultures: “But it was your own Indian people, not the white men, that took you from your people. You know all men can do the same thing” (18). This insight is folded into her adoption of the point of view of those who seek to possess the land through the formation of borders and territorial purchase:

Others have come into the land. First, the French. The British. Then the Americans. […] Toussaint tells you, Napoleon Bonaparte sold the land for fifteen million dollars! Three cents an acre from Mississippi to the Rocky Mountains. What a fool! The British, Spanish, French fight over the land. None of it will belong to any of them. But to the new country, America. Toussaint tells you, you will lose too. Your land will be lost like his (18-19).

This passage serves as an overture to the start of the expedition. It effectively portrays America’s origins as heterogeneous, and is prophetic of westward expansion, the ultimate result of the journey. On setting out, Sacajawea (at her most metafictional) thinks, “Well,
here they are: one keelboat, two large pirogues, six dugouts, thirty men, to find out just what Bonaparte sold. To find out what Jefferson bought” (19). This is a modern voice that now attributes a deromanticized view of history to the historical figure. And Sacajawea’s death is the ultimate deromanticized account. After several pages of interority as she suffers from “the fever” (145), we receive (the left side of the page remaining blank) four short extracts on her death. The first is from John C. Luttig, a clerk at Fort Manuel in North Dakota: “this evening Dec 20, 1812, the wife of Charbonneau a Snake Squaw, died of a putrid fever. She was a good and best woman in the fort” (Luttig, qtd. in Glancy 146). Next is Clark’s: “1820 / Se car ja we au Dead,” (Clark, qtd. in Glancy 147); two excerpts from unknown accounts follow: “It is possible Sacajaweua died of dipththeria. It is possible Sacajawea died of syphilis” (147). This bitter and unromantic end to her life is what Glancy writes against, but at the same time, multiple possibilities for Sacajawea’s final years exist. While Glancy leaves it out of the text, there are other contested accounts of her death which support “an alternate version” of her later years resulting in an 1884 death back among the Shoshone, according to Grace Raymond Hebard’s highly romanticized 1933 novel Sacajawea (Horne 150). Perhaps Glancy excludes this for reasons of historical accuracy, but she does not argue against or seek to disprove it, either. Left up to readers to discover, the circumstances of the interpreter’s life remain open to interpretation, up until her final days. Glancy writes against existing accounts, bringing myth into her metafictional reimagining, as an alternative to recorded history and a way of exploring its contradictions.

*
The 1990s’ fascination with retelling stories of American origins reaches its peak in Pynchon’s *Mason & Dixon* (1997). In it, he reconstructs a version of history that acknowledges its status a new kind of mythmaking, yet also includes lost history that, for all its improbability, is in fact verifiable. It represents a new maturity for Pynchon’s use of historical period and marks a kind of consolidation of his literary project.

Recounting that project is first necessary. As discussed in Chapter 1, his first novel, *V.* (1963), is central to my argument that—with John Barth—he ushered in the earliest stage of satiric or picaresque historiographic metafiction. While it is often most purely reimaginative as opposed to reconstructive, *V.* finds Pynchon laying groundwork for that important shift in strategy, and can be considered an early example of the reconstructive postmodern historical novel. As discussed in Chapter 1, Pynchon and Barth are quintessential writers of the 1960s, as sociocultural changes led writers of “black humor” and then incipient postmodernism to interrogate what had long been held as truths about America and its history. *V.* ranged in scope from bohemian postwar New York City to turn-of-the-nineteenth-century Europe; Pynchon’s *The Crying of Lot 49* (1966) confined its focus to suburban California but managed to create a centuries-spanning conspiracy in this setting. Pynchon’s use of fanciful and grotesque characters and settings, as well as his fondness for connections between overdetermined symbols, reaches its apotheosis in his novel of the V-2 rocket attacks in World War II Europe, *Gravity’s Rainbow* (1973). It is perhaps best described first as a sequel/prequel to *V.* In chronological terms, we meet some of its characters both before and after their appearances in that novel, while in historical terms, it seems to realize the apocalyptic prophecies of the 20th century anticipated in *V.* After a detour taken by *Vineland* (1990)
back to post-countercultural California, Pynchon returned to large-scale ambition with *Mason & Dixon*, which focused on his most distant and sublime historical period: the pre-Revolutionary American colonies. Its sublimity draws its power from, again, myth; its history has been equated with the post-Revolutionary view of America, characterized as a time of political ferment and idealism.

*Mason & Dixon* presents an engagement with historiography in ways its predecessors do not. It chronicles the production of the Mason-Dixon Line and reveals who the men were who created it, Charles Mason and Jeremiah Dixon. First, it takes these minor historical figures—whose true stories I consider a form of lost history to be revived and reconstructed—as its heroes, and while *GR* also included historical figures, it did so as minor characters or cameos; here they are the protagonists. This reveals greater similarity with a novel like Diane Glancy’s *Stone Heart* than one would expect: in working from what we know about Mason & Dixon, and using it as a basis for some very inventive fabulation to write their many misadventures, Pynchon has a reconstructive purpose in mind despite reimaginative means. In other words, once he has proven to his readers that Mason and Dixon’s life story is going to be treated appropriately despite the many liberties he will take and the many anachronisms he will commit, Pynchon is free to attribute more concerns contemporary to the present to the explorers, allowing them to see the New World as “new” in ways that we cannot. Amy Elias writes of *MD* and *The Sot-Weed Factor* that “both recuperate an eighteenth-century context that metafictionally rebounds to the cultural politics of the present [and] are self reflexive about the First World colonial gaze” (Elias 223). Elias sees the most important aspect of the New World setting of the novel is its “projection of Desire—the desire of the Old World, worn out
and trashed by its own modern project, dreaming of innocence, youth, and possibility” (237). GR looked back (at the time) thirty years upon the mid-century high water mark of bleakness and catastrophe and found ways in which the Pavlovian Pointsman and the Nazi Blicero’s obsessions with control and destruction rebounded in contemporary America circa 1970. MD traverses several centuries to the 1767 completion of the Mason-Dixon Line not only to give a nostalgic look at natural America before it was overwhelmed by the combination of power and technology, but also to discover the point of origin of these latter: “Oedipa digs […] towards a buried world, the one that Mason and Dixon started with and then helped to blanket with power lines” (236). Doing so also goes beyond the scope of the traditional historical gaze back at American origins. Of Pynchon’s postmodern context, Rick Moody writes that it allows for a revelation of:

just the kind of truth that we often encounter in Pynchon: not simply what it means, finally, to be American—kith and kin of slaveholders and abolitionists, racists and liberals, the powerful and the powerless, the dispossessed and the rapacious, the oppressed and the oppressors—but that the boundary lines that have been surveyed to separate our American dichotomies, the boundaries of rhetoric and philosophy, are arbitrary, tentative, unwritten in human nature (Moody, par. 22).

Yet what is the difference between the Pynchon of 1997 and that of 1963, aside from the fact that the author’s oeuvre has matured to the point of encompassing more textual examples for cross-reference? The answer lies in how MD accepts the historical sublime and ultimately allows its triumph over the conspiratorial or secret view of history.
The novel is framed as an oral narrative presented by Rev. Wicks Cherrycoke, who tells Mason and Dixon’s story as a sort of periodically interrupted bedtime story to “keep the children amus’d” and out of “Juvenile Rampage” (Pynchon 6). While there are reasons in the narrative that explain Cherrycoke’s relations with Mason and Dixon, it becomes readily apparent that this story will diverge from strict factual fidelity. It is implied that perhaps Cherrycoke is able to project his consciousness where his body cannot go: “I was not there when they met,—or not in the usual Way” (14). The outrageousness of the narrative which follows is signaled by the way in which its telling begins, and the often straight-faced discourse that Mason (perhaps the more open and inquisitive of the two) and Dixon engage in amidst the paranormality they encounter.

The first of these is the Learned English Dog, or “L.E.D.” who not only “blinks” (22)—one of many anachronistic puns that parallel Barth’s and Gibson’s historical fictions—but speaks to them. Mason is eager to hear what the dog may offer them while their quest is about to commence. He asks Dixon, “Why mayn’t there be Oracles, for us, in our time? Gate-ways to Futurity? That can’t have all died with the ancient Peoples. Isn’t it worth looking ridiculous, at least to investigate this English Dog, for its obvious bearing upon Metempsychosis if nought else” (19). Metempsychosis refers to reincarnation of souls, and the Dog’s presence in the novel this early on echoes Cherrycoke’s: both act as supernatural figures and possible participants in reincarnation. The dog, too, has a fable to concoct that offers a mythic explanation for the position occupied by dogs in relation to other animals on the Great Chain of Being:

Once, the only reason that Men kept Dogs was for food. Noting that among Men no crime was quite so abhorr’d as eating the flesh of another human, Dog quickly
learn’d to act as human as possible,— and to pass this Ability on from Parents to Pups. So we know how to evoke from you, Man, one day at a time, at least enough Mercy for one more day of Life (22).

Initially, this appears to be the first of many amusing and outlandish digressions Pynchon will lead the reader on en route to his destination, but this myth’s broader resonance in an era of legal slavery, royal ownership, and other sins against human rights found intolerable centuries later is significant. It also—like many other loose ends in Pynchon’s novels—anticipates a later passage, in this case a conversation Dixon has with Lord Lepton that destabilizes the at the Age of Reason’s way of viewing itself:

“‘Great Chain of Being this, Great Chain of Being that,’— well frankly I’m the first to say jolly good,— but,— now you see you have this rather lengthy Chain, don’t you, and,—well damme, what’s it for? Eh? What’s it do? Is there something for example hanging?—dangling from its bottom end? Well! what happens if that something fails to hold on? Obviously it falls, but where, don’t you know, and,— and how far?”

“Perhaps,” Captain Dasp sibilantly entering the Game, “it is not a straight vertical line at all. Perhaps it is a Helixxx,” gesturing in the air for Lord L.’s benefit, “and wound about something,— keeping it, let us say…chain’d in? Something not part of the Great Chain itself, but fully as enormous, something that must be kept in restraint. Which we pray may be only sleeping when, throughout the Chain’s vast length, it is felt now and then…to stir.” (417-418).
Like the Dog’s discourse, the Chain hints at a supernatural, or possibly Luddite, view of the world that exists beyond the Age of Reason. But it also anticipates the structure of DNA and a globalized view of culture, both 20th-century innovations. The Enlightenment has long been a focus of postmodern theory’s genealogies of thought, and Pynchon sets MD in that era in order to recover alternate philosophical views, as seen in the above paragraph and other such musings of countercultural change, as is made clear in the Dylan-esque statement that “your type of music is changing, recall what Plato said in his ‘Republick’,—when the forms of music change, ‘tis a promise of Civil Disorder’” (260-261). A continued discussion leads to the early 1960s resonance not only of politically engaged folk, but Californian countercultural rock: “the Rock of the Oceans, the Roll of the Drums in the Night […] Surf Music!” (264). The parodic references only continue to accumulate, as when Mason and Dixon encounter George Washington on their expedition and discover his fondness for marijuana—though the historical Washington did actually cultivate hemp—and that Martha recognizes the pothead’s munchies, bringing an “enormous Tray pil’d nearly beyond their Angles of Repose with Tarts, Pop-overs, Gingerbread Figures, fried Pies, stuff’d Doughnuts” (280). Washington even makes the very Clinton-esque statement that one should avoid inhaling if prudent. Yet the America of MD also resounds with ironies, which only serve to illustrate that this may be a world very much like ours. A few pages later, Ben Franklin’s fondness for what are seen as pointless electrical experiments is mentioned, and Mason expresses the hope that “he may regain his senses” (285). Like other such references,7 this one urges the reader to

7 As in the introduction of this chapter, I again evoke Mad Men. In its first season, the Sterling Cooper agency’s top men, employed by the Nixon presidential campaign, see a hypothetical 1960 Nixon victory over Kennedy as a foregone conclusion, quite to the opposite of many of its contemporary viewers.
investigate existing accounts to perhaps find that this is not so far off from recorded history.

These classical Pynchonian asides, quirks, and countercultural riffs are all tied together by David Cowart. Writing on the technological and scientific subject matter of the novel, he is careful to note that “the fallacy of scientific rationalism” is the dominant subject of postmodernist parody, as Pynchon:

anatomizes this nation on the eve of its founding. Like other novelists and historians, he identifies a strange mix of philosophical rationalism, spiritual yearning, and economic rapacity in the American salmagundi. But uniquely he settles on the surveying of the Mason-Dixon Line as symbol of and index to the forces that would become America […] As kabbalists seek mystical significance beneath surface meanings, so does Pynchon descry in the line arrowing its way into the continent a host of portentous intimations[,] the Line that Mason and Dixon are creating has sinister implications that unfold late in the novel, especially those prophesizing what it means to America’s future (Cowart 342). Pynchon’s character Captain Zhang acts as a defamiliarizing agent when he offers his take on the Line as its completion looms: “Nothing will produce Bad History more directly nor brutally, than drawing up a Line, in particular a Right Line, the very Shape of Contempt, through the midst of a People,— to create thus a Distinction betwixt ‘em—‘tis the first stroke.—All else will follow as if predestin’d, unto War and Devastation” (Pynchon 615). In addition to the function the line played in the Civil War, Cowart notes that “the Line was perceived as dividing Calverts from Penns, Maryland from Pennsylvania, locally Protestant from [L]ocally Catholic,” while Pynchon, above and
beyond these distinctions, portrays the Line as “archetypal, emblematic of divisions the
Christian West has always construed as essential” (Cowart 355). So this makes Mason
and Dixon’s act of mapping the nation and creating the Line not only as crucial to
American myth as Lewis and Clark’s exploration, but crucial also to the nation’s
worldview.

The Line has become important to American myth, and it is worth unpacking not
only the above ways it affects how America sees itself, but also historical consciousness
generally. As the Line goes, so goes history. Not only does creating the boundary usher
its makers into the historical record, but the Line also has “aesthetic, metaphysical,
spiritual, and epistemic dimensions” (Cowart 356). These are explored throughout the
novel, which is necessarily far-reaching so as to explore these aspects of the line,
dramatizing the idea of uncharted—physical as well as philosophical—territories that it
cannot contain or bind. This makes the process of mapping unreliable and problematic,
but Pynchon addresses the problem as he chronicles the explorers’ journey. They find
more questions than answers, as space is progressively opened up. At the same time, they
are confronted with existing boundaries, and “enormous forces,” like all of the characters
in Pynchon’s preceding novels (353). One such force is slavery and the racist apparatus
that it has constructed to justify itself. In a crucial scene late in the novel, Dixon’s
idealism is challenged by the presence of slavery’s imperial force, in the person of the
“Driver’s Whip […] an evil thing, an expression of ill feeling worse than any between
Master and Slave,— the contempt of the monger of perishable goods for his Merchandise
[…] to beg for the same denial of Mercy should, one day, the rôles be revers’d” (Pynchon
696). Dixon confronts the slave-driver and “places his Fist in the way of the oncoming
Face,” then presents him with his own whip, he says, “Turn around. I’ll guess you’ve never felt this” (698).

Allessia Ricciardi attempts to pin down Pynchon’s politics in MD, which reach their height in this scene, as “a minimalist form of political commitment that may not lead to a call for action, exactly, so much as a call for attention to human suffering, that most haunting and irreducible link between past and present” (Ricciardi 1074). I agree with this assessment, and believe that the purpose it attempts to achieve is that of escaping from the mere “celebration of fragmentation of the grand narratives of postenlightenment rationality”’ (Bhabha, qtd. in Ricciardi 1074). Here Pynchon reimagines but he also reconstructs; this is his main strategy as a novelist. He is at his most serious and earnest at this moment, and in 1997 writes a plain evocation of cruelty and opposition to it that was to some degree absent from his work circa 1963. Paranoia and conspiracy are important to his early novels as they still are in this one, but they are unnecessary when other, more blatant, evidence of cruelty and domination exist.

Again, the enormous forces encountered by Mason and Dixon rebound into the present. Many twentieth century events (such as its series of genocides), which have transpired between 1963 and 1997, mark an increase in attrition that cannot be ignored by Pynchon. Gravity’s Rainbow echoed the Vietnam War’s escalation; Mason & Dixon looks backward from 20th century history to identify what has anticipated it. They also point to a larger strand in postmodern historical fiction in the 1990s, in which looking back at American origins asks important questions. These are not just about the role myth played in exceptionalism, as the postwar era began, but those about what an appropriate response might be to historical knowledge of atrocities which are an unfortunate
dominant element in these origins. As in those moments in Wideman’s *The Cattle Killing* that move towards Philadelphia’s future 1980s fire-bombings and Nelson Mandela’s Xhosa legacy, Pynchon manages to make a plea for agency and resistance within what at times seems an altogether more pessimistic work; he connects the readers of the present to the tragedies of the past and in a sense rescues Mason and Dixon from pure complicity in the colonial project, whose attorneys express a “zeal in defending Monopoly” (217) that they hope the two explorers will reciprocate. Pynchon is now writing from a point where a better understanding of the role played by monopoly in American history exists.

These separate but related elements in *MD* constitute Pynchon’s attempt at writing a new form of history that does justice to the past while also deconstructing the fallacies of the Enlightenment. It fights against Bad History (as Pynchon defines it—history that serves the masters) by creating a benign counterpart that invalidates Bad History’s power. Mapping the New World is not truly to be celebrated, as it lays the foundations for twentieth-century divisions as well as technological devastation of the land. Textually speaking, historical accounts also perform the same function: celebrating history fails to acknowledge how its mythologizing overtones might create future Bad Histories. Pynchon looks instead to a more benevolent form of myth than that used in *V.*, which allows for exploration of other dimensions of history than the hegemonic certainty urged by the “reliable” account. While not strictly a secret history in the way *V.* purports to be, *MD* is instead a telling of mythologizing/mythologized history.

This is the myth overcome by the Enlightenment, though its innovations open up new questions. Science is a subject of fascination for Pynchon, but is proven to be ultimately inadequate. If Mason and Dixon’s scientific focus on the deterministic effects
of the stars on Earth means that some things simply will not be scientifically explained, that “Earthly Certainties” are on occasion challenged by “a warning to the Astronomers, from Beyond” (Pynchon 47) or reminder that “upon some topics, the Astronomers remained innocent” (75), then it is also apparent that historical record cannot encompass the material of the New World as Pynchon has set it out. History serves a similar purpose for those who utilize it “in Interests that must ever prove base. She is too innocent, to be left within the reach of anyone in Power” (350). History is first defined by what it is not and is occasionally mislabeled: “History is not Chronology, for that is left to Lawyers,—nor is it Remembrance, for Remembrance belongs to the People. History can as little pretend to the Veracity of the one, as claim the Power of the other” (349). Quoting from the metatextual Spiritual Day-Book of Rev. Cherrycoke, Pynchon next debunks historical truth as part of the will to power, then offers an alternative way of protecting history through reimaginative escape:

She needs rather to be tended lovingly and honorably by fabulists and counterfeiters, Ballad-Mongers and Cranks of ev’ry Radius, Masters of Disguise to provide her the Costume, Toilette, and Bearing, and Speech nimble enough to keep her beyond the Desires, or even the Curiosity, of Government (350).

Naturally, Cherrycoke, and Pynchon himself, fall within the company of the fabulists and counterfeiters. Love and honor consists of historical imagination, and the recognition that (as all authors in this study have recognized) history is a literary narrative which must be acknowledged as such and in the company of other possible narratives (i.e., those we are encouraged to create through studying photographs, or other historical evidence). One
important form of narrative is the myth, which acts as a narrative forms that emerges to address cultural needs and desires. Accepting the role of the historical sublime—that which exists in literature, and myth—in this order of things means that it is the only appropriate response, and that it will keep alive the radical and disparate in America’s origins, and also keep one ear to the ground for the mysticism and yearning that is so important to the novel. This sublime is important to maintain a “ubiquity of Flow” (713) that provides care and nourishment for history, lest it be codified and forgotten, or taken at face value.

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In this chapter, I have illustrated how the preceding texts fit into a grouping of 1990s historiographic metafiction. I have done so not merely to illustrate the existence of a literary trend at the time—though Pynchon and DeLillo’s massive 1997 literary projects attracted much attention that year, and David Foster Wallace’s *Infinite Jest* the preceding year led to many comparisons with the two—but rather to show what unique characteristics postmodern fiction was developing at the time. In other words, the time period is a sort of peak for postmodern historical fiction, one in which it developed specific concerns and drew one of its originators back into its literary conversation. By drawing on the idea of a historical sublime, they do not simply introduce it as a corrective to recorded history—exposing the ways in which it is a *story*—but instead begin to work in a different direction. Instead, myth is used as the foundation for new retellings of history, ways in which fabulation might address questions about history, or address its significance in the present. All the novels discussed in this chapter present solutions to historical anxieties, working beyond the model of the metahistorical romance to create a
new model of historical myth. They present evidence of a 1990s-era generic effort to reimagine the past, while performing reconstructive aims.

Another possible companion or precursor text to Glancy and Wideman that cannot be ignored is Beloved (1987), in which Toni Morrison established a new way of writing historical fiction which, if not strictly metafictional, does stand apart from its predecessors in African-American literature about the slave experience. Inspired by a newspaper story Morrison found in her archival research for the project, Beloved not only introduces magical-realist elements as an extended metaphor for the hauntings of slavery and the scars it left on those enslaved, but also provides an experimental structure that relies heavily on interiority. Morrison’s techniques not only seek to restore humanity to the slaves and victims of racial brutality, but also provide (in the form of “rememory”) a way of utilizing time and space in ways that are truly postmodern. Time, space, and memory are reorganized through literary style here, and also crucially in Glancy and Wideman’s texts.

Space is important to Glancy’s novel in how it presents a canvas for exploration. Lewis and Clark map the uncharted territory of the Louisiana Purchase, carving out new space that they study and annotate in their journals. It is not precisely a new space for Sacajawea, as her epistemological model portrayed by Glancy does not work in linear terms. The map is not the end point, nor is it reliable. Rather, Sacajawea experiences the natural world in a cyclical manner. Images and religious myths, and even turns of phrase, reappear frequently throughout the text, and even suggest at times that Sacajawea is in a way predestined for, or pre-aware of, her sickness and ultimate fate. All this exists in stark contrast to Lewis and Clark, men who could hardly be less aware of her interiority.
Spatially, Glancy positions their text (which is also rife with “bad science” and eccentricities, and shown to be a poor account from which to infer much at all) at a remove from her second-person narration of Sacajawea. Her use of the second-person acts as a prolonged inquiry of its own status as metafiction; there is a subtle current in the voice which seems to present the idea of reimagining—or attempting to reimagine—the historical figure of Sacajawea. In this way, Sacajawea remains ultimately distant, unattainable. Glancy partly seems to parody the inscrutable Indian stereotype, but also restores to Sacajawea a depth, one that is impossible in traditional historical accounts (even when they are as positive as possible in recognizing her contribution to American exploration). As a statement on the era, Glancy urges new ways of thinking about it; as a novelist, she structures her text to take full advantage of time and space’s pliability in the historical imagination. Especially relevant to this is the mythic dimension: Glancy’s afterward (as discussed above) further extends this idea by recovering the historical sublime—depicted as a kind of myth that is impossible to exclude from Sacajawea’s story—and recasting her own authorial role as one that is part mystical oracle. At the same time, she presents herself as a chronicler of ignored history, one that Native Americans alone seem to have kept alive. If Native Americans are not interested in presenting the chronicle for a mass audience, then neither does the chronicle fulfill their needs and desires for American myth. The narrative told by Glancy (who is of Cherokee heritage) is a separate one, and its legacy may very well resist assimilation into the American canon. The same holds true of the destiny of Native Americans circa the turn of the 21st century, who still fight marginalization despite the assimilation of their narratives into revisionist mainstream history.
Wideman chronicles the marginalized as well, but in a more directly metafictional way. He is also aware of the role played by myth, and chooses also to use it as a reimaginative tool that is also reconstructive. Here, it arrives as a means to reintegrate diasporic people, geographically and historically. If Glancy traverses parts of America while listening to the Lewis and Clark journals, Wideman does not need to travel far from his home city of Philadelphia. Time and space are used to cast the city as a palimpsest, in which 18th-century is enacted beneath latter-day events, while his characters also occupy multiple territories at once, across space and time. Memories of Africa and the false prophecy of the Xhosa persist despite the Christianizing that takes place in America; Wideman’s itinerant preacher narrator occupies both positions. Elsewhere, the most famous 20th-century Xhosa, Nelson Mandela, provides a link and textual inspiration to Wideman’s author figure; he provides a redemptive closure to the novel as well as a diasporic vision of Philadelphian gang violence and urban nihilism stretching back to the earliest days of African-Americans. Like Glancy, Wideman is essentially chronicling his people’s suffering, but he takes a more difficult route to redemption. Since he has no one historical figure upon which to center his narrative—and is writing with more fundamental suspicion towards writers’ efforts to romanticize and mythologize—the end result is very much marked by anger and betrayal at the conditions that provide a master trope to his polyphony of voices, times, and places. But this provides the text with an energy, best seen in Wideman’s prologue. He grafts together his youth, that of a new generation, and his determined efforts to further develop Philadelphia beyond the contours of chronological time. The authorial speaker is aware that such efforts may not
be necessarily accurate, but that they nevertheless reflect the search for a narrative to make sense of the past and present.

Perhaps Wideman’s novel is not so much about science and exploration as it is about faith. This anticipates Pynchon’s interest in what lies beyond science, and the metaphysics opened up by it. Wideman, too, explores the effect of metaphysics on the subject, and the role played by myth when it is used to explain the present. Just as pseudoscientists sought explanation for African-American inferiority, other learned men in the colonies saw it as their purpose to bring them Christianity and therefore save their souls. In the character of the preacher, Wideman dramatizes this clash of influences, portrays through a kind of broken inner dialogue a critique of the meek Christianity imposed upon African-Americans that synchronizes with the idea of the Xhosa prophecy. All this is mythic, or metaphysical, and, therefore, part of the historical sublime. Wideman reconstructs the historical experience that does not exist in records, and even depicts himself as an author imagining it. He presents this as the only possible way to understand and process the past, and situates his novel before the solutions of emancipation and Reconstruction as a way of showing this. The crisis moment is the key to understanding the whole.

Pynchon’s *Mason & Dixon*, then, comes as a response to the conversation in which these novels are taking part. Pynchon began his career as a writer of historiographic metafiction that was most purely (re)imaginative. *V.* seeks not precisely to reconstruct or reimagine a particular era of 20th century history (as does *Gravity’s Rainbow*), but to provide a conspiratorial secret history that moves across time to explore death and destruction across World Wars and the rise of imperializing forces. This project
is one that Pynchon never entirely abandons, but by *Mason & Dixon* he has moved backwards to explore America’s origins and the role the drawing of the Mason-Dixon Line plays as a formative incident. This makes the novel’s overall project reconstructive, in that it seeks to recapture and reformulate the role played by the Line in America, as well as the overall tenor of the age.\(^8\) Through many of his authorial devices, Pynchon portrays the Age of Reason as not only the subject of parody—through “bad science” and superstition—but also one with dimensions that have hitherto been ineffable. To discover these, mapping is insufficient.

This novel presents a more mature Pynchon who has moved from a pure “secret history” to a reimaginative history with reconstructive aims. He shares with the other novelists discussed in this chapter a fascination with American origins, and the possible futures they might deliver. Pynchon in particular presents a culmination of the historical sublime as a necessary component to ways writers think about the past and are motivated to produce fiction. Poised at the turn of a century, these writers took stock of America’s past and found that its problems and possibilities paralleled those in their contemporary era.

\(^8\) In this way it strategically is akin to DeLillo’s *Underworld*, and the other novels which I discuss in Chapter 4.
Chapter 4: 20th Century Secret History Revisited: Reed, Doctorow, DeLillo

If the late 1990s offered an opportunity for novelists to return to the Age of Reason and subsequent events on that historical timeline, the era also inspired fictional meditations on the 20th century as it neared its culmination. Some, like David Foster Wallace’s *Infinite Jest* (1996), focused on contemporary concerns such as the late-nineties Zeitgeist of the information age, a focus on depression, and the addictive nature of American pastimes. Others, like Don DeLillo’s *Underworld* (1997), took the conclusion of the Cold War as a cue to explore its (whether literal or fictional) now-declassified history, much as that author had been inspired by the conspiratorial energies surrounding the Kennedy assassination’s unanswered questions in *Libra* (1988). Other nonfiction studies, such as rock critic Greil Marcus’ *Lipstick Traces: A Secret History of the 20th Century* (1989), contributed to this slow cultural boil, while keeping the idea alive in the minds of academics.¹

DeLillo’s late-century work serves as the culmination of a 20th-century secret history project on which I shall focus in this chapter. He represents the peak of a shift from secret history into *counterhistory*, a reconstructive attempt to form a competing

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¹ Marcus’ book was my first exposure to the concept of secret history, when I was a rock-obsessed teenager. It considerably broadened my cultural horizons in that it linked art movements such as Dadaism and Situationism to later 20th-century musical developments. Ambitious and often farfetched—especially when Marcus brings Medieval culture into the fray—it is nevertheless notable for what Stacy Thompson refers to in his 2004 book *Punk Productions* as a “transhistorical” reading of punk rock.

Marcus’ conception of secret history is thus necessarily obscure, a way of bringing together disparate currents of thought and cultural critique, a revisionist alternative history that is its own kind of historiographic metafiction.
historical narrative that challenges those that preexist. He has two important precursors who are also exemplary of this tradition in Ishmael Reed and E.L. Doctorow. The former is known for his energetic, stylistically innovative writing in a unique African-American counterculture tradition. He is also a key figure in this study, transitional in his shift from the pure reimaginative to the reconstructive in 20th century secret history. If their shared influence was not clear enough, Reed is directly connected to Pynchon in that he is metafictionally name-checked in *Gravity’s Rainbow* as a superior mind for tracing obscure historical conduits, such as the footprints left by secret societies: “keep in mind where those Masonic mysteries came from in the first place. (Check out Ishmael Reed. He knows more about it than you’ll ever find here.)” (Pynchon 588).

Reed’s secret history is first articulated through a return towards parody and the farcical in *Mumbo Jumbo* (1972). Reed’s story of Harlem Renaissance literature and the arts, its white patronage, and the cultural power of the mythic force referred to as the Jes’ Grew sets the stage for an analysis of what Don DeLillo has called the “American magic and dread” of the 20th century. What makes these novelists writers of historical fiction—and, to extend a step further, historiographic metafiction—is how the moment of historical crisis dominates their texts, yet is subverted. To retell and add dimensions to Jim Crow America and the ways Harlem Renaissance possibilities were thwarted by widespread racism, Reed concocts a reimaginative parody that seeks to explain the irrationality of race panic. He exposes sinister motives for the white patrons of the black arts such as museum curators and music critics, who are engrossed in a conspiracy to suppress and partition African-derived culture. They are aligned with the Knights
Templar Order and seek to advance European culture, containing the Jes’ Grew at any cost.

In *Ragtime* (1975) Doctorow provides a template for an unlikely collision of historical and pop-cultural figures that creates a sometimes parodic secret history ending in the rise of popular culture and the cult of the image, which is crucial to Jameson’s formulation of postmodern historical fiction. Taking place in early 1900s New York, the novel brings Europeans like Harry Houdini and Sigmund Freud shoulder-to-shoulder with African-Americans like Booker T. Washington and Doctorow’s fictional Coalhouse Walker, while the accelerated pace of the ragtime era will soon culminate in the First World War.

DeLillo, taking some cues from Doctorow but applying this model to the Cold War era, creates heightened and somewhat unrealistic reconstructions of historical events both probable, real, and unlikely. DeLillo’s attitude towards source material in *Libra*, his (typically playfully complex) reconstruction of the Kennedy Assassination and Oswald’s shifting allegiances, figures here in an interesting way. Reading the entire Warren Report, carefully depicting moments captured in the few extant pre-assassination photographs of Oswald, and weaving in excerpts from interviews with Oswald’s mother all seem to emphasize the reconstructive textual possibilities raised by his immersive research practices, especially for a novelist with DeLillo’s aims. It becomes clear that DeLillo does not seek to offer the historical account of the assassination, but instead to offer a meditation on the speculative energies that this cataclysmic event has unleashed.²

² This is similar in some ways to Alan Moore’s epilogue to *From Hell*, where he probes his own motivations and beliefs as to the identity of Jack the Ripper. Moore also works in a secret history which connectively links Jack the Ripper to a turn-of-the-century historical moment which includes the 1889 birth
Meanwhile, *Underworld*, a project closer in concept to that of Doctorow in *Ragtime*, creates unlikely and conspiratorial connections between twentieth century figures. Yet I wish to argue that instead of vandalizing or parodying history—despite how unlikely and odd the sparks thrown off by these juxtapositions are—DeLillo cumulatively creates an analysis of the era and its images that persist into the present day, surrounding the metaphoric core of the atomic weapon and the baseball. Walking a line between reimaginative and reconstructive, DeLillo is the author who finally formulates the postmodern reconstructive historical narrative. If historiographic metafiction begins with reimagination and ends with reconstruction, it does so because of these innovations, which begin in Pynchon and are refined in DeLillo. Pynchon’s *V.* is a large-scale, reimaginative secret history of the 20th century, which leaves out much of the events which historically occurred at the time of his writing and afterward. DeLillo focuses his lens on Cold War America using a variety of literary techniques, such as his grasp of the defamiliarized stuff of everyday late-capitalist life first refined in his 1985 novel *White Noise*. But what is new to *Libra* and *Underworld*—arising as part of America’s fascination with conspiracy and skepticism, many of which DeLillo did not need to invent—is a connective way of retelling 20th century America’s darkest corners and greatest traumas, through which the counterhistorical secret narrative emerges, which allows us to see them differently. This works as an analogic model of history and is what these writers add to historiographic metafiction as a whole, contributing to its present condition.

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of Adolf Hitler and the destiny of 20th-century catastrophe that this event foretells. See Coda for further information.
Ishmael Reed’s 1972 novel *Mumbo Jumbo* is historiographic metafiction with several unique twists. One such twist is related to how it treats its subject matter of the Harlem Renaissance and Black Arts movements. By yoking the rise of African-American art and literature in an urban context to several bizarre and parodic/satiric conspiracies, Reed manages to offer a unique explanation of the changes in African-American aesthetics in the 20th century through their historical context and several others which form a larger, yet selective, metahistorical context.

The first of Reed’s techniques is reconstructive, taking its direct inspiration from the Egyptian myth of their god of the afterlife, Osiris. Osiris’ and his wife Isis’ figures, and their “cult” (Reed 173), serve as the touchstone for the mythical “Jes Grew” cult expressed in black musical and expressive forms that combat the white, European cultural stasis: “We got reports from down here that people were doing ‘stupid sensual things,’ were in a state of ‘uncontrollable frenzy,’ were wriggling like fish, doing something called the ‘Eagle Rock’ and the ‘Sassy Bump’; were cutting a mean ‘Mooche,’ and ‘lusting after relevance’. We decoded this coon mumbo jumbo” (4). The anomalous “relevance” Reed slips in identifies the Jes Grew as a force that unites disparate peoples throughout the early 20th century. His character of the Hierophant explains: “Janitors, Pullman porters, shoeshine boys, dropouts from Harvard, musicians, jazz musicians […] dispersed. Untogether. I sent it out as a chain book” (69).

The figure of the chain book, or fragmented text, is the site where Reed maps his main literary theme onto Egyptian myth. Murdered by his brother and rival, Set, the myth proceeds to detail how Osiris’ body was cut up (like the text the Atonists seek) into 14 pieces, which were reintegrated in his resurrection. For Reed, Osiris’ murder remains
something of a mystery—and is an important touchstone in the ways the novel plays with the detective novel form—or, rather, is transformed into part of a larger mystery when the mysterious force of the Atonist church emerges. The Atonists are the ur-secret sinister society that can be traced back across historical epochs, manifesting themselves in figures such as the Knights Templar and historical agents, such as John Milton, “Atonist apologist extraordinary himself, [who] saw the coming of the minor geek and sorcerer Jesus Christ as a way of ending the cult of Osiris and Isis forever” (171), as well as condemning the pagan rites of the Jes Grew, and, by definition, African-Americans and their cultural progress:

That’s why English professors like him, he’s like their amulet, keeping niggers out of their departments and stamping out Jes Grew before it invades their careers. It is interesting that he worked for Cromwell, a man who banned theater from England and was also a hero of Sigmund Freud. Well the mud-slingers kept up the attack on Osiris, a writer Bilious Styronicus even rewriting Osirian history in a book called the *Confessions of the Black Bull God Osiris* in which he justified Set’s murder of Osiris on the grounds that Osiris made “illicit” love to Isis who, he wrote, was Set’s wife. He was awarded the Atonists’ contemporary equivalent of the Pulitzer Prize for this whopper. Others went about calling Osiris, Moloch, which translated means “nigger cow.”

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3 Richard Swope notes that the detective novel “requires a concept of time/history in which past events can be frozen in order for the detective to reconstruct those events into a teleologically driven narrative thread leading from a mystery-laden crime to resolution” (Swope 616) but that Reed subverts the tradition in the text. Reed defers closure, and chooses instead to explore the possibilities and digressions that exist as the narrative takes detours.

Well the Atonist Church becomes stronger as the years pass but a strange thing happens. The rites associated with Osiris and other pagan gods continue underground. The only remedies the Church knew was to “beat the living shit out of them.” […] They killed millions of people this way but it didn’t put an end to the dance epidemics, heresies (Reed 172).

I quote this particularly rich passage at length not just because it provides an excellent example of the ground Reed manages to cover within a single paragraph or two, but because, while it appears near the end of the text, it narrates events that are chronologically earliest, introducing the warring Atonists and Jes Grew/HooDoo forces. In its uses of anachronism and radical reconstructive fusion of time and space, it also illustrates how Reed treats history in the novel, reshaping it into a new counterhistory. Like the novelists discussed in my previous chapter, he first mythologizes it, offering the mythic as an alternative to a dominant discourse, celebrating underground/resistance movements. W. Lawrence Hogue explains that “Reed mixes […] verifiable historical figures and events with a kind of alternate mythical history [that] is pure mythology. In this non-hierarchical juxtaposition of fact and fiction, Mumbo Jumbo forces the reader to accept an improvised or ‘suspect’ truth” (Hogue 182). Or, in other words, it advances the kinds of “heresies” that Reed refers to in the above passage.

This attitude towards the truth is significant, and is a claim that is worth extending to correctly identify the novel as a historiographic metafiction. According to Richard Swope, in Mumbo Jumbo the past is “not re-constructed so as to stabilize it in the hope of locating its one ‘Truth’; rather, it is re-constructed in the sense that it is made part of the present. History, Reed suggests, need not be locked away within the rigid determination,
but rather, like Osiris, can be resurrected through infinite, communal versions” (Swope 616). Some are underground, like the followers of the Jes Grew and implied counterculture audience of the novel. Others belong to other members of a black diaspora—as foregrounded through Reed’s “chain book” metaphor; it is a chain that connects the dispersed—such as the New York African-Americans and Haitians Reed plucks from recorded 20th century history and places in his anachronistic, patchwork narrative.

The patchwork, or the collagist, sensibility that informs its content is mimicked in Mumbo Jumbo’s style. If the text reads at a frenetic clip, it seems to do so in order to keep the reader’s mind agile. It also reads as the product of a certain historical inevitability, descended from the Jes Grew, which is “seeking its words. Its text” (Reed 6). Yet the Text it seeks, as do the Atonists and those who oppose them, chiefly the detective Papa LaBas, is “not only missing but unreadable as well […] the Text’s absence questions the entire notion of textuality held by the West” that values “the authoritative interpretation” (Swope 617). The Jes Grew Text is also “regarded as an indeterminate process, rather than a determinate product” (Lock 56-57, qtd. in Swope 617). Reed makes an authoritative reading of Jes Grew, and of historical account, impossible; it is in constant motion, and any attempts to fix it in place, to contain it, are ill-fated. Similarly, readers’ attempts to fully glean a coherent, linear narrative from the text are purposely vexed.

This strategy is primarily accomplished through interruption. Historical time and literary style are both interrupted frequently in the text, and Mumbo Jumbo (starting with its title) models itself after the Jes Grew dance-cum-plague as itself disruptive and
anarchic: “People began to do the Jes Grew dance and it began to interrupt their tilling of the soil. It would hit them at all times of the day and some of them would wander through the streets talking out of their heads and making strange signs” (Reed 164). This is the expression of authentic African-American consciousness—which Reed purposely mystifies, makes “strange”—that Hinckle Von Vampton seeks to suppress and substitute with a “Brand X,” to paraphrase George Clinton on disco vs. funk. Von Vampton, a thinly-disguised caricature of Harlem Renaissance patron and (in Reed’s words) “Negrophile” Carl Van Vechten, not only seeks to continue the crusade against Jes Grew, but create a counter-discourse through means of a “Talking Android” that will, if not “dissolve it”, “remove its steam” (78). The Talking Android will make use of the mass-cultural apparatus of 1920s American capitalism, since more traditional forms of battle are of less effect in “a new age. 1920. Sword fighting only interests the kids who attend the matinees […] You must use something up-to-date to curb Jes Grew. To knock it dock it co-opt it swing it or bop it. If Jes Grew slips into the radiolas and Dictaphones all is lost” (64). This strategy of the Atonists’ includes a familiar example, which foreshadows E.L. Doctorow’s use of popular culture in *Ragtime*:

> He picks up the Aunt Jemima pancake mix box. He studies the picture. Hey . . .

> maybe the Talking Android could be a 19th-century Mammy Juddy on the plantation who would once more serve me, the slavemaster, by scolding his daughters for behaving like tomboys and prevent Jes Grew from continuing its rise. No, that’s too obvious. No, it seemed that the only 1 would be Woodrow

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5 Rickey Vincent, in *Funk: The Music, the People, and the Rhythm of the One* (New York: St. Martin’s Griffin, 1996), notes that Clinton has made reference to the novel’s importance to his numerous musical concepts and catchphrases.
Wilson . . . ! Of course he’s too black . . . hey but wait a minute. He examines the skin-lightener ads in a Race newspaper (140).

Reed’s use of the mass-culture battleground continues, and is one of his main reconstructive metaphors in capturing the 20th century as a series of historical moments. An imagined meeting between Sigmund Freud and Papa LaBas cleverly never occurs in the text, since LaBas’ entrance to his hotel in 1909 New York is literally “blocked by ass-kissers, sychophants [sic] similar to those who were to surround Hitler and Stalin later” […] The 1909 versions of [Beatles biographer and Rolling Stone writer] Albert Goldman, the “pop” expert […] who in a review of a record made by some character who calls himself Doctor John [a New Orleans blues/psychedelic rock fusion musician who began performing in the late 1960s, often using voodoo imagery and costumes in his performances] […] made some of the most scurrilous attacks on the VooDoo religion to date – I.R.” (45). This is an example of how Reed folds the past into the present through his metafictional narrative. His deadpan aside, signed with his initials, weaves together past and present, as it does the roles of Reed the novelist and cultural critic.

If such moments are largely concerned with consolidations the powers arrayed against African-American artistic traditions, Reed also seeks to reconstruct and connect using these traditions in his text. Taking inspiration from the historical significance of black cultural products, chiefly jazz, this cut-and-paste take on 20th century history relies heavily on a kind of prose locomotion that is equal parts Pynchon, Eliot, and Thelonious Monk. Hogue notes that “jazz aesthetics” are crucial in the text, citing examples from interviews conducted with Reed by Al Young: “Charlie Parker didn’t write ‘Night and Day,’ Cole Porter wrote ‘Night and Day.’ But [he] improvised on it and so that it became
something more than what it was […] Now, what I’m doing is what a painter would call a collage […] I took diverse or disparate elements and gave them some kind of organic unity” (Young qtd. in Hogue, 181).

Not only does this address Reed’s attitude towards reconfiguring recorded history as an improvisation, but also identifies the telos of the improvisation: rebuilding, while inhabiting a middle ground that resists binaries, moving “Up. Down. Any which-a-way” (Reed 139). The unity is created in the text’s energetic fusion of literary styles and reference points. Mumbo Jumbo is a lively book to read, delivering surprises such as a chart of the “U.S. Bomb Tonnage in Three Wars” (Reed 163) which interrupts the text, as do various images of African dancers, modernist sculptures, Medieval artworks, news clippings, and passages imitating telegraph messages. In this way, the text not only resembles an eccentrically curated museum6 but inhabits the “liminal space” between textbook and novel, with Reed making use of paratextual material to “force his readers to recognize how” academic citations “and their association with property, method, and merit have long proved useful for challenging and dismantling black epistemological assertions and the accumulation of property and power that such assertions threaten to produce” (McCoy 614). More important than this point, however, is how the disorienting, destabilizing effect of these citations/images creates a discourse of opposition against a kind of institutional history, while arguing for another historical model. The history of Jes Grew and those who seek to protect/destroy it is by nature a secret history. In this case, the recovery of secret history is necessary for the kind of discourse Reed’s Papa LaBas (the hero who fights against Van Vampton) wishes to create in the present: “Jes Grew is

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6 In the way it presents a textual version of the museum, and what this accomplishes in terms of historiography, see my discussion of the Museum of Jurassic Technology in the previous chapter.
life. They comfortably share a single horse like 2 knights. They will try to depress Jes Grew but it will only spring back and prosper. We will make our own future Text. A future generation of young artists will accomplish this” (Reed 204).

The novel ends with Reed stating, “Time is a pendulum. Not a river. More akin to what goes around comes around” (218). This is crucial to an understanding of his use of history in the novel. Connecting disparate times and spaces, the text plunges headlong into the past in order to build an understanding of the 20th century and what it means. Early on, Reed offers an etymological definition of the title, deriving from the Mandingo “ma-ma-gyo-mbo,” a “magician who makes the troubled spirits of ancestors go away” (7). The novel is designed to interrogate history and to recover these ancestral spirits, serving as the foundation for a new, pendulum-like movement forward in aesthetics and historical consciousness. The swing of the pendulum is the movement of a counterhistory. Reed introduces a postmodern counterhistorical writing in this text that is refined by Doctorow and DeLillo.

* E.L. Doctorow’s *Ragtime* (1975) presents a marked departure in historiographic metafiction chronicling the 20th century: a move towards a postmodern irony that is dark and by now familiar. Pynchon, in *V.*, originated this approach to the interconnected upheavals and violent episodes that birthed the era of the Great War, but the era’s history was also juxtaposed against a mid-century lost generation shaken by what had come before and unable to fully commit to the countercultural radicalism that would blossom in *V.*’s wake, and inform *Gravity’s Rainbow, Vineland,* and *Mason & Dixon*. The 20th century is a mystery in Pynchon; in Doctorow it is less inscrutable. There are certain
signposts the text works with which represent not secret history but a secret *meaning* to history: the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand; the working-class popularity of Harry Houdini’s daring escapes; the Jim Crow politics that figures important to African-American history like Booker T. Washington and Jack Johnson. A reconstruction of these pieces of the puzzle, *Ragtime* creates connections between these events that are sometimes outrageous and parodic, but not humorous so much as they are sublime speculations. Together, they form a counterhistory, a reinterrogation of the era that directly parodies how it was seen from a countercultural 1975, and offers new ways to explain and connect its recomposed sequence of events. The novel is an important precursor to DeLillo’s *Underworld*, in that it takes the space between historical events and explores it, filling in the gaps in surprising ways. This marks a vital step in reconstruction, a recompositional process that takes a step further in creating a new, oppositional narrative.

The tone of the novel requires special attention. *Ragtime* purports to follow the path taken by a New Rochelle family in the first two decades of the 20th century, first seen in the anonymous midst of immigrant families awaiting their historical destiny in America. Doctorow depicts them posing for a photograph taken by the actual photographer Jacob Riis, who captures their poverty: “At this time in history […] not daring to move, remained in the position in which they had been photographed. They waited for life to change. They waited for their transformation” (Doctorow 20). Yet at times Doctorow seems less interested in this structural motif, choosing in brief, alternating chapter to withdraw his attention from the unnamed family and towards the likes of Henry Ford, Freud, Houdini, and his own inventions, immigrant Tateh and black
pianist Coalhouse Walker. At other times, the authorial voice veers away into its own omniscient consciousness that connects and events and figures in previously unforeseen ways. Informed by historical facts while fusing them with metafiction, Doctorow creates a unique omniscient narrator’s voice that looks backward, beginning in 1906 America and following key personages and events the Ragtime age speeds along. Chapters and passages will shift in scale, interrupting the plot to digress on such turning points or harbingers of things to come as the 1912 assassination attempt upon Theodore Roosevelt: “The acrid smoke of the act still lingered in the public mind […] Guns were going off everywhere” (219). The narrator, a kind of pastiche of a historian, is crafted from a deliberately deadpan prose that captures the feeling of looking on at the era’s recorded evidence with a dry sense of horror:

One hundred miners were buried alive. One hundred children were mutilated.

There seemed to be quotas for these things. There seemed to be quotas for death by starvation. There were oil trusts and banking trusts and railroad trusts and beef trusts and steel trusts. It became fashionable to honor the poor. At palaces in New York and Chicago people gave poverty balls. Guests came dressed in rags and ate from tin plates and drank from chipped mugs […] They dined and danced while hanging carcasses of bloody beef trailed around the walls on moving pulleys. Entrails spilled on the floor. The proceeds were for charity (45-46).

Realist novelists writing in the early 20th century captured most of this sentiment, but what differentiates this passage in Ragtime from those of Sinclair, Dreiser, et al. is the

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7 One subtle but striking moment in the text in which this is accomplish occurs when the narrator takes on the role of researcher of Doctorow’s characters’ lives: “We know from Brother’s journal that the actual plan had been to make Morgan a prisoner in his own home” (311). The contradiction between finding a journal to verify historical fact yet keeping the actor unknown, or anonymous, is a metafictional device that parodies the reliability of the historian.
sense of detachment.\textsuperscript{8} There is, of course, less immediacy to these events for an audience circa post-Watergate America than for those novelists who wrote about them as they happened. Doctorow, unlike other novelists in this study, is not as interested in forging connections between past and present as he is in presenting and defining the Ragtime era as a key period that has reached its end but possessed its own manic propulsion. Analogies to periods such as the 1960s can be drawn, but \textit{Ragtime} seems intent on recapturing 1900s-1910s history as a historical course of events in its own right.

This is reflected in two significant metaphors in the text: the railroad and the player piano. The first, which opens Chapter 13, is a pastiche of a 1900s account of the development of America’s railroads: “Tracks! Tracks! It seemed to the visionaries who wrote for the popular magazines that the future lay at the end of parallel rails. There were long-distance locomotive railroads and interurban electric railroads and street railways and elevated railroads [...] the texture of an indefatigable civilization” (109). Doctorow implies that all he needs to do as a writer, in one sense, is to follow these tracks, and captures the mix of confinement and momentum of a train with its destined historical course. What again lends a sense of detached irony to the passage is the wry poke at the “visionaries” and “popular magazines” which portray history in a triumphalist fashion. The popular imagination continues to distort history on the final page of the novel, where Tateh is inspired to create what became Hal Roach’s \textit{Little Rascals} film franchise as a kind of pre-packaged nostalgic artifact that determined how subsequent generations viewed the 1900s-10s:

\textsuperscript{8} This terse, factual style also brings to mind Kurt Vonnegut’s contemporaneous writing on World War II in \textit{Slaughterhouse-Five}. 

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A bunch of children who were pals, white, black, all kinds, mischievous little urchins who would have funny adventures in their own neighborhood, a society of ragamuffins, like all of us, a gang, getting into trouble and then out again. Actually not one movie but several were made of this vision. And by that time the era of Ragtime had run out, with the heavy breath of the machine, as if history were no more than a tune on a player piano. We had fought and won the War. The anarchist Emma Goldman had been deported (369).

As one kind of history is put in its box and another is trotted out to replace it, Doctorow depicts what Fredric Jameson, in his ground-breaking analysis of the novel as an exemplary postmodern text, calls “the disappearance of the historical referent,” in which historical fiction “can no longer set out to represent the historical past; it can only ‘represent’ our ideas and stereotypes about that past (which thereby at once becomes ‘pop history’)” (Jameson 25). I agree with this take on Ragtime, but also think that John G. Parks’ view should be taken into consideration. According to Parks, Doctorow’s portrait of “the loss of American innocence and the real entry of America into the twentieth century” (Parks 459) appears in the warning that the family’s little boy gives to Houdini at the end of the first chapter: “Warn the Duke” (Doctorow 11). Parks sees this warning as the expression of an impossible yearning, “which cannot be given and, hence, cannot be heeded. But […] it is a gesture of freedom and historical consciousness that needs to be made[,] a challenge to a view of history that forecloses the imagination and […] resists the temptations of myth” (Parks 459). By presenting this thwarted alternate history, Doctorow makes the rails/player piano metaphor all the more pivotal. The past, if “played back” or reconstructed by a novelist, cannot produce a new future, but only what now
seems inevitable in the present. Yet new reflections upon the past can emerge, and
Doctorow’s reconstruction accomplishes this.

This is achieved through what Geoffrey Galt Harpham, predating Jameson’s
analysis, describes in 1985 as the “extraordinary impression” Doctorow conveys that the
text is “self-generated, privileging no character and producing itself independent of any
narrator” (Harpham 88). While I do not agree with the claim about a lack of narrator, as I
have made clear above, I believe that this automatic, “player piano” aspect of the text is
crucial to a modern understanding of it. One important way that the counterhistorical is
generated in *Ragtime* is through the chance collisions of its historical figures. They
represent Doctorow at his most playful and absurd, but also create irony in their
juxtapositions, which parody the idea of historical destiny or agency. When Harry
Houdini, planning one of his famed escapes from a city’s jail, decides upon New York’s
Tombs for his next feat, he encounters the famous murderer Harry K. Thaw in the cell
“directly opposite” to his, awaiting trial; Thaw, in a “shockingly obscene manner,”
exposes himself to and taunts Houdini, who immediately decides “to tell no one of this
strange confrontation” (Doctorow 33-34). This is linked to a class anxiety Houdini feels
towards those of the upper classes, who, unlike the working-class spectators who cheer
him on, “broke through the pretense of his life and made him feel foolish” (34). The
meeting between Thaw and Houdini is presented as a self-generated clash of forces that
are found occupying the same state. But this clash will remain absent from recorded
history, as a novelist who seeks to chronicle historical truth goes unrecognized: Just
before this chance encounter, Doctorow’s narrator relates a solitary portrait taking place
in the same historical moment:
“Coincidentally this was the time in our history when the morose novelist
Theodore Dreiser was suffering terribly from the bad reviews and negligible sales
of his first book, *Sister Carrie*. Dreiser was out of work, broke, and too ashamed
to see anyone […] One day he decided his chair was facing in the wrong direction
[…] He made a complete circle and still he could not find the proper alignment
for the chair. The light faded on the dirty window of the furnished room. Through
the night Dreiser turned his chair seeking the proper alignment” (30).

Dreiser will find his proper *historical* alignment in terms of influence and recognition
from the literary and historical canon, but it will not come until this era has ended. Yet
his inclusion in the narrative of *Ragtime* clues readers into the fact that Doctorow thinks
his cultural and political alignment is in fact correct. The “coincidentally” which begins
this passage reads in one sense as a kind of magnetic pull that the narrator experiences, a
self-generating urge to chronicle Dreiser’s position as he does Houdini’s and Thaw’s, but
it also speaks to the larger organization of the text, which Doctorow’s narrator is aware
of: “Thus did the artist point his life along lines of flow of American energy” (153).

Occasionally, Doctorow allows the ragtime era’s fascination with fads and what
we today refer to as cultural memes⁹ dictate the flow of the text. Egyptology and its
connection to popular culture is an example of a meme that appears in *Ragtime*. Again
repeating the “at this time in our history” phrase the narrator explains how “images of
ancient Egypt were stamped on everybody’s mind” (177), including J.P. Morgan’s, who
engages in philosophical dialogue with Henry Ford, who in turn famously observed that

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⁹ Coined by Richard Dawkins in 1976’s *The Selfish Gene*, the meme points to self-replicating cultural ideas
that might spread independently. The 2000s saw a boom in reference to the meme, largely related to its
existence on the Internet, where link-sharing and simultaneous seizure of a theory, “buzzword,” concept, or
parody by online communities dramatizes the spread of memes.
history is bunk, but nevertheless then (seeking a connection with history) goes on an mystic pilgrimage seeking immortality in Egypt, finally dying as “he dreamed of an ancient life” (359) that transcends his own era. As Ford’s Model T, when vandalized, sets off the escalating racial incidents in Coalhouse Walker’s strand of the narrative, Morgan’s fate echoes with the Archduke’s when, two pages later, Franz Ferdinand dies and World War I begins. At other points in Ragtime, this web of connections and its textual energy takes on a more overtly farcical character, as when Houdini earlier meets the ill-fated Ferdinand: “he gazed at Houdini with stupid, heavy-lidded eyes […] He congratulated him on the invention of the aeroplane” (119). It is as if Ferdinand’s complacent ignorance of history will make him a victim. Unlike Ferdinand, Walker’s refusal to capitulate to the politics of Jim Crow (while occupying Morgan’s mansion) leads to his death at the hands of history. These connected incidents dramatize what the young boy sees as how the world “composed and recomposed itself constantly in an endless process of dissatisfaction” (135). Rather than attempting to present an absolute, linear narrative of progress, Ragtime depicts this compositional unrest. It does so with a kind of purported accuracy, but on its own terms.

Doctorow’s essay, “False Documents,” is crucial to understanding this point. In the essay, Doctorow writes, “There is no history except as it is composed […] That is why history has to be written and rewritten from one generation to another. The art of composition can never end” (Doctorow 229). He also elides the distinction between factual historical accounts and fictionalized ones, merging one into the other: “Facts are the images of history, just as images are the data of fiction” (229), reaching the conclusion that “there is no fiction or nonfiction as we commonly understand the
distinction: there is only narrative” (231). Ragtime finds Doctorow putting these ideas into practice by composing his own idiosyncratic history. As Parks concludes from this essay, the novel’s “pastiche quality tends to challenge conventional notions of plot. Its idiosyncratic blending of fact and fiction intends to challenge the privileged status of historical discourse” (Parks 458). I agree, and also believe that the novel represents a transitional point in the historical/compositional process due to its change in attitude regarding invention. When his narrator represents the ideologies under which historical accounts are formed by pairing J.P. Morgan’s financial power—which causes American myth to bestow the title of “classic American Hero” upon him—with Ford’s positivist “lust for order as imperial as his own” (Doctorow 158), Doctorow aligns Ford’s denial of history up until the present as part of the oppressive (and imperialistic) textual structure of historical inevitability that Ragtime fights against. Much like the railway lines, the player piano, and those who sing their praises, and the marching troops of the incipient World War, Ford and Morgan are aligned with the momentum of 1910s history. This unsettling drive works at home as it does abroad: “Across America sex and death were barely distinguishable” (5). The end of the novel illustrates how an ideologically oriented type of composition wins out in the end, which privileges certain ideas and values over others.

This is where the reimaginative comes into play. Doctorow departs from the historical record, or cuts and pastes its events into a new sense of textual play, but this formation differs from previous novels in this study in that it refines reconstruction: I offer instead the idea of recomposition. The recomposed narrative is ideologically aligned with a counterhistory; in this case, it too is refined from Reed’s wild take on an era of his
own, with reconstructive leaps to other eras. Taking away the privilege of past compositions of history, Doctorow instead offers his own generation’s new counter-composition, and celebrates the possibilities of doing so. The recompositional process is, however, also reconstructive due to what it recovers—for Doctorow, a people’s history—and this framework is greatly expanded upon in the mid-to-late 20th century history Don DeLillo writes in the 1980s and 1990s.

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Don DeLillo’s *Libra* (1988) is a novel of the Kennedy assassination, predating by a few years the moment when cultural productions about the assassination (most notably Oliver Stone’s 1991 film *JFK*) would reach a peak. The many books, films, and TV specials on the assassination often included not only elegies for the Kennedy era, or darkly humorous takes on it, but skeptically returns to the territory of the Warren Report searching for what it left out. Whether the assassination was an act of the Mafia, the CIA, Castro-era Cuba, or any number of other historical actors on whom theories are tested out, the search is never satisfied. It seeks a transcendent explanation, and a culprit or culprits beyond the lone gunman, Lee Harvey Oswald, and the oft-critiqued “magic bullet” that could have caused seven wounds on November 22, 1963. The number of “oppositional histories” (Thomas 108) that emerged in response to the report respond to what Barbie Zelizer, in her 1993 study *Covering the Body: The Kennedy Assassination, The Media, and the Shaping of Collective Memory* refers to as an “absence of closure” (Zelizer 105, qtd. in

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10 One particularly postmodernist example from this time period is the television series *The X-Files*, on which a trio of comical conspiracy theorists nicknamed “The Lone Gunmen” held secret knowledge about every historical query; the show also posited that the “Cigarette-Smoking Man”—a recurring actor—was the true assassin. Another is Alan Moore’s interconnected series of 1963 comic books, which present a detailed pastiche of the popular Marvel comics tropes at the time, while suggesting a generation’s shattered innocence when they present a thwarting of the then-imagined assassination, and use its date as the deadline for a fictional mail-in contest.
Thomas 108). This absence of closure began after the assassination, but continued with Robert Kennedy’s 1968 assassination and Watergate in the 1970s; over 2,000 books had been written about the first assassination by 1992 (Thomas 107-8), forming a kind of cottage industry. The shooting played a massive role in the 1960s’ seismic changes, and by the time punk rockers succeeded the hippie counterculture around 1978, the Dead Kennedys could choose their morbid name to evoke the time when America seemed to come undone, “the seven seconds that broke the back of the American century” (DeLillo 181).

*Libra* comes late in this timeline, but responds to the need for closure, the production of conspiracy theory, and depictions of secret history while parodying them, and using them as a point of departure for historical ruminations. DeLillo sees the assassination as surrounded by a “cloud of unknowing” (DeLillo, *Underworld* 273) that is impenetrable. Closure will always be deferred, and no explanation is sufficient. DeLillo’s character Nicholas Branch, a retired CIA analyst whose painstaking, comically endless research on the assassination parallels the author’s own, offers a contemporary take on the time of national trauma: “Let’s devote our lives to understanding this moment […] We will build theories that gleam like jade idols, intriguing systems of assumption, four-faced, graceful. We will follow the bullet trajectories backwards to the lives that occupy the shadows” (DeLillo 15). The assassination has an unreal character, one that compels such activity. Speaking of the mystical aura that surrounds the assassination is the prototypical DeLillo connection between spiritual and worldlier mysteries; this is also found in his 1985 *White Noise*, which purports to be a Tibetan Book of the Dead for contemporary Americans. But what complicates *Libra* is how it interfaces with the
historical/fictional axis of multiple studies and reconstructions of the assassination. As Mark Osteen notes, it is “framed intertextually as yet another of the [...] semifictional documents about the assassination; it is framed ‘extratextually’ [...] (for example, by the cover photo of Oswald) as a revelation of hidden truths. One of the novel’s revelations, indeed, seems to be that all history is secret history. But such a revelation is self-contradictory” (Osteen 153).

Since the concepts of reconstruction and secret history are pivotal to this study, Osteen’s usage of these terms requires further attention. First, the idea of reconstruction functions in a twofold way. DeLillo not only reconstructs plausible events leading up to the assassination, but also pulls from obscure sources and hints at what is to come in the 1960s, such as Jack Ruby’s pre-sexual-revolution strip club business and the rumor that the U.S. “had been experimenting with a substance called lysergic acid here in Japan” (DeLillo 87). Such textual signposts are sly reminders of the history that’s to come, offering a reconstruction much like others presented in this chapter: a weird history that shows how long in coming were the cultural changes to follow in the 1960s and beyond, and contributes to how we view the time period in contemporary terms. On the topic of the factual variety of reconstruction, Osteen writes that while Libra itself offers a plausible conspiracy theory of the assassination, it forces readers to “question our need for plots” (Osteen 154). This is because it is not just an extended, fleshed-out conspiracy theory, but a “theory of conspiracies” (154) that speaks to the cultural needs which produce them. Libra’s is one in which former operatives of the CIA, wishing to incite a war with Cuba, hire Oswald to attempt to shoot Kennedy. They “script a gunman out of ordinary dog-eared paper, the contents of a wallet,” but plan on his “spectacular miss”
(DeLillo 50-51). How this plan gets out of control owes a lot to Oswald’s desire to be a
vital historical actor, seeking a “moment” which “had been waiting to happen. The room
had been here since the day he was born, waiting for him, just like this, to walk in the
door” (84). This implicates Oswald as victim of the same historical longing as those who
seek closure from the assassination. While they do so as spectators seeking to make sense
of a chaotic history, he does to from the other end, as an actor well aware of his own
destiny yet witnessing his life from the detached perspective of one imagining himself as
a different kind of actor: the kind that comes “right out of a movie, or a TV play” (91),
and “feels a sort of distance” from his own suicide attempt, imagining it scored as “A
sweet death (to violins)” (153). One another level, Oswald’s actions are the result of a
desire to be “headed here from the start. Inevitable” (101). This speaks to the same
historical crisis of knowledge—and its attendant need—with which Doctorow ends
*Ragtime.*

Second, DeLillo problematizes secret history, not only in the sense of Osteen’s
above reference to the contradictory nature of history’s secret character, “foregrounding
the intrinsically public nature of the secret” (Noya 242), but also in the sense of “the
secret of the literary as a mode of truth. The secret is both theme and form, to employ a
tarnished dichotomy that the very notion of the secret undermines” (240). In other words,
DeLillo is fascinated by the connected secrets of mid-20th-century history, but distrusts
the factuality of historical narratives; therefore, presented with this crisis, he chooses

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11 Similarly, what Osteen calls the cinematic “cross-cutting” technique (Osteen 105) utilized by DeLillo in
*Libra* and especially *Underworld* seems to be influenced by Doctorow’s borrowing it from Dos Passos and
applying it to the scale of historical events. This makes these books not only historical reconstructions, but
collages comprised of carefully chosen characters and actions. Even if the cross-cutting seems at times
deliberately random or (as first seen in *Mumbo Jumbo*) disruptive, they capture vectors of action. DeLillo
raises this technique to its height in *Underworld*, which attempts to capture the widespread paranoia of the
Cold War.
literature, sidestepping the issue of reliability as a willful denial of closure. In his unpaginated author’s note which closes the novel, DeLillo writes:

This is a work of imagination. While drawing from the historical record, I’ve made no attempt to furnish factual answers to any questions raised by the assassination. Any novel about a major unresolved event would aspire to fill some of the blank spaces in the known record. To do this, I’ve altered and embellished reality, extended real people into imagined space and time, invented incidents, dialogues, and characters (DeLillo, endnote).

Therefore, the “truth” which DeLillo creates in *Libra* will not answer the questions, nor correct the actual, known historical record. At the postmodern juncture when the novel is written, such actions would be doomed to be reincorporated into the record itself. Rather, it is an investigation of why the questions arise. It also raises the possibility that “we both want to know the truth and […] invent our own” (Osteen 163). Unknowing is a productive space that leads to the proliferation of accounts, debunkings, and further speculations. More than any other in this study, *Libra* is about secret histories and why they persist.

Its counterhistorical move also extends the secret history into chaotic history. The emergence of the accidental, or contingent (that Oswald succeeds in his attempt) critiques the conspiracy theorist’s desire to explain every seemingly chance event or convergence. DeLillo has alleged conspirator David Ferrie explain the chaotic force that binds Oswald to the assassination conspiracy through one of the text’s repeated metaphors, the “third line” between fact and fiction, known and unknown:
“Think of two parallel lines,” he said. “One is the life of Lee H. Oswald. One is the conspiracy to kill the President. What bridges the space between them? What makes a connection inevitable? There is a third line. It comes out of dreams, visions, intuitions, prayers, out of the deepest levels of the self. It’s not generated by cause and effect like the other two lines. It’s a line that cuts across causality, cuts across time. It has no history we can recognize or understand. But it forces a connection” (DeLillo 339).

The failure of the CIA plot and Oswald’s complex psychology, which makes him a product of America itself, as well as the fact that, in this account, he both is and is not a patsy for schemers places an “emphasis on the role of contingency” (Willman 408) and redirects focus to Oswald as created by his circumstances. His delusions of grandeur are copious, and are only magnified when his reading on communism leads him to “names in the catalogue that made him pause with a strange contained excitement. Names that were like whispers he’d been hearing for years, men of history and revolution” (DeLillo 34). When Oswald defects to Moscow after leaving the Marine Corps, he sees his actions as significant: “He was a man in history now. Later he would print in his Historic Diary a summary of these days” (149). Even as a budding textual producer (earlier, he states it is ambition to produce short stories about contemporary American life), Oswald seeks to record his life and times in a significant way. Some of Oswald’s most metafictionally weighted interior narration occurs when he speculates about the enduring quality of the name of Francis Gary Powers, the pilot whose U-2 spy aircraft is shot down over Soviet airspace in 1960: “It occurred to Oswald that everyone called the prisoner by his full name. Once you did something notorious, they tagged you with an extra name, a middle
name that was ordinarily never used. You were officially marked, a chapter in the imagination of the state […] It already sounded historic” (198).

DeLillo creates the impression that the assassination “is a spectacle staged for public consumption” (Osteen 162), and, seeming to deliberately cover some of the same territory as *White Noise*, focuses on the heightened sense of reality images take on when transmitted by mass media. This time, they are applied to historical consciousness, providing the solution to absences posed by the Jamesonian crisis of historicity.

Arriving in America for the final third of the novel, Oswald has a premonition of the televised notoriety of his own image, which will end in his death at the hand of Jack Ruby. This occurs when Oswald and his Russian wife see themselves recorded on a department store’s TV camera: “Marina looked at them in life, then looked at the screen. She saw Lee hoist the baby on his shoulder, with people passing in the background. She turned and looked at the people, checking to see if they were the same as the ones in the window […] she was amazed every time she saw herself return” (227).

But this theme reaches its apotheosis when, reconstructing the assassination itself, DeLillo borrows heavily from the Zapruder film footage of Kennedy’s motorcade, doubling the assassin and spectator witnessing the shooting. Oswald transitions from being slightly startled that Kennedy and the First Lady are as attractive in real life as their televised images, to feeling a bizarre sense of reassurance at this fact: “The President had chestnut hair and the First Lady was radiant in a pink suit and small round hat. Lee was glad she looked so good. For her own sake. For the cameras. For the pictures that would enter the permanent record” (DeLillo 395).

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12 In that novel, Jack Gladney’s family note a kind of aura their mother’s televised image takes on—for her children, it has more attraction than the genuine article—and a set-piece surrounds the semiotics of the “Most Photographed Barn in America.”
The permanent record contains murkier corners than these images etched into national consciousness, and exploring them does not solve the questions raised by the assassination. Branch is left to pore over the “poetry of lives muddled and dripping in language” that comprises the Warren Report and all its associated documentation, ranging from “Jack Ruby’s mother’s dental chart” to “a microphotograph of three strands of Lee H. Oswald’s pubic hair”; the absurdity of the mounting pile of “baptismal records, report cards, postcards, divorce petitions, canceled checks” and other records adds up to “the megaton novel James Joyce would have written if he’d moved to Iowa City and lived to be a hundred” (181). Any attempt to reconstruct actual history from this massive amount of ephemera seems ill-fated. Yet DeLillo writes from the spaces between facts, and of the mystical uncertainties that surround them, and cannot be banished by appeals to factuality. The novel stands as a possible record of the assassination, but deviates from it into the territory of productive uncertainty. Part reimagining in its attempt to explain the assassination, but part reconstruction in its use of researched material, it typifies the heights reached by historiographic metafictional imaginings of the 20th century. It also, with Mao II (1991), served as an opening act for Underworld (1997), which seems almost self-consciously Joycean in size, ambition, and careful attention paid to its language on the sentence level. It also is another kind of “megaton novel,” one that follows cultural currents that result from the emergence of the atom bomb.

* Underworld extends its scope beyond one historical time and place into a sprawling metahistory that begins in 1951 and runs to the end of the 20th century. The novel is a project closer in concept to that of Doctorow in Ragtime, in that it creates unlikely and
conspiratorial connections between disparate historical figures. Yet I wish to argue that instead of vandalizing or parodying history—despite how unlikely and odd the sparks thrown off by these juxtapositions are—DeLillo cumulatively shapes an analysis of the era and its images that persist into the present day, all surrounding the metaphoric core of the atomic weapon and its analog sized and shaped like its core: the 1951 baseball from the New York Giants-Yankees World Series hit by Bobby Thomson in the legendary “Shot Heard ‘Round the World.” The atomic weapon and the baseball tie the novel together: DeLillo’s protagonist Nick Shay, whose life is told in reverse with the decade-by-decade sections of the novel, seeks to own the famous ball, while Cold War anxieties are deeply felt in their changes throughout the decades, and are dramatized through DeLillo’s own unique take on various historical events from the past several decades. The Cuban Missile Crisis, for instance, is seen through the eyes of Lenny Bruce, whose stand-up comedy routines DeLillo reimagines to turn his *cri de coeur*, “We’re all gonna die!” (DeLillo 507) into a universal statement of anxiety, while his subversive commentaries also provide critique of the era’s politics.

An account of the final game of the World Series opens the novel, and is presented as a detail-rich 60-page prologue that finds iconic 1950s celebrities Frank Sinatra, Jackie Gleason, J. Edgar Hoover, and Toots Shor seated together in the stands, where Hoover is hit in the face by a torn-out *Life* magazine reproduction of Pieter Breughel the Elder’s *The Triumph of Death*, a warlike or post-apocalyptic “landscape of visionary havoc and ruin […] ash skies and burning ships” (41) which captures his undivided attention. This is a prime example of the “complex skein” (Osteen 215) that

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13 While the novel does begin and end in 1951, the main sections of the novel proceed in reverse chronological order.
provides the novel with its semiotic backbone. If not a secret history, *Underworld* is a kind of deep historical meditation upon the era that finds equally new sparks of meaning in its lost detritus and most famous icons. Building his chronicle on a series of connections, vignettes, and motifs, DeLillo admits the novel is inspired by Doctorow’s structural model and approach to history. In an essay written for the *New York Times Magazine* to coincide with *Underworld*’s release, DeLillo reports his admiration for *Ragtime*’s “original and buoyant” approach to its era, which “transforms the past,” creating a new mode in which “history and mock history tool along together. They form a kind of syncopated reality in which diverse human voices ultimately come into conflict with a single uninflected voice, the monotone of the state […] In this novel, language is a democratic experiment” (DeLillo, par. 24). This represents the culmination of the connective model of historiographic metafiction of the 20th century built by the novelists discussed in this chapter.

The connective model truly reaches its height in *Underworld*, which is rich with echoes and repetitions. Mark Osteen traces one particularly compelling “circuit” of connections that hinges on the word “orange” and where it shows up in American culture:

Chuckie Wainwright’s plane “Long Tall Sally” drops Agent Orange on the jungles of Vietnam; during his stint in Vietnam, Matt remarks that the drums of Agent Orange resemble “cans of frozen Minute Maid” (*Underworld* 463); a few years earlier, one of the elder Wainwright’s clients [at the ad agency where Nick Shay works] was Minute Maid orange juice (532). In 1974, as Klara [Sax, Nick Shay’s artist lover] watches Sergei Eisenstein’s long-lost film *Unterwelt* [a fictional film which shares its title with an actual one, here imagined by DeLillo]
as a science-fiction-inspired work], she recognizes the soundtrack as Prokofiev’s overture for the opera *Love for Three Oranges* (442), and during her work to transform “Long Tall Sally” into an artwork she wears an orange T-shirt (67).

Near the end of the novel, in the 1990s, the aged nun Sister Edgar—Matt Shay’s former grade-school teacher who lived in the Bronx the same time as Klara—sees what she believes to be an angelic apparition on a billboard. The billboard is selling Minute Maid orange juice (820-822). This complex skein indicates a unity linking advertising, war, religion, and underground art, yet no character grasps the unity (Osteen 215).

This network of associations is deftly woven throughout time periods and among characters, and develops gradually with the novel. At the same time, Nick and Klara’s biographies are developed in parallel to the revisiting of Cold War history as DeLillo moves backwards through time, dismantling *fin de siècle* America and exploring its genealogy. The penultimate section of the novel, “Better Things for Better Living Through Chemistry: Selected Fragments Public and Private in the 1950s and 1960s” (499) is comprised of vignettes that seem most deliberately inspired by *Ragtime*, but also works synecdochally to conjure the era from the parts of a whole. It is two synecdochal fragments of 1951 history that shared the front page of *The New York Times* on October 4, 1951 that, in his account, provided DeLillo for a starting point for *Underworld’s* composition:

A pair of mated headlines, top of the page. Same typeface, same size type. Each headline three columns wide, three lines deep. *Giants capture pennant*—this was the dramatic substance of the first headline. *Soviets explode atomic bomb*—this
was the ominous threat of the second. What did I see in this juxtaposition? Two kinds of conflict, certainly, but something else [...] the power of history (DeLillo, par. 7).

The power is summarized as a yearning to participate in and potentially reshape the way these events are seen: “A fiction writer feels the nearly palpable lure of large events and it can make him want to enter the narrative” (par. 7). It is also a personally significant project for DeLillo, as it means a return to the New York City of his youth and “the prospect of recovering a nearly lost language, the idiom and scrappy slang of the postwar period” (par. 7). Surely, this explains why the novel’s prologue and epilogue both return to the early 1950s, while also placing a personal stamp on their evocation of Nick Shay’s early adolescence. But DeLillo’s interest in lost language extends beyond speech and idioms. Rather, he seeks to recover a language of cultural thinking shaped by the Cold War era.

The Kennedy assassination is also dealt with in Underworld, and while it might be expected for DeLillo to avoid treating it extensively to avoid repetition of Libra, some of its crucial themes repeat. Mostly, these focus on its iconic visual status. For instance, the Zapruder film of the shooting is shown on hundreds of televisions as the backdrop art instillation for a 1974 studio party among Klara’s art-world social circle. It carries with it “a kind of floating fear, a mercury reading out of the sixties, with a distinctly trippy edge,” and the power of the film is undiluted: on a wall of a “hundred identical screens,” “the sheering of tissue and braincase was a terrible revelation” (DeLillo 488-489). Drawn into the age of mass media, the historical moment has only gained its bracing power.

Elsewhere, the 1980s videotaped exploits of the “Texas Highway Killer,” who kills a
man driving his family car, not only is mentioned as a potential “copycat” of Oswald’s crime, but is also portrayed as urged into being by the popularity of video documentation: “You sit there and wonder if this kind of crime became more possible when the means of taping an event and playing it immediately [...] became widely available. Taping-and-playing intensifies and compresses the event. It dangles a need to do it again” (159). Thus a current of violence and desire has been unleashed in American culture since the assassination, and it now repeats itself in various ways. The Highway Killer, who calls into a TV station, states that he had a “healthy, basically, type childhood” and that both he and the media are complicit in the crimes: “if this is all a game, then take it as a game” (216). Osteen states that the Zapruder film’s accidental quality is notable for how it conveys “an innocence and faith demolished by the event that it depicts” (Osteen 250); DeLillo’s creation of the Highway Killer seems an outgrowth of this loss, as well as an attempt to become, if not a historic actor, then a celebrity in a diminished version of Oswald’s iconic image. The assassination has unleashed this form of grim, self-aware reverence in addition to the increasingly powerful forces of the Cold War and Vietnam.

What can we, as readers, do with the “certa in select disquiet” that occurs when we learn, as DeLillo puts it, that “Everything connected at some undisclosed point down the systems line” (DeLillo 408)? Leonard Wilcox’s psychoanalytic-critical reading of DeLillo posits that Underworld is a reconstruction of traumatic history, searching from the point of its “inexplicable nonorigin” back to “construct traumatic experience in the only way it can be, after the fact” (Wilcox 122). Moving from the positive, exhilarating experience of the World Series game to (for instance) the traumatic “Shot Heard ‘Round the World” of the Kennedy Assassination provides the novel with its arc. Wilcox, in
Lacanian terms, also states that the potential for nuclear annihilation implicit in the Cold War “cannot be assimilated by the symbolic and is therefore the one referent that is most literary” (135). What I find applicable about this reading comes when an analogy is posed between *Underworld* and James Joyce’s massive text, *Ulysses*, that purported to contain everything that pre-modernist literature left out (itself explicitly referenced in *Libra*). The connections become a way of capturing history—or, more specifically, its energy and power—in a way that other histories of the Cold War have left out. This creates a wry, semi-parodic approach to secret history and conspiracy (as is the case in *Libra*), but also a focus on connecting historical events in search of the answer to trauma. Like the novel itself, DeLillo sees the late-1990s emergence of the World Wide Web as necessarily produced by our cultural hunger for answers, connections to piece together history, but also a heightened, mystical sense of meaning: “There is no space or time out here, or in here, or wherever [sister Edgar] is. There are only connections. Everything is connected. All human knowledge gathered and linked, hyperlinked, this site leading to that, a keystroke, a mouse-click, a password—world without end, amen” (DeLillo 825). Thus the novel and World Wide Web run parallel to one another as the endpoint that the 20th century has been building towards.

Waste figures prominently in the novel, and it features as a by-product not only of capitalism or the forward march of history, but also of nuclear power (and the cultural apparatus that has led up to and surrounds it). Nick Shay travels to Russia to learn about their promised plans to annihilate waste via “underground nuclear explosion” (788), then

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14 Wilcox also notes, productively, that the novel’s final, redemptive “Peace” (827) also intertextually echoes the “Shantih” of Eliot’s *The Waste Land*. In my opinion, this is an insightful reading, especially given the symbolic importance of waste in *Underworld*. If Eliot’s is the ur-modernist text that seeks to make sense of World War I’s cultural upheaval and carnage, then DeLillo’s is the postmodernist revision of an epic structure applied to a world overloaded by information, historical event, and connections.
speculates on how “waste is the secret history, the underhistory, the way archaeologists
dig out the history of early cultures” (791). Waste is recycled into art in many places in
the novel: the stained-glass beauty of the Watts Towers, made from recycled soda pop
bottles; the graffiti artists of mid-1970s New York; Klara’s repainting of the army surplus
B-52 bomber. These all comment on late capitalist society but also “redeem its artifacts”
(Osteen 245) just as DeLillo seeks to.

In this way, underhistory is closely related to the concept of oppositional
“counterhistory,” pioneered by how Doctorow rewrites history in Ragtime and named as
such by DeLillo in “The Power of History” (DeLillo, par. 18). In his portrayal of J. Edgar
Hoover as a germophobe obsessed with the plans of beatniks and hippies to go through
his own waste, DeLillo posits his character not as a literary invention (like his fictional
characters), but a collection of traits that comprise what he calls a “disinvention, real,
conjectured, gambled on, guessed at” (par. 23), proof that “ultimately the writer will
reconfigure things the way his own history demands” (par. 31). DeLillo’s Hoover is best
seen as another piece of the symbolic energy of the Cold War era—but also as how
DeLillo chooses to reconfigure it—when he appears at Truman Capote’s 1966 Black and
White Ball. At this metafictional, metaphoric historical carnival, the partygoers include
“Andy Warhol […] wearing a mask that was a photograph of his own face” and a man
wearing “an executioner’s hood” (DeLillo 571), echoing The Triumph of Death and its
erlier erotic impact on Hoover: “Edgar loves this stuff […] It causes a bristling of his
body hair. Skeletons with wispy dicks. The dead beating kettledrums. The sackcloth dead
slitting a pilgrim’s throat” (50).
Such a portrayal would be impossible without the removal of the stable belief in a historical referent that Jameson first pinpoints. It frees up the speculative energies of the novelist and manifests itself in a new powerful focus on history and how it compels writers to capture it in new ways. *Underworld* serves as the culmination of historiographic metafiction of the 20th century. It reconfigures the events from the second half of the century—events that its author lived through, as did its contemporary readers—into a bold new historical vision.

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All the novelists discussed in this chapter, who are generational contemporaries, are reflecting on the meaning of the 20th century from positions in its last third. Reed and Doctorow write in the 1970s, while DeLillo is writing from the century’s end, a time dedicated to summing up the era’s import in a generational sense, much as the looming bicentennial served for the previous two. Composing an oppositional or counterhistory while the culture at large is producing official histories, the novelists all intersect with official history and its accounts. Doctorow parodies how the Ragtime era is reflected upon historically through nostalgia and the erasure of anti-hegemonic figures and currents. DeLillo, first in *Libra* and then in *Underworld*, begins with a cultural fascination in conspiracy and paranoia that flourished in the Cold War, and subverts a desire for answers—for cold facts—by choosing instead to turn his attention towards the historical mindset itself. *Libra* is an account of one man’s attempt to fulfill his own historical destiny, which creates a chaotic overturning of a “plotted” attempt to write history; *Underworld* looks at the fallout of the 1950s-1960s origins of the Cold War, and the changes they work upon the American culture and psyche.
This also means that Doctorow, Reed, and DeLillo himself can be seen as part of these changes, which affect how we view the 20th century from a postwar vantage point. Are they witnessing the formation of a historical narrative in which the ideology of capitalism is triumphant, silencing other discourses or forcing them to move underground? What shape is taken by the dominant ideology as it changes and shapes others, especially in terms of official history? Reed’s case, in particular, is noteworthy, due to the cultural-historical ferment in which he writes. In the early 1970s American culture was writing two histories of sorts about the Vietnam War as it happened that conflicted with one another: the triumphalist history in which we would win, and Communism as an ideology would lose,15 opposed by a skeptical history that protested the war and saw it as a sign of America’s ideological undoing (which seemed tantalizingly within grasp for some within the counterculture). This is especially clear when Reed interrupts his text to present a chart of the bomb tonnage in past and present American wars: he presents a counterhistorical narrative not of triumph, but genocidal brutality. In doing so he presents American history as a war of opposing forces, one that is far from over. This informs all three novels, but especially Reed’s: for him, the main point of focus, the narrative of race in America, is far from over. Mumbo Jumbo is a novel that emphasizes race and how academic institutions have managed it. Despite historical accounts which would see the Harlem Renaissance, Civil Rights era, et al. as signs of progress towards closure, Reed makes them part of a larger framework of ideological suppression. Working “Jes’ Grew” (a reference to Uncle Tom’s Cabin) into a countercultural, oppositional narrative allows him to run between—or underneath—key

15 With regards to the 1961 Bay of Pigs invasion, Libra dramatizes an identical clash of histories, and an attempt to rewrite it through the greatest of forced historical changes: a failed attempt to assassinate Kennedy.
historical figures and events, working connectively to expose hitherto unknown perspectives of them, forming a reconstruction of diasporic African (African-American and Caribbean) experience. It is his counterhistory, celebrating a tradition ironically opposed to what’s seen as the high point of African-American literature and culture: the Harlem Renaissance. Jes’ Grew is a connective, spiritual, mystic tradition that is postmodern in the sense of play, energy, and the disruption it performs even within the text of *Mumbo Jumbo*; on a broader canvas, this voodoo virus/dance plague/meme is what vitalizes African artistic traditions, and compels a reactive European conspiracy to shut it down or counter its growth. Reed presents the history of the Jes’ Grew as the true (long suppressed) history, and the white establishment’s attempts to control it as the counterhistory. Parodically, he inverts dominant and subaltern discourses, giving a view of the 20th century from the viewpoint of the “winners.” Reading *Mumbo Jumbo* creates the impression that readers are being let in on secret truths.

Doctorow, in *Ragtime*, works to create a historical counternarrative that opposes nostalgic and empty retellings of American life in the 1910s. It sets out to shatter the presupposition that ragtime music, as seen from 1975, is little more than the music of the past: a harmless and innocent style of jazz that is most at home coming from a player piano.16 Instead, ragtime represents cultural and racial unrest, the turbulent onslaught of modernity in a premodern world, and a sense of momentum that will reach its peak with the onset of World War I. Choosing eccentrically among historical figures to weave

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16 The same could also be said of the way DeLillo plays with 1950s-60s notions of nostalgia. While there are not many references to pop music in *Underworld* (aside from the Rolling Stones’ suppressed 1972 tour documentary *Cocksucker Blues*, which gives the fourth section its title), DeLillo does suggest that cultural icons like Lenny Bruce and Mick Jagger can only be correctly seen as part of the nuclear paranoia and death-sex-drugs conflation of the era. He reveals their secret meaning, which goes beyond nostalgic attempts circa 1997 to see them as mere icons of sexual liberation and the crusade against obscenity laws.
together in his reconstruction, Doctorow focuses on, among others, Harry Houdini, J.P. Morgan, and Sigmund Freud, to whose own interior narration sections of the novel are dedicated and at times interact with fictional but plausible characters like Coalhouse Walker, whose oppression as an African-American evokes that of the first black world heavyweight boxing champion Jack Johnson, who sparked race riots after winning the title in 1910, and received death threats for his ostentatious displays of wealth.\textsuperscript{17} Doctorow’s choice of historical figures, and their often-unexpected thoughts and desires, exemplifies Don DeLillo’s take on the power of fiction to offer new “human truth” from this perspective: “Fiction slips into the skin of historical figures. It gives them sweaty palms and head colds and urine-stained underwear and lines to speak in private and the terror of restless nights. This is how consciousness is extended and human truth is seen new” (DeLillo, “Power of History,” par. 35). In this way, Doctorow recovers a counterhistorical view of hegemonic figures like Ford and Morgan, and captures the opposing people’s history of the period. Doctorow and DeLillo reconstruct with a focus on understanding the present, demystifying iconic American figures and events.

DeLillo’s novels extend this idea into the postmodern 20\textsuperscript{th} century. The figures he focuses on, such as Lee Harvey Oswald and the motley historical cast of \textit{Underworld}, are themselves important to the generation of postmodern culture as such. Thus they reflect back upon the era’s formation from within itself. At the same time, they urge readers to reconsider—and reconstruct—established history in new ways, urging into existence a historical worldview that defamiliarizes and invigorates. While, contemporary with DeLillo, Pynchon (and others discussed in Chapter 3) were looking back at American’s

\textsuperscript{17} See Geoffrey C. Ward’s biography \textit{Unforgivable Blackness: The Rise and Fall of Jack Johnson} (Vintage, 2006).
origins through the lens of metahistorical romance, *Underworld* chronicles at times equally mystified but more contemporary events, reopening the book on the Cold War and asking what would come next in the 21st century.\(^{18}\) It is an interrogation of history that looks into the secret and the no-longer secret, as well as their place in the public imagination. It joins contemporary meditations on the meaning of the 20th century, but for DeLillo there is no easy solution to our cravings for historical closure. He too, like Pynchon and Glancy, brings the power of myth to his narrative, only in a decidedly dark fashion. *Libra* cannot resurrect John F. Kennedy, but it can study the trail his assassins left behind, and speculate on the great lack of closure compelled by their mysterious intentions and motivations. In *Underworld*, the end to the Cold War and the averted threat of nuclear war do not seem a foregone conclusion, but a kind of miracle.

By the generational shift that includes Doctorow, Reed, and DeLillo, fiction began asking different kinds of questions about events of historical resonance. They represent the movement from distant to recent past, and from reimaginative to reconstructive. That the 20th century’s events became processed in a reconstructive fashion before those of previous centuries is telling; it illustrates that reconstruction begins in its attempts to make sense of the recent past, working analogically to apply its findings to the past. In this, they also represent a midpoint between the Pynchon of *V.* and of *Mason & Dixon*, a historiography that looks for the origins of the present in the past. In this way—and despite its anarchic, one-of-a-kind quality—Reed’s *Mumbo Jumbo* is also a crucial text in the evolution of historiographic metafiction, offering up a new kind

\(^{18}\) Contemporary readers cannot miss the dark irony of the World Trade Center towers appearing on its cover; the mystical, apparition-like framing of the image already imbued them with the quality that subsequent artistic depictions of the twin towers possessed. They truly evoke the quality which lent Mark Osteen’s 2000 book on DeLillo, *American Magic and Dread*, its title.
of historiography that disregards rigid boundaries, finding connections and likenesses across time and place. DeLillo’s connections may be more local, but speak to the depth of Cold War America in that their multiplicity can be found in mere decades, not centuries. Thus his novels chronicle the condition of postmodernity—concurrent with pivotal late-20th-century events—while his predecessors apply its artistic techniques to events that predate it.

These transformations of American historical event make them the culmination of historiographic metafiction in the 20th century, closing a circuit begun with events contemporary to Pynchon and Barth’s novels. They too have become part of the century’s discourse, the histories it has told itself as America grappled with its place in the postwar world.
Coda: Directions in Graphic Historical Fiction

Between the late 1990s and mid 2000s—concurrent with the literary developments discussed in previous chapters—a series of texts grouped under the formal category of the “graphic novel” enjoyed a boom in popularity with the American literary establishment. Yet this emergence did not come from nowhere. 1986 brought three highly acclaimed graphic novels—Art Spiegelman’s first volume of *Maus*, Frank Miller’s *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns*, and Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons’ *Watchmen*—that paved the way for a new phase of acceptance for the graphic novel. The latter two were collections of special projects published by superhero genre publisher DC comics, but outside of its main line of continuity directed primarily towards the comic book fanbase. Nevertheless, they did appear as individual comic books, and overlapped with the superhero genre in style and content while purporting to approach the story in a new, reimaginative fashion. Miller’s solution was to treat Batman realistically (and parodically) while confronting the issue of his then fifty-year stasis, aging him into an even darker vigilante; Moore created an alternate-historical world where superheroes not only had the character depth of Miller’s Batman but affected events in American history, exploring their fascistic undertones and complex psychology. These two graphic novels are still seen as totemic, a high-water mark for writing and artwork and the start of an influential movement that attracted others with an overlapping interest in comics and literature to experiment with the two. They also are seen as critical texts in the
postmodern canon, as their genre and format allow for an experimental, deconstructive
take on this content within their pages.

Spiegelman’s *Maus: A Survivor’s Tale*, however, comes from a completely
different school of comic art: the “underground” movement of the 1960s and 1970s.
Underground “comix” auteurs like Robert Crumb attracted an entirely different kind of
attention from outside the genre’s hardcore fans than Moore and Miller, often due to their
counterculture leanings and uncensored content.1 Spiegelman was an established
underground artist, who was a co-founder of the more highbrow underground comics
magazine *RAW* in 1980; excerpts from *Maus*, which he began in 1972, appeared in *RAW*
in 1981 and continued throughout the decade. As the first and second volumes of *Maus*
appeared, it attracted attention far outside the underground comics world, even receiving
a special Pulitzer Prize in 1992. It is an account of Spiegelman’s father’s life as a
Holocaust survivor that deals with the generational resonance of anti-Jewish persecution
and the legacy of the survivors. Using cats, mice, and other animals as stand-ins for Jews,
Nazis, and ethnic groups, Spiegelman created a poignant engagement with history that
has provided lasting influence on the writers of graphic fiction. In particular, *Maus* is a
work of historiography that captures an oral account of his father’s experiences, and
writes in response to this history from a succeeding generation. Apart from the suffering
recollected by his father, the text includes its own poignancy in its historical reflection,
especially memories and lives considered lost to history. At the conclusion of Book I of

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1 However, a relatively recent and ongoing movement to reconstruct comics history, acknowledging
subversive comics artists and writers within the mainstream Marvel/DC world, has traced an underground
sensibility infecting those publishers’ 1970s comic books, such as those written by Steve Gerber, Jim
Starlin, and Steve Englehart. Englehart, for example, had Captain America fight a “Secret Empire” run by
Richard Nixon. See Jonathan Lethem, “The Return of the King” in *The Disappointment Artist* (Vintage,
the graphic novel, Spiegelman captures a distinction between kinds of history and how it is recollected. Upon learning that his father, Vladek, has burned his mother’s account of suffering in the Holocaust after her death, Art (who appears with his father as he relates the account) can only cry in anger, “You murderer!” (Spiegelman 159) at the absence of a historical document and its possibility of preserving life generationally. Privileging the oral and the visual over the written—and creating them out of necessity from its absence—Maus is a pioneering work of comics as history that utilizes the medium to fill absences left by the historical record, and to reconstruct as a way of filling these absences.

The 1990s-2000s boom in the graphic novel mentioned above largely involved a new generation of independent (“indie”) cartoonists like Chris Ware and Daniel Clowes.² Often, they reacted against the work of Moore and Miller, or found it unfashionable to cite as an influence; Spiegelman was closer artistic kin, one who provided support to this new generation of artists. Maus proved highly influential in terms of subject matter, making memoirs a suitable subject for graphic novelists, but also historical material. Scott McCloud’s 1994 Understanding Comics, itself an academic work presented in the graphic-novel form, also proved a valuable decoding device for the general public, who had begun thinking about the graphic novel form in new ways. These notable texts are all essential to understanding the graphic novel as a late-20th-century phenomenon, a new literary mutation or redirection of ideas that contemporary scholarship has fixated upon.

As argued in my first chapter about Pynchon and Barth, Spiegelman and Moore—in his later creator-owned work From Hell—provide a similar two-pronged influence on

² See Chris Ware, Jimmy Corrigan: The Smartest Kid on Earth (Pantheon, 2003) and Daniel Clowes, Ghost World (Fantagraphics, 1999).
contemporary graphic novels. While *Maus* has been written about extensively elsewhere, it is worth discussing what Paul Buhle says about its status as a key “graphic history,” the non-fictional graphic novel that is closest to “the very root of the historical saga, in oral history or storytelling” for how it takes advantage of a natural inclination to have “thought about history […] ‘in pictures’” (Buhle 315). While Buhle misses the metafictional aspects of graphic history, he is aware of its lineage with or subversion of the conventional comic-book format. The idea of comics as history was first utilized in “uplift-comics” (319) that arose in the wake of panic over the adult content of horror and crime comic books. Comics histories often metafictionally subvert this tradition as indie or underground comic artist-writers parody or subvert the 1950s ideal of clean-cut superheroes; distancing devices like deliberately “cartoon” art, captions, and thought or speech balloons work metafictionally. Every contemporary graphic novel in this tradition has a complex relationship with the comics medium itself, that self-reflexively may interact with multiple genres of comics at once. At times, this is as simple as a nostalgic, gentle art style recalling cartoonists past; at others, it rewrites past comics traditions and their ideologies. The development of the historical graphic novel has also taken a similar arc to historiographic metafiction as a whole, as these exemplary texts illustrate. The reimaginative has given way to the reconstructive, and with it a deeper interrogation of history and what it means. My four texts chosen for this coda, Alan Moore and Eddie Campbell’s *From Hell*, Ben Katchor’s *The Jew of New York*, James Sturm’s *America*  

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3 After the Congressional hearings in 1954 that resulted in the creation of the Comics Code Authority, which approved suitable content, publishers like DC were quick to rebrand their comic books as wholesome and ideologically right-minded. Thus, depictions of historical figures and heroic adventure set in past eras would coexist alongside Superman in their comic books. *Classics Illustrated*, a series of literary adaptations that were popular at this time, were also key to the comics industry’s survival. See David Hadju, *The Ten-Cent Plague: The Great Comic-Book Scare and How It Changed America* (Picador, 2008).
trilogy, and Kyle Baker’s *Nat Turner*, provide examples of how graphic novels work as a kind of culmination of historiographic metafiction that continues to push thinking about history in a provocative direction. In the absence of reliable historical narratives and cold facts, they work first as reimaginations, then as reconstructions that reexamine history and the history of their medium.

For the purposes of this study, Alan Moore and Eddie Campbell’s *From Hell* (first collected in 1999) is crucial. A somewhat neglected work outside of the graphic novel genre’s readership, it is of a piece with the historiographic metafictions discussed elsewhere in this study, making creative use of the graphic novel format and Eddie Campbell’s illustrations and lettering to impressionistic ends. In terms of subject, it chronicles the Whitechapel murders committed by Jack the Ripper in 1888 London. Like DeLillo’s *Libra*, it looks at an infamous historical figure associated with psychosis and violence, and even possesses similar concerns on the part of its author. Like *Watchmen*, it is a very dense and layered text. Moore’s footnotes to *From Hell*, for example, provide copious historical annotations and explanations of his writing strategies, but also identify his point of entry into the historical phenomenon of “Ripperology,” which resembles DeLillo’s take on JFK conspiracy theorists. It is a position highly aware of how, when confronted with “a shifting cloud of facts and factoids,” we choose to “project the fictions that seem most appropriate to our times and our inclinations” (Moore, *From Hell* Appendix I, 29). Moore acknowledges how his speculative fiction “can provide only speculative answers” (34), but takes what he identifies as a holistic approach to the murders, one that focuses on their time and place. In an interview with Danny Graydon, he explains the genesis of this graphic novel: “I’d seen advertisements for Douglas
Adams’ book “Dirk Gently’s Holistic Detective Agency. A holistic detective[.] You wouldn't just have to solve the crime, you'd have to solve the entire world that that crime happened in. That was the twist that I needed” (Moore, qtd. in Graydon, 2001, par. 2).

This makes From Hell not just a speculative inquiry into the Ripper killings, long thought to be the result of “sexual passion or blind anger” (Moore, Appendix I, 34), but Victorian England itself. Moore’s explanation for the murders in terms of plot is that Sir William Gull, Queen Victoria’s royal doctor and Freemason aware of secret knowledge including the “Great Architect of the Universe” (Moore and Campbell, From Hell, 2.17) is asked by those within his secret order to murder prostitutes who know of an illegitimate child fathered by Prince Albert, first impairing the consciousness of his mistress through surgical procedure (From Hell 2.31-32).

This makes the murders an issue of extreme misogynist suppression and occult, ritual violence. Within this plot, Moore—keenly aware of the occult tenor of the era—also uses a connective logic linking Egyptology, Freemasonry, notable figures in the occult like black magician Aleister Crowley and Albert’s Order of the Golden Dawn, and dark secret historical origins of London itself: “Encoded in this city’s stones are symbols thunderous enough to rouse the sleeping Gods” (4.19), symbols that “have POWER […] to deliver half this planet’s population into slavery” (4.23). Moore’s connective logic is free-ranging, rivaling at times Ishmael Reed’s in its inventiveness. When seen through the occult lens, Moore notes, for instance, when discussing false letters from the Ripper generated by the Victorian English tabloid press, that “Rupert Murdoch’s highly popular right wing tabloid […] unsurprisingly in this tale of obelisks and other arcane solar symbols, is called The Sun” (Moore, Appendix I, 27). The occult works as a metaphor for
the lack of closure offered by the murders, which manifests itself most notably when Moore digresses on the 1938 Halifax Slasher case, which was later found to be the result of a series of victims who “slashed themselves” in a form of mass hysteria: “In my more fanciful and speculative moments, it seems almost as though whatever dark chthonic energies led to the crimes of Whitechapel and elsewhere was unable to find a suitable receptacle in Halifax, leaving a vortex of panic and mutilation with an almost mystic absence at the centre” (Moore, Appendix I, 41). If the language used evokes traditional comic book violence and depictions of horror and evil, Moore’s treatment of it playfully resonates within this genre convention while applying it to a historical narrative.

*From Hell* also has multiple disruptions of straightforward chronology, a series of flash forwards that lead into the twentieth century. All are chosen strategically, pointing towards the era’s violence. Moore depicts 1960s Manchester serial murderers Ian Brady and Myra Hindley sharing a romantic moment during a film adaptation of the Ripper mythos, as one of many “events rising towards inevitable convergence like an archway’s lines” (Moore and Campbell, 14.12-13). Gull, at the scene of one of the murders, raises his bloody knife into the air and is suddenly framed by a full-page splash depicting London’s Mitre Square “as it would look more than a century into his future” (8.40; Moore, Appendix I, 29). This suggests not only the continued fascination the murders have, but the sense of how “the 1880s contain the seeds of the twentieth century,” including the invention of the electric light bulb, automobile, steam turbine, and radio waves, as well as the “Mahdi uprisings, which represent the modern western world’s first confrontation with the world of Islam,” the French seizure of Indochina, “the first in a series of events culminating in the Vietnam War [as] the Zionist movement held its first
conference while throughout the decade, anti-Semitism became popular throughout Europe” (Appendix I, 13-14).

Fig 6.1: Art from Alan Moore and Eddie Campbell’s *From Hell*

Moore incorporates the Whitechapel murders into this historical reconstruction, prefiguring the 20th century’s fascination with violence. But most ominous is the sequence depicting Klara Hitler’s vision of the coming Holocaust when Adolf Hitler is conceived in 1888. Moore and Campbell weave together a montage of panels linked by the grunts of Klara and Alois Hitler’s lovemaking in speech balloons. First, we are shown their house from above, then interiors of the couple in the bedroom, followed by a
disruptive cut to a white chapel in a barren field, from which—as Alois reaches orgasm—a torrent of blood pours upon Jews in the street, washing them away (Moore and Campbell 5.2-3; Fig. 4.1). It is in this sequence that the stark black and white but visually dense style of Campbell’s artwork is at its strongest.

Moore’s engagement with history—and the text’s own metafictional status—is made clearer in the second appendix, “Dance of the Gull Catchers,” which is illustrated by Campbell in comics form. A chronicle of Ripperologists and their theories, the epilogue’s many clever visual transitions and interpolated images from other sources dramatizes how “Fiction becomes evidence. Evidence becomes fiction” (Moore and Campbell, Appendix II, 2). As From Hell includes many historical figures, this appendix includes others who have been seen as suspects for the murder, whose faces sometimes remain static and identical while pasted into different panels (7-8). This survey of authors and accounts culminates when Moore and Campbell depict themselves creating an admitted “dodgy pseudo-history”:

The Whitechapel killings aren’t even considered. Too played-out. Too obvious

[…] Slowly it dawns on me that despite the Gull theory’s obvious attractions, the idea of a solution, any solution, is inane.

Murder isn’t like books.

Murder, a human event located in both space and time, has an imaginary field completely unrestrained by either. It holds meaning, and shape, but no solution. Quantum uncertainty, unable to determine both a particle’s location and its nature, necessitates that we map every possible state of the particle: its super-position.

Jack’s not Gull, or Druitt.
Jack is a Super-Position (16).

Moore and Campbell are depicted joining a line of Ripperologists with butterfly nets in the third panel of the page, while panel five’s bloodstain on a wall framed by the Ripper’s hands and knife is bordered by the wide seventh panel, which mirrors the bloodstain in a silhouette orbited by a stream of floating disembodied heads of suspects. This clever textual/visual layout is echoed when Moore discusses and depicts the relation between “the phantom we project” and Koch’s snowflake, which fractally creates an image “so crinkly and complex that its length, theoretically, is INFINITE. Its AREA, however, never exceeds the initial circle” (23). Campbell’s artwork depicts the evolution of the snowflake, which then is mirrored by the depiction of a murdered body in the street in the next panel in the series. This closing encapsulates not only the unreliability of historical narrative, but how speculative history has taken on a life of its own. Moore depicts the process of being drawn into this universe of competing histories, and adds his own sometimes factual, sometimes speculative, reconstruction into the mix. If it is impossible to solve the Ripper murders, Moore and Campbell can solve the society that produced them, and in doing so accomplish historically what others cannot: reading into the signs and symbols leading up to a secret history of the 20th century, and producing from them a reading of a culture.
Fig 6.2: Jack’s Super-Position
Fig. 6.3: Koch’s snowflake
A holistic approach to time and place that includes the visual makes *From Hell* a pioneering text in the historical graphic novel that is followed up by the stories in *James Sturm’s America: God, Gold, and Golems* (first collected 2007). Sturm does not so explicitly link events in his chosen time periods (1801, 1886, and the early 1920s) to the present, and possesses a much lighter touch as a whole. Yet there is an interface with the contemporary world in the way its three stories chronicle those “whose dreams shaped this nation,” as its jacket copy puts it. Comprised of two shorter vignettes and one longer piece—taking place in a mining town, a revival meeting, and a baseball league—*America* collects three works of graphic fiction published between 1996 and 2000. The prevailing metaphor linking these graphic novellas together is a historical/geographical panorama, as the collected hardcover edition’s design makes evident (Fig. 4.3). The dust jacket depicts a nostalgic, religious-art-inspired panorama, with the title held up by two angels, one of whom is Coach Strauss of the Stars of David, Sturm’s fictionalized Jewish baseball team (Sturm 90), the other, Skinny, a pathetic, near-dead miner from the mining vignette (57). In the middle of this crest appears an unnamed girl seen at the revival meeting, who there, surrounded by radiating lines typical of religious depictions of sainthood says, “I have been to his wondrous world! Indeed it is glorious! Hallelujah!” (15). On the cover, she appears instead surrounded by the rays of the nearby sun, and with the proclamation/motto “Do not be afraid,” suggesting a redemptive, celebratory view of *this* America. Below the title appears a miniature depiction of the stories’ settings, arranged chronologically; wrapping onto the back cover is a sparser landscape featuring first dinosaurs, then a Native American settlement. The book’s endpapers mirror this; the front endpapers are of a deserted, bucolic landscape, while the back
endpapers depict an abandoned suburban amusement park under cloudy skies. On the cover, separated from the land/panoramic timeline by a river in which a moody prospector sits and a barrel of oil has spilled to mark contemporary industrial/urban space, sits a self-portrait of Sturm at his drawing desk looking slightly upward, accompanied by his dog.

Figure 6.4: Cover of *James Sturm’s America*

This use of the panorama suggests a reconstructive American landscape visually, while using a kind of sublime cartoon nostalgia to suggest the “collective saga […] a narrative beyond personal or family experience” (Buhle 317) that most far-reaching histories attempt to capture. But Buhle pins down a sensibility that inspires this text when he mentions underground comic artist Justin Green’s penchant for “treating bite-size chunks of cultural history idiosyncratically” (318). Sturm metafictionally incorporates a pastiche of contemporary text in the pages introducing each vignette, as “The Revival” duplicates an invitation to the Kentucky meeting that aspires to “lay the groundwork for
God’s empire here on Earth. Giving a thorough inspection into the power of faith. Including an accurate historical account of religious life in daily America” (Sturm 9).

Sturm’s blurring of the boundary between the historical document’s voice and his as a chronicler parodies the desire for accuracy, equating it with the religious urge spoken of in this mock-invitation. In his endnotes, however, Sturm returns somewhat less critically to the “intoxicating brew of historical documents and ephemera” (190) that inspired these stories, quoting liberally from some (unidentified) accounts “dismissed as unworliday, outlandish, or blasphemous by those not present” (189). Some of Sturm’s most cartoonish art and lettering appears in the first panoramic scene depicting the revival, when a wild-eyed convert dismisses some drunken pioneers swilling from and hawking “Lorenzo Bliss’s family medicine! Next best thing to a miracle!” as “UNDESERVING! WRETChES! SSsNakes!” (12). This parodic touch captures the mass energy of the gathering in a way akin to treatments by Pynchon of the discredited science of the 18th century: “Folks down on all fours barking like dogs! And this one woman, speaking some crazy tongue—someone told me it was Ancient Egyptian, the language the original Indians spoke!” (13). Soon afterward, Joseph Bainbridge, one of the protagonists, hallucinates the transformation of the drunkss into demons (20), one of Sturm’s many uses of cartoon tropes to depict religious visions and fervor, as when each of his panels pulls in closer on the preacher Elijah Young, who proclaims that “Faith raises cities and builds empires!” while appearing progressively bug-eyed and deranged” (26-27). When Sturm ends the vignette on a quiet note among the pioneer family, who after burying their child set off to “build a new life in Missouri” away from their “woe and misery” (32), the text emphasizes the brutality and rigors of pioneer life as the roots of American experience, a
celebration of origins akin to those in *Mason & Dixon* and *Stone Heart* forged into a new form of visual mythmaking.

The second vignette, “Hundreds of Feet Below Daylight,” uses the visual medium of comic art to a full advantage, depicting “the life and death of the mining town of Solomon’s Gulch, Idaho” (35) in a dark, claustrophobic palette using heavy blacks. More brutality in America’s past is depicted, such as a race riot in which Chinese immigrant miners are beaten and lynched (39). At times, the brutality and difficulty of mining life is explored through anachronistic parody, depicted as business as usual akin to the 20th-century blue collar working world, as when the miners’ understated complaints that they have yet to be paid are heard among explosions in the darkness (43-44). This vignette in particular seems most indebted to *From Hell* in that it seeks to capture the grim everyday goings-on of an experience contemporary readers are used to encountering in murky woodcuts and daguerreotypes. Similarly, the desperation and prosaic villainy of the mining boss and his minions, who would “trample over a room of babies if a gold nugget awaited [them] on the other side” and ultimately are seized by murderous rage (63; 75-77) evokes early American comic strips and films. Here, Sturm suggests the birth of capitalist greed, reconstructing it from what we think we know about the past as well as actual documents like the cartoon reproduced in the endnotes in which a preacher finds gold in the grave of a miner’s funeral (190). In this way, Sturm responds to and continues the discourse of the past.

“The Golem’s Mighty Swing” is Pynchonesque in its merging of obscure historical facts with parodic invention: in this case, a caricatured touring baseball team (in some cases consisting of non-Jews wearing the trappings of Judaism), the Stars of David,
a version of those in the historical Negro Leagues. Engaging with the discourse of anti-Semitism that was on the rise in the 1920s, Sturm tells a hopeful story of the team’s victories on the baseball field over those who see them contemptuously as “these Hebes” (130). They plot to costume their heaviest hitter, himself on loan from the Negro Leagues, in the guise of the Golem, a Jewish legend about a “creature that man creates to be a companion, a protector or a servant,” who can only be created by a Kabbalist, who nobly “wants to discover the essence of God himself” (119). Recapturing the golem myth and transporting it to the American baseball field, Sturm creates a redemptive form of the historical sublime wherein the terrifying figure of the hulking monster evokes not revenge but “Survival. Perhaps that is a victory unto itself” (176). Perhaps that is a message shared with the first vignette; Sturm celebrates and reconstructs an American urge to survive desperate circumstances, connected with the desires for religious and mythic transcendence. This is the panorama he surveys, and one that truly has not existed in this form before this graphic-fictional portrayal.

Ben Katchor’s The Jew of New York (first collected 1998) has a notable intertext with some of the earliest and latest books in this study: while it owes more of its lineage to the wild, reimaginative New York of Pynchon’s V., it also is a possible precursor and inspiration of Chabon’s The Yiddish Policeman’s Union. Like that text, it deals with the historical phenomena of proposed alternate Jewish homelands and refuges. In this case it is Mordecai Manuel Noah’s 1825 attempt to establish “the city of Ararat as a refuge for the world’s Jews on an island in the Niagara River between the United States and

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4 The golem figure has been the subject of some scholarship on the Jewish origins of the American comic book superhero; golem figures appear in the likenesses of The Thing of the Fantastic Four, the Hulk, and many others created by mid-century comic creators. See Simcha Weinstein, Up, Up, and Oy Vey (Barricade Books, 2009) and Chabon, The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier and Clay (Picador, 2001).
Canada” (Hoberman, par. 3). Unlike in Chabon, however, this act is not followed through as the point of origin for an alternate history. Rather, Noah’s plan incarnates a rich historical world given a temporal context which coincides with an American religious ferment that produced not only Mormonism but also Brook Farm’s utopian living experiment, and other forms of 19th-century American spiritual awakenings. Like the bad science that is a focus for writers of historiographic metafiction about the 18th century, this kind of religious optimism is parodied as a search for a transcendent religious narrative, as when Katchor depicts a man in a “waterproof India rubber suit” wading in the river while reading from a pamphlet that concludes “the Indian tribes to be out of Hebrew descent” due to a misreading of their culture that emphasizes performance of circumcision, ritual sacrifice, diet, and even the “fringes which the Indians fastened to their garments” (Katchor 7-8). Like the other graphic novelists I discuss, Katchor provides mock reproductions of an excerpt from the pamphlet and other ostensible period documents between chapters, which provide a few of the era’s beliefs and make the at times preposterous events of the plot seem part of a more plausible time and place. These include handbills promoting the harmful effects of onanism, a performance of the titular play mocking its Noah stand-in, Major Ham, and a recitation “in perfect Hebrew” from a Native American, with the supporting act of an exhibition of the stuffed body of Nathan Kishon, a Jew who has lived in the New York wilderness and gone feral, transforming into what is called a “wild South American creature” that murders the play’s star actor (41, 67). Next to this spectacle, perhaps the most preposterous of the many schemes and plots among the text’s characters is the laying of a “narrow gauge, brass pipe directly to a carbonated inlet of Lake Erie” (66) that will pipe soda water to homes and businesses.
This plot is also depicted in the book’s front and back endpapers, which depict a map of “an imaginary, vanished Manhattan—an urban museum of musty, haphazard relics” (Hoberman, par. 2), including a deed for the Lake Erie Soda-Water Company.

This carnivalesque atmosphere, capped off by Ararat, whose founders hope will exist “under the protection of the Great American Union [and] equal Palestine in size” (Katchor 13), is populated by seers, visionaries, and venture capitalists. “The streets of this city are filled with eccentrics” (like Kishon), whose “aberrant behavior” must be tolerated for fear of anti-Jewish sentiment about the religion’s inherent tendency to produce madness (57). Katchor’s Manhattan is as fascinated by Judaism as fearful of it, and in this atmosphere—where “the main religion is commerce” (Hoberman, par. 6)—a cast of other mystics-cum-snake-oil-salesmen like Yosl Feinbroyt thrive. Feinbroyt has trance-induced visions of a “celestial journey” to a palace that reveals Kabbalistic glyphs and their meanings; he sketches them and sells them on embroidered handkerchiefs that become a fad during the summer of 1830 (Katchor 33-35). Katchor uses this sequence to transition into other madcap ventures by hunters and trappers, who try to sell an aphrodisiac lozenge developed from “the anal gland of the adult male beaver” (37).

This Manhattan of 1830 is depicted through new visual-textual innovations that constantly evoke the vanished past and its distance from a contemporary reader. Katchor’s angular, sketchy figures are depicted in a gray color palette “that has intimations of newsprint, soot, and overcast skies” (Hoberman, par. 2). Each page has an average of eight panels, which are often dominated by large speech balloons filled with the artist’s distinctive lettering. This emphasizes that the characters in The Jew of New

5 Also significant—while explaining this aesthetic choice—is the text’s original serialization in 1992 and 1993 in The Forward, a Jewish-American newspaper.
York are all voluminous talkers and philosophers, exponents of the strange, hybrid world they populate. In form as well as in content, the text engages the reader as an artifact from this alternate New York: its “spidery drawings,” bound “between two pieces of embossed but unfinished cardboard” (par. 11), seem designed to evoke the patina of the past and an overall sense of otherness, a far cry from the reader-identification that Scott McCloud and others see as central to the humor and storytelling of comic strips. It is this timeworn quality that becomes doubly significant when the text is billed by its author as a “historical romance” (Katchor vi). While the term has been in existence since Sir Walter Scott’s era, the intertextual reference to Amy Elias is a reference point for this dissertation. Katchor’s text, when read through the lens of Elias, becomes an ironic commentary on the romantic historical sublime that extends the concept further. Its world is a bleak and byzantine one, wholly appropriate to a New York that never truly existed, one urged into existence by obscure history like the attempt to establish Ararat. Katchor’s graphic novel is wildly reimaginative but inspired by the reconstructive impulse. It retells some actual events but places them in a highly fictionalized and parodic context. But the visual reference points for the story—and its status as an objet d’art—make it an aesthetic reconstruction. Katchor uses graphic fiction to limn the contours of some very strange 19th-century history, the realities of which as a whole no less implausible than its fictional mutations.

Though it is a decidedly different type of text, Kyle Baker’s Nat Turner (2008) also breaks with past tradition in its bold visual energy. It is representative of just how diverse the medium of the graphic novel can be, and is very unlike the work of Sturm or Katchor. Baker usually produces a few large, detailed borderless panels per page that are
drawn in a style reminiscent of the anatomically exaggerated realism of American comics artists like Will Eisner, Jack Davis, and John Buscema. Their art has long been associated with a caricatured, lurid, burlesque sensibility of the 1940s-1970s. Some of the more lurid moments in *Nat Turner* such as a burly slave beheading a white child (Baker 135) seem to ironically comment on these artists’ previous portrayals of race, violence, and villainy. Baker also uses this style of over-the-top violence and sexuality in his Iraq War satire, *Special Forces*, which at times appears calculated to offend a politically correct audience. But wedded to this over-the-top sensibility, which Baker uses to metaphorically (and wryly) portray Nat Turner’s 1803 slave rebellion as the work of the traditional comic book “hero with superhuman abilities” (6), is an attempt to do justice to the historical event through a counterhistorical engagement. Its heavy use of artistic pastiche makes it a commentary on the selective presence and absence of black images in American comic art and popular culture as a whole. Baker notes the necessity for this text in his introduction when he writes, “I can rent dozens of films about the Civil War, Martin Luther King, Rosa Parks, and Jackie Robinson. But there are no Hollywood Nat Turner films. While many battle sites of the Civil War have plaques, statues, and even gift shops, the sites of Turner’s rebellion are unmarked” (6). This makes explicit the text’s intention to, like other African-American graphic novels discussed by Michael

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6 Of particular note is the black caricatured sidekick, Ebony, in Eisner’s *The Spirit*, who has been subject to some defenses but many criticisms. Baker has written and illustrated a story for a 2000s revival of the character by contemporary artists, which attempts to update or reconstruct a non-racially-caricatured Ebony for a modern audience. African-Americans are not notably depicted in the horror art of Jack Davis for the 1950s EC comics, but the hyper-violent depiction of racially caricatured Arab and African others—who often behead or are beheaded—is a tradition especially seen in Buscema’s *Savage Sword of Conan* pulp revival for Marvel comics. This is an intertextual reference point that Baker exploits to produce new meaning, using it to resist whitewashed, sanitized depictions of slavery and slave rebellion that ignore its violence inflicted upon the body.

7 Of possible relevance is the absence of William Styron’s novel in Baker’s bibliography. This puts his politics more in line with Ishmael Reed’s. (See Chapter 4.)
Chaney, to “question institutions of recollection, such as documentary photography and Hollywood cinema, upon whose premises any such thing as the past is produced for scrutiny in the first place” (Chaney 176). Baker, previously employed by “the two largest” comic publishers (Marvel and DC) also notes the personal significance of self-publishing the comics collected in a later trade paperback edition when he notes “I liked that one of my first books as an independent publisher would be about a self-freed slave” (Baker 7).

All of the text in Nat Turner comes directly from The Confessions of Nat Turner, the 1831 account of the rebellion composed by his lawyer. Occasionally, the illustrated narrative will be interrupted with a facsimile page from the account. At other times, a mixture of smaller comic panels—for instance, depicting Turner growing to adulthood as he covertly learns to read—and a cameo spot illustration appropriate to a 19th-century newspaper interrupt a page comprised largely of text (93), and occasionally an actual image from journalism related to the rebellion finds its way among Baker’s (111).

Another strategy is to present text and illustrations on facing pages (180-181), which uses competing texts in the same space in a way similar to Glancy’s Stone Heart. All of this makes Nat Turner a text closely wedded to its source material, more of a graphic adaptation than a direct attempt to create historical fiction around the rebellion itself. This adaptation, like all others, creates a new perspective on the source material, imagining what it leaves out. It is not exactly a secret history but it is a holistic one that depicts a kind of universal slave life from many conceivable angles, while moving to specifically address Nat Turner’s historically-recorded rebellion halfway through. However, Baker engages in his own historiography as a visual, not textual, response to the Confessions. He is allowed to create his own sense of the rebellion and Turner’s presence, one that is
almost anti-textual (despite the presence of extracts from the *Confessions* in the graphic novel). In part, this accomplishes the goal of depicting the slaves’ world as they might have communicated it. Baker also visually reconstructs Turner as a heroic (if troubled) figure, embodied through sketched vignettes and moments, all of which are created “with a dream-like temporality that recontextualizes the graphic novel as a conscious revision of media constructions of black embodiment” (Chaney 176).

Linda Hutcheon is aware of the graphic novel and its status as a medium for new kinds of adaptation. In a recent interview discussing Chester Brown’s graphic biography *Louis Riel*, she notes that the visual is privileged over the literary in the graphic novel, its “heterocosm”—its visual world, its characters, even its action [are] totally determined by the visual, not the literary (which is usually reduced to dialogue and some information). Some of the most powerful adaptations in the form of graphic novels use “silent” panels—no words. I’m thinking of those panels in *Louis Riel* where he lets us see and feel Riel’s moral dilemma, rather than telling us about it verbally (Hutcheon, qtd. in Bucknell 165).

The images depicted in *Nat Turner* run parallel to the historical document but also exist as one potential envisioning of the recorded events, appropriate for a contemporary audience. At the same time, devices specific to comics—sound effects, panel and page transitions, varying uses of layout—are used to emphasize this graphic novel’s status as a comic book. In this way, Baker creates a hybrid form where the Nat Turner narrative exists in a new, postmodern space of visual and textual energy. The book’s first section, dealing with slave captivity in Africa and the Middle Passage, is perhaps its most experimental, where a full-page splash of a slave woman’s leg caught by a lasso as she
dives over a cliff is followed by two somber large panels of chained slaves guarded by an
armed captor, the bottom of which is simply bordered by four pictographs of the moon in
its phases, suggesting the passage of time without narrating it directly (Baker 28-29). As
time passes and Turner’s mother is first stripped, then nearly killed by captors, one man
talks another out of shooting her with a large, boldfaced “$!” in an oversimplified speech
balloon, accompanied by a talon-like pointed finger (35; Fig 4.4). During the Middle
Passage, one slave who jumps overboard again is given a large speech balloon, in which
the duplicated image of a dead slave’s body she is chained next to is reproduced instead
of text (42, 46). The privileging of the visual over verbal is again depicted when a young
Turner is shown reading the Bible, seeing Moses’ image panoramically in a panel that
depicts the extremely wide-eyed youth’s amazement (87).

![Image](image_url)

Figure 6.5: Art from Kyle Baker’s *Nat Turner*
During the rebellion sequence, which takes up the last third of the text, the
carnage is interrupted by a full-page reproduction of the axe with which the murders are
committed (152). In this phase of the text, Baker depicts some of the murders in
extremely small panels, then the narrative reaches its peak as the largest, most powerful
slave fights for his life among armed white men in a sequence that evokes the
metamorphosis of Marvel Comics’ Incredible Hulk (174-178). Directly after this violent
climax, in which the man dies in silhouette amid gunfire, a page reproduces the “List of
Persons Murdered in the Insurrection […] Amounting to Fifty-Five” (179) directly from
the original Confessions document. This emphasizes the lack of humanity granted to
those who participated in the uprising, as Baker reminds us in quoting the document that
no slaves are listed among those dead. Another bold statement is made when, after his
lynching, which has the power to turn a bloodthirsty crowd’s expression from one of glee
to one of quiet awe (195-6), Turner’s autopsy is contrasted with a small, inset cameo
panel of a cotton gin (198), which likens the corpse of a slave to a defective version of
the machine that led to slavery’s growth. As the cotton gin caused the growth of cotton
production in the American South, dependence on slavery and the plantation system
grew. Baker creates a parallel between slaves and industrial labor, again pointing to the
denial of humanity that is a key theme of his text. Yet the discovery of the Confessions
text by a young enslaved woman leads to the book’s climax, as, armed with its subversive
power, she disappears into the darkness (199-200).

This suggests that Baker believes in the transformative power of historical
knowledge. The same can be said of all the graphic novel auteurs discussed in this coda
to my dissertation, who retell and rewrite the past because its relevance compels these
new imaginings that are also resurrections of historical ephemera, and reconstructions of history itself. Even more than film, the spirit of historiographic metafiction is alive in the graphic novel. These texts are exemplary of its possibilities, and tendencies to rewrite and retell the events of the past. Its fusions of text and visual material are a literary innovation of the late 20th century, a genuinely new way of thinking about history.

With the exception of *Nat Turner* (itself a late work in the career of an artist who has been working as an illustrator for over twenty years), these graphic novels all predate a certain boom period in the form’s popularity and production in the mid-to-late-2000s. As *Maus* and *Watchmen* led to a generation’s rediscovery of the comics medium that pointed toward its possibilities, *From Hell, James Sturm’s America*, and *The Jew of New York* could comprise the formation of a graphic-historical canon which will only be added to in the future. I propose that they are significant to historiographic metafiction’s development for this reason, as they are both influenced by their literary and artistic precursors and having the potential for vast influence of their own. They provide a foundation for future graphic novel projects, some of which have been long in gestation, such as Elijah Brubaker’s graphic biography of Wilhelm Reich, published both online and in print. As the graphic novel continues to develop, it will produce further outgrowths in the field of history. Parallel to the development of film and television’s historical dramas, the historical graphic novel will continue to encompass future innovations in its new visual historiography. The form is a space for *construction* as well as reconstruction, as the collective response to each eagerly awaited new graphic novel—often years in the making, due to the time-consuming nature of the form—displays. History is told anew in
the graphic novel, and the texts discussed in this section provide a starting point for future
historiographic and artistic innovations.
Conclusion

The crisis in historicity that Frederic Jameson sees as crucial to postmodernism is the result of social forces, reproduced within the internal dynamics of literature. Historians, while skeptical of past histories and the claims they made, continued to produce them on good faith, with the intention to revise and correct. Novelists, however, re-engaged with history to seek out answers to other social and cultural questions raised alongside doubts in the reliability of history; in doing so, they only became more aware of its centrality in the production of contemporary American identity. In response to the crisis and its anxieties, historiographic metafiction carried over the role played by all metafiction—to break the fourth wall between text and reader, emphasizing the constructed nature of the literary text through parody and subversion—to historical accounts. The historical novel, once thought to recapture the spirit of an era, became more about how we viewed the era in the present time. Any authenticity of spirit that it recaptured was now rescued from an error-prone or distorting view from the present, but also presented a deliberately vexing strategy offered among a multiplicity of possible histories or prismatic views. Historical accounts became a matter of absence and plenitude, with the latter arranged around the former’s central lack. If authenticity was impossible, its impossibility opened the literary floodgates.
But what created this absence? Again, the answer lies in history itself, in the dual forces of American history’s forward momentum and the stories it begun to create about its past. The First World War was crucial to the formation of European Modernism in foregrounding the cultural battle between the rational and the irrational in the minds of writers like Virginia Woolf and T.S. Eliot, then created a Lost Generation in its wake. The Second World War worked differently, from the American side of the conflict, but produced a similar crisis in a generation of postwar writers who rebelled against the 1950s’ celebratory conformism. The Beat Generation’s denunciation of mainstream values began a transformative movement among the nation’s youth, and it is not coincidental that Pynchon, Barth, and Dick all participate in a skeptical rejection of American exceptionalism and hegemony in their texts, all published in the pre-Kennedy-Assassination early 1960s. After 1963, this viewpoint became seen as prescient, and a seminal starting point in the counterculture’s intellectual growth. What all these writers have in common is an embrace of generational skepticism and unrest in the wake of World War II. Pynchon depicts this through the ennui and confusion of his own bohemian lost generation of caricatures; Dick creates an alternate historical world in which the inevitable victory over the Axis did not in fact occur; Barth delves into America’s mythic origins with mischievous intent to portray it as a time of innocence lost, a wilderness seething with criminals and malcontents. All three writers are also reacting in a sense to the anti-Communist panic and the search for American values in literature and history, just as its literary canon had been used in earlier decades to find exemplary cultural greatness in the service of ideology. With 19th-century American
literary figures such as Melville and Whitman co-opted in service of a mid-20th-century identity, it is no wonder that this generation sought to parody not only academic stuffiness but academia’s ideological direction of the time. The countercultural significance of Pynchon, Barth, and Dick would only grow as the 1960s’ period of cultural mutation began in earnest in the years after the Kennedy Assassination and America’s entry into the Vietnam War.

These writers exemplify the reimaginative impulse I have added to Linda Hutcheon’s definition of historiographic metafiction. At the same time, they also contain the seeds of the reconstructive; this is especially true of Barth. *V.* is a reimaginative secret history of the early 20th century that sees the World Wars as the result of intangible dark forces that are incarnated in the mysterious titular V. Yet they are never fully explained, demystified, or restored into a linear, clear history. This means that not only is an attempt to assemble the pieces into a coherent, chronological narrative impossible—for there will be pieces missing, despite many intriguing clues or similarities between them leading to V.’s “answer”—but also that the “truth” of them is beyond history’s knowing, if there is any “truth” out there at all. In this way it continues the modernist project of responding to the unreason manifested in World War I’s carnage from a historical standpoint. The clockwork, cybernetic aspects of V. (both the figure and the novel) recall Picasso and Duchamp’s artistic strategies: they assemble and “explode” the form, moving opposite to the realist or historical impulse. Barth, in *The Sot-Weed Factor*, writes in a parodic mode of reimagina­tion but instead works to create a reconstruction. The relationship between his novel and Ebenezer Cooke’s poem “The Sot-Weed Factor” is a clever inversion of the
relationship between fiction, or poetry, and history. Rather than trying to decode the poem’s historical references, it encodes, reconstructing (or reverse-engineering) a world that the satiric poem turns out to describe quite accurately, and a character whose lost innocence inspires him to write in such a way. It is this energy with which Barth approaches history that is a foundation for all later reconstructions, which subsequently de-emphasize the parodic aspect of the purely reimaginative in favor of other ends. This tension between reimagination and reconstruction first appears here, and persists in various forms until the latter comes to dominate in postmodern historical fiction.

In order to become reconstruction, reimagination had to develop and produce new mutations. Concurrent with Barth and Pynchon’s innovations, the birth of alternate-historical fiction in Dick’s *The Man in the High Castle* gives the reimaginative impulse a focus, a fulcrum upon which its deviations from recorded history hinge. Dick also reacts to the politics and ideology of the 1950s and early 1960s, especially a worldview that emphasizes America as the triumphant victor in a postwar politics. Dividing up America between the Axis victors and giving each of them a fascist pageantry that owes more to then-current America than the Third Reich, Dick rewrites the outcome of World War II and points to a hopeful resolution that would only be the lesser of two evils. The text also presents a compelling meditation on historicity that emphasizes the chaotic and contingent. This is the text’s legacy outside of the science-fiction tradition; it gives birth to the *counterhistory* practiced by Reed, Doctorow, and DeLillo in their meditations on the 20th century’s crises and formative events. But later texts in the alternate history genre also develop Dick’s ideas in new directions. When Gibson and Sterling’s *The Difference*
*Engine* alters history less in terms of a forking path than in terms of transplanting one century’s developments into the previous one, it also works as a more self-consciously postmodernist textual pastiche. It interpolates and samples 19th century texts using the tools of digital technology, and defamiliarizes the past through this new historical lens. Chabon’s *The Yiddish Policemen’s Union* shares these texts’ idea of redrawing geographical boundaries when it relocates a Jewish settlement to Alaska. It also presents an evolved, late-form version of alternate history, the alterations of which have become increasingly specific and less routinized or obvious; its textual innovations have also spread to literature as a whole. In the process from Dick to Chabon, alternate history has become less chaotic and more teleological, focusing on both how its alternate versions of our present are reached and how they could just as easily have become those of our actual present. Doing so allows us to see a two-way flow between past and present. Causality becomes less a matter of inevitable historical destiny as it does a series of possible moves on a chessboard. The alternate history becomes the result of incremental adjustments to a past that did not necessary have to lead up to our actual present. In this way alternate histories change our relationship to the past.

It is in the 1990s’ historical novels of the 17th and 18th centuries that reconstruction begins an important, focused late iteration. As pinpointed by Elias’ formulation of the historical sublime, they look backwards at mythic American origins and formulate a new understanding of them animated by romance and myth. They are also fascinated by the master narrative of “bad science” emerging at this time, but use it to illustrate how our contemporary science may be no less partial in its understanding of
the world. Opposed to science is myth, which is also acknowledged as at times inseparable from history (as Glancy explicitly states in *Stone Heart*). Human experience and lost history—that which has been left out of, or obscured by, myth—become a salvage site. Glancy and Wideman both use the experience of the racially marginalized in *Stone Heart* and *The Cattle Killing*; Pynchon recharacterizes early America and its scientific and exploratory spirit in *Mason & Dixon*. Pynchon’s new relationship to history articulated in this novel is of particular importance. The reconstructive Pynchon (arguably initiated in *Gravity’s Rainbow*) attempts to capture a sublime American spirit appropriate to his contemporary era, a countercultural resistance that racial, political, and geographic disparities cannot diminish. If *V.* is a story of 20th century violence, *M&D* looks further back to find possibilities for rebirth and reawakening. Glancy and Wideman also use reconstruction as a principle of textual organization, connecting disparate voices and viewpoints while continuing to use historical documents in their rewritten histories.

Doctorow and Reed pioneer reconstruction as applied to the 20th century. *Mumbo Jumbo* can be described as a parodic reimagination of the Harlem Renaissance that radically alters its place in our history by revealing its secret history, and as such does owe some stylistic debt to Barth. But it is, upon closer inspection, less a reimaginative than a reconstructive narrative, the historical material of which extends further into the past, and even deep into the fabric of myth and occult conspiracy. Its mania for finding connections and traces becomes an end unto itself. Aside from applying reconstruction to African-American cultural history via the Jes Grew concept, it also celebrates a disruptive historical model and similar literary technique. This disruption is less central to
Ragtime, but in it Doctorow mimics Mumbo Jumbo’s relationship between writer and history: history spins rapidly along, and all a novelist can do is capture brief flashes of it, chronicling fragments of its chaotic lunge into the first decades of 20th century American unrest. Yet in telling the story this way—and recomposing history into fragments that add up to a different whole than the one readers have known thus far—a new history is created. The 1910s are seen differently than they were before. Rather than entirely denying the possibility that we can know this history, Doctorow opts instead to parody the known accounts while demystifying them, forging a new, speculative and reconstructive account. It is one that defamiliarizes the past while producing counterhistorical insights from it which share thematic emphasis. Doctorow provides the obvious precursor to the kind of history DeLillo practices in Libra and especially Underworld, providing a set of novels that engages with a late-20th-century American need to know and process historical events that have resisted closure. They delve into the weird histories of the Cold War and Kennedy Assassination, trafficking in their secrets. These secrets, pursued by conspiracy theorists, have formed the texture of their own kind of history, which purports to correct the narrative we think is accurate. But DeLillo’s counterhistory moves beyond a search for answers, looking instead at the 20th century as series of vignettes, a technique learned from Doctorow. His counterhistory, however, differs in that it presents the closure of a circuit that begins with Pynchon and Barth’s own historical era; one could imagine either author appearing in a cameo in Underworld’s 1960s or 1970s sections, much as Doctorow uses Dreiser. Pynchon, in particular, has taken on a countercultural aura—which owes a great deal to his reclusive
nature, and facts both known and apocryphal about him—that seems wholly appropriate to DeLillo’s investigation of his era. Shifting the focus of his own historiographic metafiction to the early 1960s, which I have shown to be seminal for the genre’s production, leads to a reexamination of postmodernist art and culture. DeLillo’s fascination with New York’s 1970s art world (and the graffiti that it embraced) serves as evidence of this, as he maps connections between the cultural and political mutations from 1951-1997 and the political shifts therein.

In a sense, the historical graphic novels I discuss in my coda carry out both reimaginative and reconstructive projects. The attempt to visually depict history owes something to the former, especially in the artistic/cartooning tradition. These graphic novels are reconstructive in their attempt to retell and fuse historical events and details that sometimes come from different events or traditions. In addition, the fusion of the historical novel and the comic book is itself a hybrid construction, and all the texts I discuss as exemplary seem at all times keenly aware of both genres’ histories and traditions. Moore takes storytelling tropes refined during his career as an experimentalist working within the genre of superhero comic books (a background he shares with Baker) and applies them to copious research on both the Jack the Ripper killings and Ripperology, the abundant theories that exist about them. As a result, he reconstructs Victorian history out of a drive to explain the murders. Sturm, like many American cartoonists, is more interested in producing an idiosyncratic art, hence the attachment of his name to the title; this reflects a long tradition among cartoonists—Walt Disney’s Pinocchio and Walt Kelly’s Pogo—that emphasizes the vision or sensibility of an auteur.
His is a historical account that joins (and invents) vignettes in American history to create a panoramic view of its events and, by definition, reconstruct a view of the 19th and 20th century periods in which they occur. Katchor and Baker further extend idiosyncratic views of history to create their graphic novels. Katchor’s exists in a metafictional world reconstructed from scraps of Jewish-American and urban lost history, while Baker’s is a visually energetic focus on the black body under the conditions of enslavement and violence that borrows its visual vocabulary from American comics’ pulp traditions, while subverting them to tell a story that has remained to a large degree untold. This graphic novel movement not only recapitulates moves made by writers of historiographic metafiction in general, including reimaginative and reconstructive currents. It also continues an engagement with history and its production, and as a result becomes the production of a new history suited for the late 20th/early 21st century.

Rewriting has moved across literary genres, and to its fringes, appearing in new genres influenced by those that emerged in the past. While the reimaginative continues to inspire such new mutations as the historical graphic novel, the reconstructive is dominant. What changed to transform reimagination into reconstruction, leading to the prominence of the latter? Does it coincide with the dominance of historiographic metafiction as a mode in literature and film? I believe that the main shift that has taken place over the lifespan of the supergenre—the family of related genres—is due to a desire to process and understand the past. This desire was stronger at the end of the 20th century than it was in the early 1960s. The crucial role of American history in identity formation—and the political battles of the present—have themselves produced the reconstructive mode of
historiographic metafiction. Its present state represents the second phase of the historical graphic novel’s generic evolution, which has yet to cease. This is why reconstruction needed reimagination first: it birthed a new way of seeing history, and disavowing previous ways of writing historical fiction, exposing them as insufficient to the postwar literary landscape. Episodically, I have presented subgenre studies in my individual chapters, in which this integrated narrative emerges: that the postmodernist view of history cannot erase a cultural hunger for knowing and understanding it, even if the means of doing so are radical and experimental, at times closely associated less with reconstruction than dismantling. While embracing postmodern irony, or the literary techniques—which vary in their degree of alterity from conventional historiography—that distinguish the genre, they nonetheless seek to create an understanding of the past that answers the questions it raises in their immediate present. In other words, the focus on “relevance” that has been raised by inquiry into canon formation and historical literary texts is not foregrounded. It is assumed a priori that the past is relevant, though these authors may need to work to convince us that this is so. And it is also assumed from the start that history, as we know it—history as a way of taming the all-encompassing past—does not supply us with the answers that we seek, the meanings we desire. But how can an engagement with history salvage the relevant from a calcified understanding of it that prevents access?

Doing so must necessarily involve engaging with some clichés of historical fiction, subverting them metafictionally. All the texts in this study are animated by this tension between conventional historiography and its literary reshaping: to reincarnate the
past in a meaningful way, even if its authors are aware that this is by no means a reliable process. For the origins of this tension, a brief return to the three foundational early 1960s texts of my argument is necessary. When, in *Sot-Weed*, Barth’s narrator justifies his “fast and loose” account of actual history with the explanation that “Clio was already a scarred and crafty trollop when the Author found her” (Barth 743), we are given the forerunner of future authors’ engagements. Barth simply finds more information relevant to an American identity formation circa 1960 in Cooke’s satiric poetry than in other historical accounts of pre-Revolutionary America, and crafts his engagement from this reimagined landscape, significantly choosing the underrepresented Maryland that he returns to in several other works. Pynchon, in *V.*, makes a departure from Barth in that he begins with a relevant historical question: what led to and connected the violence and upheaval of the early 20th century? It is the search for this absent cause—and a knowable history itself—into which Stencil slips, seeking to reconstruct the past into a coherent narrative. What Stencil (by way of Pynchon) here performs is identical to all the reconstructive novelists I have surveyed. Hutcheon provides a canny understanding of metafiction’s engagement with the production of historiography that is foundational to my argument; where I extend her seminal work is in specifying how, despite its irony, the return of a desire for transcendent history cannot be fully repressed, and has made its gradual return since the origin of postwar fiction. My emphasis on reconstruction also extends Elias’ argument about the historical sublime. She argues that we experience and fulfill a desire for history through the sublime’s distortion and myth; I argue that the reconstructive desire is equal parts myth (or several disparate myths), lost history, secret
history, and defamiliarized history. Reconstruction is a prism through which all that we see—or mis-see—about history is sorted out in fiction. This is why the emergence of counterhistory requires a reconstructive focus to operate.

It also operates as a way to restructure our perceptions about history. As I discussed in Chapter 3, the resurfacing of lost or obscure historical facts into a narrative that strings them together, giving certain of them an elevated importance, allows for more significant epochal events to be seen differently, or in a symbolic way.

DeLillo takes a similar approach to the Kennedy Assassination as Moore’s *From Hell*, which adds an emphasis on the holistic view of a society that produced an infamous historical event. Moore’s epilogue to *From Hell* is a late-phase discussion of the impossibility of finding a solution to the Jack the Ripper murders without adding to an already crowded landscape of possible solutions. It too engages with the possibility of genre exhaustion. Barth famously discusses it in his seminal 1967 essay, “The Literature of Exhaustion,” which points the way for a literature of replenishment, a way to respond to a literary condition where innovations seem impossible. History and innovation do not usually go hand in hand, unless new historical texts are thought to correct their predecessors, or to clarify their findings. This is an idea parodied in *V*. Pynchon’s reason for reaching back into history, in *V.* and his subsequent novels, seems to be that a false historical closure has been achieved prior to his emergence as a writer, and that we are not done with World War II, Colonial America, or the rich worldwide tapestry to which these and other places like his San Narciso, California are connected. In this way his is an *oeuvre* of replenishment, which seeks to reinvigorate time and place through often-
fantastical invention (itself pioneered during the reimaginative’s dominance), or the resurrection of lost historical ephemera (which is the new content V. ushers in with the reimaginative era, which recurs with a difference in the reconstructive). Reed is responding to a codified, exhausted—and no longer politically useful—view of African American history. The Harlem Renaissance, Nat Turner, and ancient Egypt have all had their stories rewritten before their radical potential could be unleashed on the world; Mumbo Jumbo is a textual unveiling that parodies and counterargues against this kind of history. Doctorow creates much the same engagement with 1910s America, reconstructing and inventing collisions between its figures. Dick reopens the legacy of World War II, rewriting history into its other; by the time Gibson and Sterling come to write The Difference Engine, alternate history has become its own subgenre in SF and military fiction, depicting many possible alternate outcomes or paths taken involving the war. As a result, they remove alternate history’s strict emphasis on a fulcrum point, choosing instead to cut the development of the computer from one historical context and paste it into a completely different one. Chabon’s response to the exhaustion of certain tropes of alternate history lead to an innovative reconstruction that again defamiliarizes how contemporary Jewish identity is formed. It is part of a cultural conversation in which Katchor and Sturm also participate, unearthing lost Jewish history and exploring its possibilities in an American historical context.

The dominance of reconstructive historiographic metafiction is a response to a different kind of historical crisis than that theorized by Jameson. It is a crisis where the knowability of history has been knocked off its perch, but also one of a proliferation of
historical facts, ideas, and interpretations. Competing narratives that seek to regain a lost
dominance or canonicity define it. Some of these are ideologically suspect, potentially
extremely so (i.e., the lunatic fringe’s Holocaust deniers). Other less radical attempts to
“correct” history as we know it still may be considered reactionary attempts to argue that
revisionist history, for instance, has gone too far in the opposite direction from fact, or to
celebrate the forebears or originators of a certain ideology. There is also an ongoing
attempt to present a warts-and-all, deromanticized approach to iconic historical figures,
which can be seen as motivated by one of several competing—for instance, far-right or
far-left—ideologies. Doing so can provoke very different cries of outrage, depending
upon the target. In these cases, contemporary popular history has in fact come to imitate
Barth’s “Secret Historie” in which Captain John Smith is portrayed as the hero of a
bizarre pornographic adventure of conquests.

Contemporary Americans are often skeptical of such purported revelations of
secret history, and rightly so. Often, it is difficult to separate myth from fact, or to
dissolve the fusion of the two that owes its existence to an inadvertent historical
reimagination. As a result, all historiographic fiction has been lent a trace of the
metafictional, in that it makes its research processes, blending of real and imagined
material, and inspiration from myth and legend apparent. Of the authors discussed in this
dissertation, Diane Glancy is perhaps the most exemplary of this tendency. Stone Heart
dramatizes the fusion of competing narratives, as well as the unearthing of lost historical
factoids from Lewis and Clark’s journals. Is it possible that what we are reading from the
source text is in fact a biased account that makes the explorers look far less heroic than
we have considered them? Possibly, but the deromanticization of them that occurs is in fact subtle. The often uninteresting and erroneous nature of their accounts makes the invention of a myth of the bold American exploratory spirit seem all the more necessary. And Glancy in a way communes with a Sacajawea that is not exactly the historical one (whose death gives rise to contradictory accounts), but one that exists in the American and Native American cultural imagination. In this way, Glancy offers a perfect encapsulation of what reconstruction is about in my argument: a space in which competing historical narratives and ideas can meet, can coexist, leaving it up to the reader to cull from it as they choose. While these narratives do largely share a leftist political agenda, they also seek to expose what Joan Didion refers to as political fictions. The reconstructive presents not a historical sublime but a series of collisions between the sublime, the canonical, the lost but factual, the purported, and our culture’s desires for the production and reception of knowledge itself. This is a postmodern historical fiction that speaks not to a disavowal of the past as unknowable but instead a renewed interest in history. Like DeLillo’s novels, which are as much about our engagement with and processing of the Kennedy Assassination and the Cold War as they are about those events themselves, Glancy creates a metafiction that dramatizes the process of thinking through history, and its significance on multiple levels. Both books coincide with a *fin de siècle* and early-century obsession with information, technology, and remapping America in space and time.

Along with the competing ways of viewing history that have accrued and led to the dominance of the reconstructive mode, the contemporary context for viewing the
past—why write this novel now, why about that period?—is significant. The parity between past and present is crucial to several novels discussed in the previous chapters, and it is again in play as I conclude my argument. I believe that late-phase historiographic metafiction seems to offer reconstruction only as a possible answer to the historical question of an era’s significance. It seems overly facile to determine that a figure or event was, for instance, the 19th century’s answer to something relevant to us today. It is more reimaginative than reconstructive to create a portrait of the contemporary world in a past one, as in John Fowles’ *The French Lieutenant’s Woman* (1969), though its presentation of three possible endings for Sarah Woodruff is perhaps an important metafictional signpost in genre evolution. Instead, I see the mapping of the present onto the past as one way among others to present a new enrichment of history, be it anachronistic parody or a motivation to rewrite a story of the past.

The question of why certain novels emerge at a certain time is a worthwhile one, and it can also be applied to historiographic metafiction as a whole. The influence of the mid-to-late 20th century’s wars will always be an interesting template to apply to postmodernist historical fiction. *Gravity’s Rainbow*, for instance, can become an explanation of the Vietnam War as a means of fulfilling a hunger for annihilation that World War II did not satiate. Reed’s bomb tonnage chart in *Mumbo Jumbo* supports this thesis, while wedding it to a narrative of suppression. Parallels between the Age of Reason and the Information Age abounded in the 1990s. DeLillo explains the logic of the Cold War, and how its fallout looms large over the dawning of the 20th century; Dick reshuffles the deck of postwar geopolitics and rethinks the meaning of objects from a
distinct, reliable past. Filmmakers and graphic novelists are inspired by literary innovations and work them into new genre fusions that retell and adapt history in new formulations.

In all of these examples we can see an argument antithetical to a view of postmodern ahistoricity, or repetitive pastiche. It is not that narratives of America’s past are destined to repeat themselves, but that they are destined to interact with one another, to influence and proliferate as they mutate. It is for this very reason that an exhaustion of history as a transcendent narrative has in turn led to a proliferation of historiographic metafiction, and an evolution that becomes increasingly aware of alternative ways of seeing and processing the past, all of which are crucial to the evolution of American identity. As ways of seeing and thinking about our nation’s history proliferate and change, the exhumation and rewriting of its history will continue.
Bibliography


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