

“Whoever has emerged victorious participates to this day in the triumphal procession in which the present rulers step over those who are lying prostrate. According to traditional practice, the spoils are carried along in the procession. They are called cultural treasures, and a historical materialist views them with cautious detachment. For without exception the cultural treasures he surveys have an origin which he cannot contemplate without horror. They owe their existence not only to the efforts of the great minds and talents who have created them, but also to the anonymous toil of their contemporaries. There is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism. And just as such a document is not free of barbarism, barbarism taints also the manner in which it was transmitted from one owner to another. A historical materialist therefore dissociates himself from it as far as possible. He regards it as his task to brush history against the grain.”

Walter Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History”

University of Alberta

**Documenting Barbarism: The Violence of the Archive in Contemporary
American Fiction**

by

Theo Joseph Finigan

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Abstract

This dissertation analyzes representations of the archive in four late twentieth-century American novels: Don DeLillo's *Libra* (1988), Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian or The Evening Redness in the West* (1985), Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987), and Bharati Mukherjee's *The Holder of the World* (1993). In depicting a series of distinct periods in American history—colonial settlement, westward expansion, Reconstruction, the Cold War—these revisionist, “postmodern” texts all draw self-conscious attention to the process of representing the past by including archival documents, sites, and practices within the textual frame. The novels thus emphasize the necessarily mediated nature of historical knowledge by depicting both events that occur in the past and the deployment of the archive to represent and understand those events in the present. In emphasizing these novels' self-reflexive engagement with the archive as a crucial site for the production of knowledge about the past, this project takes its cue from the recent and widespread critical-theoretical “refiguring” of the concept of the archive in the wake of Jacques Derrida's *Archive Fever* (1995). The novels analyzed in this dissertation engage in a similarly self-conscious—albeit fictive—theorizing and critique of the archive. Focusing on the representation of a range of troubling events in American history, including colonialism, genocide, slavery, sexual abuse, and political assassination, this project argues that there is, in fact, a fundamental connection between such scenes of violence and the turn to the archive as a trope for the representation of history. In these novels, the seemingly benign gesture of archivization—the collection, ordering, and recovery of traces

of the past—is implicated in the more obvious material violence of the historical events contained *within* the archive. Thus, even as they strive to counter hegemonic understandings of the American past through the construction of fictional “counterhistories” of resistance, these novels simultaneously seek to complicate any straightforward equation of revisionist historical understanding with the redress of past injustices. By implicating what I call the process of “archival recovery” in the very violence it is ostensibly designed to mitigate, these texts problematize the privileging of the “historical” in late-twentieth century academic and popular culture, thereby casting doubt on the archive’s ability to enable an ethical or redemptive encounter between present and past.

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Introduction

Archival Fictions

Thus, on the waste land between the marshalling yard of the Gare d'Austerlitz and the Pont Tolbiac where this Babylonian library now rises, there stood until the end of the war an extensive warehousing complex to which the Germans brought all the loot they had taken from the homes of the Jews of Paris. I believe they cleared some forty thousand apartments at that time ... in an operation lasting months, for which purpose they requisitioned the entire pantechnicon fleet of the Paris Union of Furniture Removers, and an army of no fewer than fifteen hundred removal men was brought into action. All who had taken part in any way in this highly organized programme of expropriation and reutilization ... the people in charge of it, the sometimes rival staffs of the occupying power and the financial and fiscal authorities, the residents' and property registries, the banks and insurance agencies, the police, the transport firms, the landlords and caretakers of the apartment buildings, must undoubtedly have known that scarcely any of those interned in Drancy would ever come back ... In the years from 1942 onwards everything our civilization has produced, whether for the embellishment of life or merely for everyday use, from Louis XVI chests of drawers, Meissen porcelain, Persian rugs and whole libraries, down to the last salt-cellar and pepper-mill, was stacked there in the Austerlitz-Tolbiac storage depot ... The most valuable items, of course, were not sent off wholesale to the bombed cities, and no one will now admit to knowing where they went, for the fact is that the whole affair is buried in the most literal sense beneath the foundations of our pharaonic President's Grande Bibliothèque.

(W. G. Sebald, *Austerlitz* 401-03)

Exergue: *Austerlitz*

Toward the end of the late German writer W. G. Sebald's enigmatic Holocaust novel *Austerlitz* (2001), two men—the unnamed narrator and the eponymous protagonist, Jacques Austerlitz—engage in a wide ranging discussion concerning the imposing structure that is the Bibliothèque nationale de France. Commissioned in 1988 by then President Mitterrand, the modernized complex superseded the old library located on the rue Richelieu in 1996, its four large

towers grouped around a central plaza providing a massively expanded (and digitized) storage space for France's cultural, historical, and intellectual patrimony. However, Austerlitz—a retired professor of architectural history who, throughout the novel, pays numerous visits to libraries, museums, and other archival sites—is rather ambivalent about the library's appearance and function. For example, he sees the complex's "monumental dimensions" as indicative less of the grandeur of French cultural heritage than of Mitterrand's self-aggrandizing desire to "perpetuate his memory" into the future (386). In part because of this monomaniacal focus on political commemoration, the Bibliothèque nationale is, from Austerlitz's perspective, hopelessly inadequate as a living, working library. Thus, "both in its outer appearance and inner constitution," the national library is "unwelcoming if not inimical to human beings" (386); if its vaguely dystopian physical appearance "overwhelms" the solitary individual upon his or her approach (387), its labyrinthine security arrangements (389) and counter-intuitive "control systems" (392) make it nearly impossible to use effectively for any kind of research. Consequently, Austerlitz, who, as a young child, had been sent away from war-torn Europe and who is now attempting to uncover information about what happened to his Jewish family under Nazi occupation, finds the great library "useless in [his] search for any traces of [his] father who had disappeared from Paris more than fifty years ago" (393).

What is perhaps most interesting about Austerlitz's brief disquisition, though, is not so much its satirical depiction of the excesses of contemporary, bureaucratized knowledge production or its lament over the exigencies of

historical research as its suggestion of the problematic, if (literally) subterranean, connections between France's national repository, on the one hand, and the occurrence of an unimaginable historical trauma, on the other. While Austerlitz's feelings of profound, existential alienation seem, at first, to be in response to the inhuman space of the modernized library, to his sense of being treated as "a potential enemy" (398) by those in control of its fortress-like confines, ultimately there is something more at stake in his reaction than a kind of generalized, (post)modernist angst. For Sebald, in other words, the symbolically brutalizing effect of the Bibliothèque nationale seems analogous to, if not deeply bound up with, the violence of the Holocaust itself. On one level, this "violence" is that of a deleterious, unjust forgetting. Austerlitz argues that the technologically advanced library seems to be designed "to break with everything which still has some living connection to the past" (398). More specifically, the construction of the new library site entails the literal erasure of the remnants of cultural memory, "burying" most if not all traces of the awful fate of Paris's Jewish community along with the shameful record of French collaborationism. Ironically, a space supposedly dedicated to the *preservation* of a people's collective memory facilitates instead a dubious process of cultural amnesia that works strategically to downplay or occlude altogether the nation's partial complicity in genocidal practices. Simultaneously, however, Sebald intimates an even more profound connection between Mitterrand's grotesque library and the history it conceals. If the basic function of this library is to gather together—and thus *to archive*—the venerated textual traces of French cultural history, then Sebald suggests that a

similar gesture of “consignation” is inextricable from the events of a less celebrated history: the expropriation, disappearance, and eventual murder of the Jews in the Shoah. Here, in other words, the great project of collection that constitutes the new Bibliothèque nationale repeats, in an uncanny fashion, the earlier work of organization and arrangement by which “everything our civilization [in this case, that of the Parisian Jews] ha[d] produced” was “put ... into the depot in proper order and sort[ed] ... by value and kind” (402). In *Austerlitz*, then, the process of archivization—the collection and ordering of objects or texts—appears to be indissociable from both the material violence of racialized genocide and the discursive or symbolic violence of the collective repression whereby the nation fails to do justice to its painful past.

Despite originating in a different cultural context, Sebald’s haunting final novel, with its ambivalent association of the archive with the defining trauma of modernity, neatly encapsulates some of my own concerns and thus provides a suggestive point of departure for this project. This dissertation features close examinations of four works of late twentieth-century American fiction in which the archive is a recurring figure or trope. In each of the novels—Cormac McCarthy’s *Blood Meridian or The Evening Redness in the West* (1985), Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* (1987), Bharati Mukherjee’s *The Holder of the World* (1993), and Don DeLillo’s *Libra* (1988)—the archive may provide a literal setting or backdrop for much of the action but it also more often than not functions as an underlying, overdetermined metaphor for the texts’ key thematic concerns, particularly in terms of their presentation of the complex relationship between

America's past, present, and future. In broad terms these four texts can be classified as historical novels according to the terms provided by David Cowart's 1989 study of that genre: that is, they are fictions "in which the past figures with some prominence" and "a historical consciousness manifests itself strongly in either the characters or the action" (*History* 6).¹ More specifically, though, these novels all exhibit what Cowart refers to as "historiographical acuteness" (*History* 27); in other words, to the extent that they continually emphasize the idea that past reality does not exist independently of its "textualization" or "materialization" in the documentary and/or artifactual record, these novels constitute highly self-reflexive, "postmodern" engagements with the historical past. As Mariadele Boccardi suggests concerning a similar tendency in the contemporary British historical novel, such self-conscious texts depict not so much the past itself as characters' engagement with "the sources that mediate the reality of the past for consumption in the present" (5). These novels thus tend to fold back on

¹ Cowart's generous definition of the historical novel is useful in that it avoids an overly rigid schema that might lead to certain "arbitrary exclusions" (*History* 6). For instance, if we were to follow certain definitions provided by other critics of the form, a novel such as *Libra* would not qualify as a historical novel since it was not written about events that occurred at least "two generations" removed in time; similarly, Morrison's deliberate, politicized shift of narrative focus away from so-called important events and people and toward the marginalized means that *Beloved* could be excluded from the genre on the basis of its neglect of the "public sphere" (qtd. in Cowart, *History* 5). While my emphasis on the figure of the archive as deployed in historical novels differs from Cowart's focus on the latter genre as such, there are some points of intersection. Thus, the subgenre of the historical novel that Cowart sees as being concerned with "The Way It Was" (and hence with a certain "historical verisimilitude") (*History* 8) dovetails with my primary texts' interrogation of the archive's promise to enable the full recovery of the "truth" or "reality" of the past. Likewise, in their depiction of key moments in American history—the death of a President, the closing of the Frontier—my chosen novels are examples of Cowart's notion of "Turning Point" fiction (*History* 8). I would also suggest that, on a certain level, we are similarly concerned with the crucial relation that these texts establish between past and present (i.e. rather than just treating the past as an object of antiquarian or hermetic contemplation in and of itself). To that extent, this project is motivated by what Cowart identifies as "the Ur-historical question" preoccupying "the more self-consciously historical novelist": "What in the past made the present?" (*History* 7). In addition, the following chapters repeatedly ask a supplementary, inverted question: how is it that the present, via the mediation of the archive, *makes* the past?

themselves in a metafictional way, representing within textual space the very processes (or, at least, figurative analogies *for* those processes) of collection, documentation, and interpretation through which the novels were themselves fashioned and by which, more generally, historical knowledge is produced. In my reading of them, these texts are structured around key scenes in which various kinds of “objects”—whether documents, cultural artifacts, images, or even less obviously “representational” or “textual” things like human bodies or creatures—are gathered together and arranged in some kind of pattern or order, before being located, retrieved, and studied by protagonists who thereby seek to make some sense of their own and others’ pasts.

Jacques Austerlitz’s in my view paradigmatic search for documentary “traces” of his father leads to his perception of the “complicity” of archivization in cultural expropriation and, perhaps, genocide. Just so, beyond the more obvious notion of the archive in fiction somehow pointing to a degree of historical self-consciousness, what the novels in this study gesture toward time and again is the seemingly unexpected connection between the archive and the representation of *violence*. While these texts are, in a more general sense, obviously concerned with certain violent events in American history—colonialism, genocide, slavery, and assassination—they tend to connect depictions of those phenomena with figurations of the archive in more than a “mimetic” sense. That is, the archive is not simply the space in which the many acts of violence of American history are remembered or represented—or, for that matter, forgotten, left to gather dust. The frequency with which violence and archive are here juxtaposed or even collapsed

onto one another suggests instead that these novelists sense a deeper, more profound connection, something that inter-implicates each of these two slippery concepts in the other's symbolic and ideological matrix. In the novels in this study, in sum, violence and the archive seem to go hand in hand, and rather than being merely instrumental in relation to the content it stores, the archive here helps to constitute it in the first instance. This dissertation is concerned with exploring this unexpected connection further and, ultimately, with coming to some kind of conclusion about this relationship. What does it mean, in the context of these fictions, to depict the archive as “violent”? What are the implications of such a claim for thinking about ethical and political issues? More broadly, what does it say about our concept of history if the characteristic means by which contemporary, Western culture “knows” the past and produces historical discourse—the archive—is seen as inextricable from, or even as the *cause* of, the violence it would seek to master?

“... So Familiar a Word”: What is “the Archive”?

Given that this project analyzes selected works of contemporary fiction that, in some fashion, represent the spaces, activities, and concepts that have accrued around the figure of the archive, it makes sense to begin by attempting to define what I mean by this crucial term. Providing a straightforward or “ordinary”² definition does not initially seem all that difficult. The *Oxford English*

² In contradistinction to what they see as a tendency toward overreading or vagueness in certain recent engagements with the concept, some commentators have emphasized the quotidian banality of the archive. In particular, see Osbourne's article on “The Ordinarity of the Archive.”

Dictionary defines *archive* as 1) a noun referring to “a collection of historical documents or records” and 2) a verb signifying “to place in an archive.” Several basic premises can be extracted from the dictionary definition. The archive is a *collection* and thus involves the gathering together and ordering of certain objects (usually of a textual nature) that would otherwise, presumably, remain heterogeneous, disordered, or unrelated. Those collected textual objects bear some kind of relation to temporality: in that they are *historical*, their function is to preserve traces of the ever-receding past via a process of “cultural retention” (Kong 13). Meanwhile, the fact that these traces are described as “documents or records” suggests a supposedly *mimetic or indexical relation* to reality: past experiences or events are “recorded” in the archive. Finally the verbal aspect of the dictionary entry suggests both *archive as place and archiving as process*: the collected texts are situated *in* an archival building or institution, and they come to reside there by virtue of an operation of “placement” (which would also, thereby, imply the active presence of the archivist who effects this placing). An initial, working definition of *archive*, then, might emphasize its function as an actual repository: it is “a place or space in which materials of historic interest or social significance are stored and ordered” (Brown and Davis-Brown 17), a “public institution” consisting of certain buildings that house collections of important documents (Mbembe 19).

In her relatively nuanced response to, and critique of, deconstructive engagements with this problematic, Steedman similarly suspects that the archive is in fact “far less portentous, difficult and meaningful” than someone like Derrida claims (9).

These quite specific or delimited definitions can in turn be supplemented by a more extended sense of the archive as the name we give to “the many places in which the past (which does not now exist, but which once did actually happen; which cannot be retrieved, but which may be represented) has deposited some traces and fragments, usually in written form,” which have subsequently been “catalogued and indexed” in some way (Steedman 69). In this view the archive would not necessarily be identical with its more strictly “bureaucratic” iterations (Codebò 17), but could also refer to analogous discursive modes and institutional sites in which a generally archival “logic”—encompassing activities of collection, ordering, inscription, exhibition, and so on—is in effect. Such a view is evident in the observation made by Michael O’Driscoll and Edward Bishop that the archive has, particularly of late, assumed “a variety of institutional forms, including record depositories, museums, and libraries,” along with “all manner of inscriptions: monographs, photographs, film and video, databases, blogs, email, websites, monuments, paintings, and architectures” (4).³ It is due, at least in part, to the social and material changes hinted at in O’Driscoll’s and Bishop’s description that the meaning of the archive seems to have become more and more capacious in recent times, particularly from the last decade-and-a-half of the twentieth century on. As Carolyn Hamilton, Verne Harris, and Graeme Reid insist, the contemporary notion of the archive is in a perpetual state of conceptual flux as it is repeatedly “refigured” in response to technological developments as

³ See Manoff, who points out that while some commentators insist on a strict definition of “archives as repositories of documents, manuscripts, and images” and thus exclude other sites of collection from being referred to in this way, the “distinctions between libraries, archives, and museums” has actually “always been ambiguous” (10).

well as structural shifts in various “societal processes and discourses” (7).

Antoinette Burton describes this recent techno-social expansion of the archive in more specific terms as the combined result of an increasingly egalitarian view of the past congruent with the new social history and the accelerated development of electronic technologies such as the World Wide Web. Thus she claims that “The respectability which oral history has gradually gained in the past twenty five years, together with the emergent phenomenon of the Internet-as-archive, has helped to prize open canonical notions of what counts as an archive and what role the provenance of historical artifacts of all kinds should play in History as a disciplinary project” (“Archive Stories” 3).

Yet the attempt to pinpoint the archive with even relatively flexible definitions such as these might nonetheless seem a quixotic gesture. The *OED* itself suggests this potential recalcitrance by including as a third possible definition the *figurative* application of the notions of collection and placement described above. The archive, in other words, is also necessarily defined by its status as a mobile cultural metaphor with a resonance that is irreducible to its instantiation as a particular kind of bureaucratic, historiographic, or museal institution. As numerous commentators have discussed, the archive no longer refers simply to a dusty hoard of papers or a collection of images and inscriptions but has become, in Carolyn Steedman’s words, both a “portmanteau term” encompassing many different kinds of repository and “a metaphor capacious enough to encompass the whole of modern information technology, its storage, retrieval, and communication” (4). Indeed, it might be argued that, particularly in

recent years, the archive has undergone a certain extended “metaphorization” (Grimm 109) by which its available meanings have become virtually endless. The archive has thus, by turns, assumed the guise of a “political technology of liberal governmentality” (Joyce 35), an “epistemological master pattern” structuring imperial desire (Richards 11), a “mythic” point of origin for nation states and their attendant literary traditions (Echevarría 17), the “central figure of twentieth-century literary and theoretical engagements with questions of knowledge” (O’Driscoll 284), a name we might give to the convoluted matrices of modern “Power” (Steedman 6), or even, perhaps, the “ultimate horizon of experience” itself (Comay 12).

The kind of conceptual hyperextension that is particularly evident in the quotation from Rebecca Comay’s introduction to *Lost in the Archives* is characteristic, it could be argued, of a broadly post-Foucauldian discourse in which the archive repeatedly mutates into a series of more or less unrecognizable forms. Indeed, in *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, Michel Foucault goes to great pains to separate his image of the archive from any hitherto accepted definition: By this term [archive] I do not mean the sum of all the texts that a culture has kept upon its person as documents attesting to its own past, or as evidence of a continuing identity; nor do I mean the institutions which, in a given society, make it possible to record and preserve those discourses that one wishes to remember and keep in circulation ... The archive is first the law of what can be said, the system that governs the appearance of statements as unique events ... it is that

which defines the mode of occurrence of the statement-thing; it is *the system of its functioning*. (145-46, original emphases)⁴

Given the degree of abstraction in Foucault's formulation, we might be forced to agree with the assertion of another great archival theorist that "Nothing is less reliable, nothing is less clear today than the word 'archive'" (Derrida, *Archive* 90). From such a perspective, the archive eludes "the rigor of the *concept*" and gives itself over instead to "a series of impressions associated with a word": "Archive," then, might "only [be] a *notion*," an unavoidably "unstable" and "shifting" signifier (Derrida, *Archive* 29). If archivization is inextricably linked to classificatory operations (Derrida, *Archive* 3; Ernst 14), then a fundamental irony evident in many contemporary engagements with this anti-concept (Velody 12) would seem to be that it resists any such taxonomic specificity itself. The archive is multiple and overdetermined at its very core, a fact Jacques Derrida foreshadows on the first page of *Archive Fever* when he concedes that the critical "lexicon" he will use to describe this figure will, of necessity, be divided by "a series of cleavages" throughout (1). Indeed while scholars and theorists usually invoke it by means of the definite article, *the* archive of today's critical climate is perhaps more accurately viewed as multiple instead of singular, heterogeneous rather than monolithic. O'Driscoll and Bishop neatly encapsulate this state of affairs when they suggest the multiple "valencies" of the archive in contemporary critical discourse: "Both literal and figurative, both a set of material practices and an effect of discourse, both constituting and constituted by culture, archives are

⁴ Hereafter all emphases are in original unless otherwise indicated.

what Derrida might call ‘undecidable’ or what [Paul] de Man would term ‘unreadable’” (4). It is perhaps not surprising that some critics have expressed a degree of ambivalence regarding the archive’s multivalent status within contemporary critical thought. As a historian, for instance, Steedman is clearly made uncomfortable by what she implicitly sees as the colonization of her disciplinary space by theorists whose (supposed) intellectual and rhetorical contortions cause them to pass over the archive’s more “prosaic” qualities (69). Likewise, even a rather more sympathetic commentator such as Marlene Manoff nonetheless concedes that the recent “explosion” of interest in the archive has on occasion been accompanied by the “somewhat careless ... use of the term” (10).

In light of the foregoing considerations, this dissertation attempts to strike a balance between the dubious alternatives of a slipshod “carelessness,” on the one hand, and a potentially reductive literalism, on the other. I concede that I am not centrally concerned with *actual* archives here, those places where many of my academic colleagues ply their scholarly trade amidst reams of original documents—although I hope it will become clear over the course of the following analyses that the notion of “actuality” is often precisely what is in question in the first instance. In my usage, it is the *figurative* archive that necessarily emerges through the complex arrangements of language, imagery, and metaphor immanent in certain fictional texts. At the same time, however, my decision to analyze these texts in lieu of other possible objects of study has been guided by what is, in the end, a quite specific notion of archivization. While I do not necessarily agree with the decision made by Suzanne Keen to exclude theoretical discourse almost

entirely from her reading of contemporary British “romances of the archive,” I have found her relatively straightforward criteria for inclusion in this genre to be both instructive and, to some extent, worth emulating.⁵ Thus, in essence, the core of this project is the close analysis of fictional texts whose narratives prominently feature main characters who enter into some kind of relation with history by means of the textual and/or material traces left behind by the events of the past, whether that interaction takes the form of deliberate retrieval and interpretation or an uncomprehending, accidental encounter. In these novels, that is, the archive is “the means by which [characters] strive to recover what [they] ... have lost, and to relive the lost past by retelling its stories” (Bradley 109).

At the same time, I have found it necessary to be more flexible than Keen in my sense of what can function as an archive or an archival figure. To be sure, with apologies to Freud, sometimes an archive is just an archive; but while the archive cannot be found *everywhere*, nonetheless the plots of my chosen novels are often irreducible to the literal “action of ‘doing research’ in documents,” just as they do not always centre on protagonists who are “archival researchers” in any immediately obvious sense (Keen 3). Instead, the archive in the novels of McCarthy, Morrison, Mukherjee, and DeLillo is often refracted into heterogeneous forms even as it retains its basic *raison d’être* of mediating the relation between characters and their pasts. For example, while Beigh Masters, the narrator of Mukherjee’s *The Holder of the World*, is a professional scholar who

⁵ Keen effectively limits the scope of her analysis to those contemporary British novels that contain “scenes taking place in ... structures housing collections of papers and books.” Perhaps a little questionably, Keen admits though that her reading includes “few words” about “the influential uses of the term ‘archive’” by both Foucault and Derrida (10).

enters immediately recognizable archival institutions (such as documentary holdings, museums, and heritage sites) in the course of producing a quasi-academic monograph, one of the central characters of McCarthy's *Blood Meridian* is an illiterate youth whose encounters with the traces left in the wake of deadly violence on the Frontier are "archival" in a more latent, symbolic, or analogical sense. Similarly, whereas DeLillo's CIA historian, Nicholas Branch, spends the entirety of *Libra* actually researching the facts of the Kennedy assassination in a document-filled room that certainly resembles an archive, the formerly enslaved African-American characters in Morrison's *Beloved* recover traces of their hitherto repressed pasts more through the "archives" constituted by their scarred bodies and traumatized psyches than via the medium of the written documents produced by a dominant white culture that continues to marginalize and victimize them long after emancipation.

In sum, in the context of the four novels I analyze in what follows, "the archive" signifies (to borrow Charles Merewether's useful phrasing) the "means by which historical knowledge and forms of remembrance are accumulated, stored[,] and recovered" (10), even if the "form" that this process of historical "remembrance" takes is not always immediately recognizable as the conventional image of a repository. Overall, then, I have attempted to treat the concept of the archive in such a way as to respect both its specificity and its endless suggestiveness. That is, on a certain level I understand it in terms of a quite *narrowly* defined set of textual elements—recurrent narrative structures, patterns of imagery, plot devices, metaphors, and so on—that at once provide fertile

ground for the practice of close reading and serve to group together the works of four unique novelists within the purview of a kind of loose sub-genre (the “archival novel,” say). On another level, however, I interpret the archive as a highly *expansive* figure that necessarily opens out onto a series of profound cultural and philosophical questions concerning the nature and ethics of history, memory, and representation, and that consequently prompts reflection on some crucial political and ideological issues relating to “otherness” (gender, race, class, and so forth).

More specifically, as will be argued in more detail in subsequent chapters, despite the various forms that it takes in these novels, the archive most often tends to appear in concert with moments of acute self-consciousness or metafictionality, whereby these “postmodern” historical novelists engage critically with the nature—and, ultimately, the consequences—of their own means of representing the legacy of America’s violent past. While the presence of the archive signals moments of metafictional self-consciousness in these texts, they are not necessarily of the “surfictional,” formalist, or language-game variety. These novels are not flights of metatextual fancy. Rather, they tend to recognize the imbrications of textuality and (historical) reality, meaning that these archival “figures” reflect a desire to investigate and even intervene in the ways in which American history has hitherto been imagined—but where this “imagining” or “figuring” is inescapably bound up with the “reality” that would otherwise seem to be the “referent” of such representations. As we will see, though, the focus on the archive also entails a crucial ambivalence about the very idea of historical

representation itself, one that undermines or at least qualifies the overall revisionist bent of these novels. Thus, while these novels are indeed “revisionist,” in that, to borrow Cowart’s terms, they try to present “a more credible version of the past” by interrogating the “chauvinist pieties” of the conventional imagining of history, they also point out the limitations of such a project attendant on a broadly constructivist conception of historical representation; imbricated in discourse, that is, the “truth” of history remains “fluid and elusive” (*History* 9, 19).

“Our Inherited Concept”: Theoretical, Critical, and Cultural Contexts

I want now to elaborate some of the underlying conditions for my examination of the archive in works of late twentieth-century American fiction. In other words, it might be worthwhile to supplement the previous discussion of *what* “the archive” means in the context of this project by considering *why* such a concept merits further consideration in the first place. What factors make studying representations of the archive interesting or even necessary? In this section I will discuss some of the overall intellectual and cultural considerations that make such an investigation timely or relevant.

The most immediate motive is simply in response to the marked currency of the archive in contemporary critical and cultural theory. One thing we can say with certainty about this concept is that, despite—or perhaps because of—its indeterminacy, the archive has attained a certain renewed prominence in the last decade-and-a-half or so in the humanities and social sciences, particularly

following publication of the text that has unquestionably “influenced much of the [recent] archive discourse” (Manoff 11), Derrida’s seminal *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression* (1996).⁶ Put simply, in the wake of Derrida’s influence—as well as that of “theories that foreground historical contextualization, such as New Historicism and Cultural Materialism” (Freshwater 729)—the archive has become an overdetermined “keyword” in contemporary academic discourse. In its various guises, it has animated a wide range of richly productive, often interdisciplinary intellectual labour in disciplines as varied as historical scholarship, sociology, philosophy, cultural critique, and literary criticism, with the fruits of these endeavours evident in a flurry of publications and events—monographs, scholarly articles, journal collections, conferences, and graduate seminars—that shows no signs of ceasing in the near future.⁷ According to Helen Freshwater, the archive has indeed “become an increasingly attractive place to pursue research work in critical studies” (729), although as O’Driscoll and Bishop caution, this attraction is not merely associated with the prospect of working *in* archives as such: “While scholars have always relied on archival research to some degree,” they suggest, “it

⁶ The text of *Archive Fever* cited in this dissertation is only the most recent iteration. As indicated in an unattributed and unpaginated note at the front of my edition, the initial form of *Archive Fever* was a lecture entitled “The Concept of the Archive: A Freudian Impression” which was delivered during a colloquium on memory and psychoanalysis held at the Freud Museum in north London in June 1994. It was subsequently published, in book form, in French in 1995 as *Mal d’archive: une impression freudienne*, before appearing in English in a special issue of the journal *Diacritics* that same year (Manoff 11). The English language monograph that I draw on throughout was eventually published a year later. (“[T]he archive always holds a problem for translation” [Derrida, *Archive* 90]; we traverse from an original lecture in English, to a French monograph, to an English journal article, and finally back to book form, this time, once again, in English.)

⁷ Work on the archive continues apace, with several publications being issued in the last couple of years alone (see Codebò, Halloran, and Kong in particular). In 2010, meanwhile, a major international, interdisciplinary conference on the archive was held at McMaster University in Hamilton, Ontario.

is only in the last several decades that the archive itself has become a matter of concerted theoretical attention” (8). This renewed attention has led to the emergence of what might be called *archive theory*, a “multidisciplinary field of inquiry” (O’Driscoll and Bishop 9) that encompasses a diverse range of methodologies, themes, and political positions: Derrida’s deconstructive reading of Freud and Yosef Yerushalmi; Giorgio Agamben’s philosophical investigation of the limits of discourse in relation to Holocaust testimony; the post-feminist and post-Marxist intervention by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak in postcolonial historiography concerning the question of the subaltern; Ann Cvetkovich’s “queering” of the archive, in which alternative, “intimate” methods of archiving and memorialization are seen as crucial to the formation of lesbian public cultures; the materialist approach to cultural history by Steedman, which re-imagines “archive fever” as a *literal* illness attendant on physical proximity to grubby old documents; Diana Taylor’s “hemispheric” analysis of embodied performance, which positions the archive as a technology of inscription set against a “repertoire” of bodily gestures, movements, and practices; as well as the attempt to rethink the actual mechanics of collection acquisition and management by proponents of the new, “postmodern” Archival Science such as Terry Cook and Verne Harris. I have found several of these approaches, in which a consideration of some version of the archive is blended with the elaboration of other, more established critical concepts, amenable to the analysis of my primary texts. Where pertinent, then, in subsequent chapters I draw on various theoretical engagements

of the archive in relation to such discourses as trauma studies, feminism, postcolonialism and subalternity, and postmodernism.

Much of this work of theorization is concerned, on some level, with challenging the assumption that the archive—as the methodological site for the production of a number of discourses, including, most obviously, historiography—enables an empirical or mimetic referentiality and is thus diametrically opposed to such conceptual categories as the “fictive” or “narratological.” Throughout *Archive Fever*, for example, Derrida repeatedly suggests that the relation between the archive and the fictive might consist in something rather more nuanced than a binary opposition. Indeed, if a key text for his theorizing of the archive is *Moses and Monotheism*, it is surely significant that Freud repeatedly referred to his speculative investigation into the psychic and cultural inheritance of Judaism as a “historical novel” that was designed to produce a kind of “truth” entirely distinct from the strict veracity usually associated with the scholarly marshalling of documentary sources (Derrida, *Archive* 5, 41).⁸ Given the seemingly intimate relation between the archive and fiction proposed by Derrida and many others, it is perhaps not surprising that the aforementioned prominence of the archive as a theoretical concept has arguably been matched by its emergence as an important trope in recent novels, as well as,

⁸ “Fiction” (as well as related terms like “fictional,” “fictionality,” and “fictive”) makes a striking number of appearances in *Archive Fever* (9, 16, 22, 39, 40, 41, 47, 49, 55, 67). In fact, Derrida here seems to see the issue of the relation between fictiveness and the more determinate order of conventional scholarly knowledge as central to thinking through the archive; he thus claims that he “cannot imagine a better introduction to the question of the archive, today, than the very stakes of [the] vertiginous difference” that inheres between “the traditional norms of scientificity” that Yerushalmi’s text is mainly structured according to, and the less conventional form of knowledge production found in a “chapter of fictive monologue” included by Yerushalmi as a conclusion (59).

to some extent, in other genres of literary and aesthetic expression. While an overall concern with history as a theme predominates in contemporary fiction (Coward, *History* 1), several scholars have also remarked on the particular trend whereby “contemporary fictions of archives” are now being produced in “startlingly” quantity (West 45). The last few years have thus seen, variously, “a proliferation of representations of archives in ... popular British fiction” (Keen 3), a “burgeoning body of fiction that privileges representations of ... collections of documents” (Buxton 345), and a “deluge” of “faked and fictionalized archives” (Takahashi 179), with the upshot being that the representation of archives is now considered a “significant strand of literary prose” (Codebò 18) and “one of ... postmodernism’s most indulged motifs” (Callus 259). Likewise, a recent critical bibliography by Arlene Schmuland lists one hundred and twenty-eight mostly contemporary novels that include depictions of archives and archivists, thus suggesting that “the body of archives-related fiction has grown substantially” of late (24-25). Other literary genres and forms of aesthetic expression seem to have followed suit in this rush to showcase the archive, which also gained a “sudden career” as a key trope in German poetry of the 1990s (Grimm 110) and constitutes a distinctive characteristic of the contemporary visual and plastic arts to boot (Foster 143; Merewether 10).

As if in diagnostic response to this feverish output, there has been a corresponding increase in the number and frequency of works of criticism dealing both specifically and indirectly with the archive as a thematic and/or formal facet of the contemporary novel. Beginning in the early 1990s with Roberto González

Echevarría's *Myth and Archive: A Theory of Latin American Narrative* (1990)—which draws on a more Foucauldian concept of the archive to argue that self-reflexive texts such as Gabriel García Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude* use the trope of the “lost manuscript” in order to disrupt those legal, anthropological, and scientific discourses that constitute the “founding mediation” of Latin American culture (173)—several scholarly monographs have since been issued treating various aspects of what some critics have begun to refer to as the contemporary “archival novel” (Codebò 13; Franco, “Working Through” 375). In *The Imperial Archive* (1993), for example, Thomas Richards suggests that the utopian image of an encyclopedic archive of totalized knowledge—the Victorians' favoured analogy for an orderly Empire—has collapsed by the time we reach the era of a writer such as Thomas Pynchon, for whom a globalized, postmodern reality has irrevocably fractured the West's political and epistemological order into shards of heterogeneous “information.” A similarly post-imperial reading is proposed in *Romances of the Archive in Contemporary British Fiction* (2001), where Keen argues that the recurrence of plots in which recovered papers point toward a stable truth offers symbolic (and nostalgic) recompense for Britain's waning global influence at the end of the millennium. In *W.G. Sebald: Image, Archive, Modernity* (2007), J.J. Long evaluates the titular German novelist's career-long engagement with what he sees as the predominant “technology of representation” of a disenchanted European modernity (11), while Vivian Nun Halloran's *Exhibiting Slavery: The Caribbean Postmodern Novel as Museum* (2009) is somewhat more optimistic in its suggestion that, by gathering “real and

imagined historical ‘objects’ within their pages” (12), contemporary novels by African-descended writers can help to memorialize adequately the suffering of the Middle Passage. More recent interventions along similar lines include Paul Kong’s *The Raiders and Writers of Cervantes’ Archive: Borges, Puig, and Garcia Marquez* (2009), in which the fragmentary figure of the “manuscript” works to undermine the totality of the “archive” in a kind of allegory of postcolonial literary influence, and, finally, *Narrating from the Archive: Novels, Records, and Bureaucrats in the Modern Age* (2010), where Marco Codebò, *pace* Richards and Kong, argues that the archival novel tends to shore up an epistemological order by mimicking the actual *form* of a “systematic arrangement of records” (14). In addition to these dedicated monographs, article- and chapter-length studies have recently been published by Marilyn Booth (2005), Dean Franco (2005), and Angelia Poon (2008), examining the archive’s function, in examples of fiction by, respectively, Egyptian, Chicano, and Malaysian writers, as “a record of alternative possibilities and alternative visions” of (post)colonial history (Booth 277). Finally, following Linda Hutcheon’s influential delineation, in texts such as *A Poetics of Postmodernism* (1989), of the genre of “historiographic metafiction” (5-6)—a key tenet of which is that past “reality” is only ever accessible to present “representation” in the form of textual and artifactual remnants—the archive has also been established as a key trope in the contemporary or “postmodern” historical novel more generally; thus, while critical studies of recent historical fiction by Santiago Juan-Navarro (2000), Tim S. Gauthier (2006), Sarah Henstra (2009), and Jerome de Groot (2010) do not primarily focus on the archive, in the

course of their investigations they nonetheless implicitly raise the question of this trope in relation to larger issues concerning the representation of the past in literary texts.

These varied manifestations of an academic and literary discourse of the archive both reflect and have helped to constitute a broader “archival consciousness” (O’Driscoll and Bishop 9) that, in some ways, defines our particular historical moment. What we might call the archivization of everyday life, the saturation of contemporary epistemologies with assumptions about the lightning-quick retrievability of an ever-present knowledge base, is perhaps most immediately evident in the proliferation of technologies of information storage—for instance, those increasingly ubiquitous iPads and smartphones—that provide (or better, *distract*) many in the postindustrial, “first” world with a constant immersion in a data cloud comprising, on the one hand, the digitized traces of the broader culture (think Wikipedia), and, on the other, minutely detailed archives of our own experiences, in the form of real-time micro-autobiographies on Twitter and Facebook. In other words, if the archive is front and centre as a philosophical concept or literary trope, this development is not unrelated to a contemporary “Googlemania” in which the “availability of archival sources of all kinds online arguably makes us all archivists now” (Burton, “Archive Stories” 4).

But if this characterization risks reducing the notion of a pervasive archival consciousness to the status of yet one more expression of the enervating logic of late capitalism (“the convergence of virtual archives and corporate commodity culture” having made us “all archive consumers” [Burton, “Archive

Stories” 4]), there is also a sense in which the recrudescence of the archive is tied up with the perhaps futile desire to push back against the forces of globalization. If, as David Harvey has argued, a primary effect of the arrival of a socioeconomic condition of postmodernity has been the “compression” of spatio-temporal relations (240)—that is, the world has shrunk geographically while history has been concertinaed into a perpetual present—then the fascination with the archive in Western(ized) culture in particular reflects an attempt to re-establish a meaningful sense of space-time itself. Thus, for instance, David F. Bell suggests that if, in one sense, certain high-speed “archival” technologies—“software, fast internet access, global television, faxes”—precipitate a “collapse” of physical distance that at once erodes our sense of national belonging and the possibility of critical thought (156-57), at the same time, many of those same technologies often enable or encourage the symbolic *reassertion* of threatened national or cultural identities, in the form of, say, a contemporary mania for internet-based genealogical research, or the increasing ability to access “national” artifactual or documentary collections online, as part of a generalized “boom” in the construction, patronage, and virtualization of museums and other consignatory institutions.⁹

⁹ Note that Bell is highly ambivalent about this supposed recrudescence of “national” borders and thus self-identity, seeing it as constituting a phantasmatic relation between the individual subject and the coercive nation-state: “The individual is empowered against the nation state by global technologies that would seem to tear down traditional national borders, but simultaneously she undergoes an expropriation from a settled ‘situation’ and is thus vulnerable to the nostalgia for a ‘home,’ a nostalgia upon which the nation state can play in order to maintain and consolidate its power” (D. Bell 157). The concept of a museum “boom” that is at once the expression of a desire for and anxiety about the past is discussed in detail by Huyssen. See also Prosser’s argument about the broader cultural context in which late twentieth-century American fiction was being written: a millennial period marked by an ambivalent “hypermnnesia” whereby “the contemporary is caught up with past times, particularly in the form of public memorials,”

Similarly, the recent archival turn could be seen as reflecting the widespread desire for a more intimate connection with the past. As Kerwin Lee Klein argues, the populist conception of “memory”—which, significantly, is increasingly conceived of, in non-psychologized, supraindividual terms, as a form cultural and institutional remembering (““archives remember”” [132])—tends to be seen, rightly or wrongly, as providing access to a more fulfilling, “humanize[d]” relation to the past than what has hitherto been on offer from more official forms of historical discourse (129).¹⁰ As well as being evident on an individual level, this sense of the recuperative aspects of an archived cultural “memory” has also assumed political or even juridical import. As Burton explains, the proliferation and dispersion of archival discourses in recent times, especially in the form of a number of projects of national redress in various parts of the world, seems to have provided an opportunity for the perspectives of hitherto “silenced” or “traumatized” communities finally to be heard. Thus, an overtly archival or memorious project such as South Africa’s famed Truth and Reconciliation Commission subordinated “conventional forms of knowledge about the past (History)” to “the claims of groups who have typically been

even as, “At the same time, the past is doubted, the accuracy of remembering and representing history distrusted” (7).

¹⁰ Compare the influential discussion of modern culture’s relation to the past by the French historian Pierre Nora, who describes a contemporary “Fear of a rapid and final disappearance [that] combines with anxiety about the meaning of the present and uncertainty about the future to give even the most humble testimony, the most modest vestige, the potential dignity of the memorable”; the form this “Modern memory” assumes is “above all archival” (13), although Nora is also generally ambivalent concerning the replacement of an authentic “*milieux de memoire*” (memory as immanent cultural practice) with the artificial “*lieux de memoire*” of our historical epoch (7). Thus, “What we call memory is in fact the gigantic and breathtaking storehouse of a material stock of what it would be impossible for us to remember, an unlimited repertoire of what might need to be recalled,” deposited in “museums, libraries, depositories, centers of documentation, and data banks” (13-14).

disenfranchised by dominant regimes of truth but who are also seeking political rights” (“Archive Stories” 2). From this perspective, then, the popularity (not to mention cultural authority) of the archive derives in part, at the present juncture, from a certain ethico-political “allure”—a “beguiling fantasy ... which seems to promise the recovery of lost time, the possibility of being reunited with the lost past, and the fulfilment of our deepest desires for wholeness and completion” (Freshwater 738). It is to this attractive and somewhat problematic fantasy of “recovery” that we now turn.

Alluring Archives

One underlying presupposition that connects many of these theoretical, literary-critical, and cultural discourses of the archive is not just an interest in “the past” in and of itself, but rather a shared sense of its urgent importance. My basic contention concerning this premise is that much (although, crucially, not *all*) of the cultural work in this arena is structured by the desire to produce an “ethical” encounter with the past by way of the latter’s residual archival traces. The figure of the archive, according to this outlook, thus assumes what we might call a “recuperative” function, in both senses of the word. First, and ostensibly most straightforwardly, the archive enables the retrieval of the past: in other words, it makes the past either *present* as such—if we think of past reality as a stable essence—or, in perhaps more sophisticated versions of this recuperative approach, in which the past is a “lost object” that can only be gestured towards, available *in* the present in the form of non-essential textual or artifactual traces. The limit-case

of this mode of retrieving the past involves what Freshwater refers to as a process of “self-effacement” in which an occluded archive “substitute[s] for a lost object” (738), resulting in what Derrida, in his discussion of Freud’s reading of Wilhelm Jensen’s novel *Gradiva* (1903), imagines as “An archive without archive” (*Archive* 98).

Second, and more importantly, the gesture of retrieving the past from the archive eventuates in—or even, in some cases, constitutes in itself—an ethically redemptive or meaningful state of affairs or mode of being. Here, the archive is seen as a fundamental means of enabling, performing, or conditioning some kind of *positive* outcome for the individual subject or cultural grouping that is undertaking the work of recuperation. Of course, what counts as “positive” or “redemptive” will differ according to the specific context and goals of each act of retrieval. The archive might thus enable, variously: the attainment of knowledge or truth, as in the solving of a mystery or the unveiling of a secret; a process of mourning in the wake of trauma, leading to emotional catharsis and closure; an accounting for a past injustices that gives voice to historically silenced subjects; the assertion of an individual’s or cultural group’s identity and/or origins; a general sense of wholeness or unity; redemption from a “fallen” state, whether in terms of the past’s being considered a sublime or simply more meaningful alternative to a degraded present, or of a sagacious present moment’s “progressing” toward an improved, utopian future because it has learned not to repeat the errors of a corrupted or ignorant past; and, finally, the work of critique itself, the “historicizing” of present social formations or representational forms in

reaction to a straitened political landscape.¹¹ In sum, then, my point is that much contemporary thinking on this topic supposes that the archive generally facilitates—or, at least, as it circulates as a cultural and theoretical figure, is *imagined* to facilitate—an encounter with the past (whether that past is ontologically “real” or multiply “mediated,” textualized, and so forth) that mitigates some impediment or difficulty inherent in the present moment’s relation to its own historical conditions.

A particular instance of this paradigm has been described by James A. Knapp, who examines it in the context of a “new materialism in literary and cultural criticism,” one that is grounded in a practice (and, Knapp argues, a *rhetoric*) of “archival discover[y],” and which, like archive theory *in toto*, began to emerge in the mid-1990s (695, 696). As one of its practitioners elaborates, this “New New Historicism” marks an attempt to become “more historical” in response to earlier critical paradigms (such as the *old* New Historicism) that were guided by more poststructuralist-inflected, textualist or discursive orientations toward cultural history (qtd. in Knapp 696-97). According to Knapp, this shift has taken the form of a concerted appeal to “material things”—the flotsam of quotidian history—such as pieces of clothing, cooking materials, and domestic

¹¹ It would, of course, be possible to have many if not all of these things without the archive; you would not have to go *into* an archive to “historicize” in, say, the sense Jameson means in *The Political Unconscious* (9). But my argument is that the archive is frequently imagined, in a number of contexts, as a key means of achieving such outcomes, and thus functions as a recurrent trope for the privileging of the past as the enabling ground for various valorized ideas—politics, identity, justice, healing, and so on. It should also be noted that interpreting the archive as an ethical or redemptive figure does not necessarily mean that the past whose traces it contains is itself uniformly positive or “happy” in nature, and the history recorded in the archive might be a highly ambivalent one consisting of individual or cultural trauma. However, the idea of an underlying narrative of recovery and mitigation at work on a latent level in archival discourse is not contradicted by such an admission, since a confrontation with the legacy of problematic events can obviously precipitate a state of cathartic renewal that is itself effectively redemptive.

implements, as well as books and manuscripts considered as material objects in and of themselves (697). If one of the goals of immersing oneself in all this “*stuff*” (697) is a kind of “historical re-creation,” then, “as the storehouse of the material facts required for all historical inquiry,” the archive is the key site for such an operation (703). As a result of its function as a technology of retrieval, the “material archive,” Knapp claims, “has regained its place as the starting point for a great deal of current cultural history and criticism” (696).

Aside from the overly general, if not slightly meaningless claim of producing scholarship that is “more historical,”¹² the goals of this turn to the archive are essentially twofold. On the one hand, it supposedly leads to more precise forms of historicization: “the new materialism ... uses the material stuff to focus on the ‘thingness’ of cultural forms, to anchor an account of cultural history in the actual conditions of existence” (697). On the other hand, as well as constituting a methodological “corrective to ahistorical theorizing,” (695), this focus on the actuality of the everyday is also meant to function as a “corrective” in a somewhat more moralistic sense. While Knapp concedes that this approach should not be equated with a specifically Marxist analysis of the material conditions of production, he nonetheless identifies a pervasive sense in which the turn to the archive of things is accompanied in much scholarship by the desire to produce simultaneously a more generalized “political critique” (697). Thus, if previous approaches to the “cultural past,” with their overly discursive frame of reference, tended to emphasize the inescapability of “the structures of power” by

¹² See Knapp’s discussion of Stanley Fish’s pointed objections to scholars’ competing—and, for Fish, highly dubious—claims to historical credibility (700n11).

which historical knowledge has usually been “disseminated” (697), the new archivism, with its—ostensibly—“less-mediated interaction with the past” (700), seeks to locate a sort of outside to, or moments of productive tension within, those power structures. That is, the material archive somehow allows us to enter the enchanted universe of the marginalized but resistant subaltern subject. In the terms of one advocate of this approach, the archive enables us to “take seriously,” finally, the previously denigrated category of the “common”: “the low (common people), the ordinary (common Speech, common wares, common sense), the familiar (commonly known), the customary or taken for granted (common law, commonplace, communal), etc.” (qtd. in Knapp 697). Moreover, if this deployment of the scholarly archive provides, in the words of another of its proponents, a means to “recuperate the alien cultures of the past”—in other words, to recover traces of a lost otherness that serves to disrupt received notions about the meaning of history—it also thereby reflects back, in the manner of a “distorting mirror,” on an estranged, and thus potentially transformed, present moment (qtd. in Knapp 703). Thus, Knapp argues that such “new materialist critics” as these draw on the archive as a means of barracking both for “accuracy in historical criticism and the applicability of such scholarship to present political concerns” (703-04).

If part of the “intoxication” with the archive in recent scholarly discourse stems from the way it appears to “[allow] the voices of the past to speak, especially the voices of those conventionally silenced in official discourse, the fabled voices of the ‘Other’” (Bradley 114), a similar concern is evident in a

discourse I identified earlier as one of the other key sites of archival representation: the contemporary historical novel. Indeed, according to Cowart, a defining feature of the historical novel from the mid-twentieth century onwards has been, precisely, its articulation of a “sense of urgency” concerning the past’s relation to the present, particularly as that present itself seems to grow “increasingly chaotic,” apocalyptic even (*History* 1, 2). Further, as Amy J. Elias discusses in her extensive study of this genre, *Sublime Desire: History and Post-1960s Fiction*, the postmodern historical novel (Elias alternately refers to it as “metahistorical” fiction) is characterized by two dominant and, at times, competing views of the past: “the postmodern [novelist’s] attitude toward history is paradoxical, an attitude of supplication and desire as well as an attitude of scepticism” (xvii). With many of the traditional assumptions about history having been disturbed by both the great traumas of the twentieth century and the subsequent articulation of an “anti-foundationalist historiography” (xii, xvii), certain novelists have begun remodeling “positivist or stadialist history as the historical sublime, a desired horizon that can never be reached but only approached” (xviii). They thus have tended to concentrate as much on theorizing, often in an ironic manner, the very *processes* of representing the past, as on attempting to depict the past itself (xvii). At the same time, given its grave, “post-traumatic” import, the represented past cannot be dismissed with a cynical shrug, and these writers also evince an “obsession with social realities” that encourages “a compulsive, repetitive turning toward the past” in the service of an unquenchable “desire for the comforting self-awareness that is supposed to come

from historical knowledge” (xii, xvii). Elias’s analysis ultimately suggests that this contemporary fictional genre’s endeavour simultaneously to engage critically with the processes of “historical documentation” and articulate a “politics of historical critique” that affirms the meaningfulness of the attempt to represent the past (xiv).

That is, in the terms of my own argument, the contemporary or postmodern historical novel is structured by overlapping if at times contradictory concerns with the means and import of representing the past. As many other critics have noted, the genre tends to draw self-conscious attention to the archival *mechanisms* of historical recreation. Thus, Gauthier believes that contemporary historical novelists, “self-aware of their limitations as they are, frequently stop to examine the process by which they have constructed history” (9), while Paul Smethurst characterizes the postmodern novel in terms of a shift from the signified of the past to its *signifiers*, most often in the form of the “textuality of images, sounds, memories, buildings, cities[,] and landscapes” (155). Maria Margaronis, meanwhile, affirms the centrality to late twentieth-century novels of a self-conscious engagement “with the purposes and processes of writing historical fiction” itself, including a probing of the relation between “documentary evidence” and direct “experience” as they relate to past events (140, 159).

However, at the same time, critics continually stress the abiding concern, in texts of the very same genre, for understanding or recovering traces of the past in the service of a variety of political projects. For example, Peter Middleton and Tim Woods claim that the depiction of “history in contemporary literature” goes

hand in hand with a “postmodernist renewal of an ethics of history” (55). From this point of view, the past haunts us with a “moral obligation” to which novelists respond by acting as “a textual anamnesis for the hitherto ignored, unacknowledged[,] or repressed pasts marginalised by the dominant histories.” For Middleton and Woods, then, “an ethics of history” is located “in the reflexive, performative writing of the past” (77). Likewise, de Groot sees the often overtly polemical historical fiction of recent times—and in this movement he includes postmodernist, queer, feminist, and postcolonial works—as constituting a project of “political intervention and reclamation”; such works proffer “revisionist views of history that reclaim the past on behalf of a variety of unheard voices,” thus “rewriting history from the perspective of the disempowered” (140, 149). More generally, Cowart sees contemporary historical fiction as having an important ethical function; while cautioning against completely annexing the past to the needs of the present—a “naïve” gesture that reduces history to the status of a convenient lesson—Cowart nonetheless maintains that, at their most serious, historical novels “invite their readers to reflect on the currents and forces of history from a moral perspective” (*History* 25, 27). Thus, as with the “materialist” discourses discussed by Knapp, it would appear that, at least according to much of its critical reception, today’s historical novel frequently links the self-conscious attempt to understand the past with the desire for some form of politicized or ethical outcome in the present. Simply put, these texts consistently posit a relation between the archive and the possibility of recovery, or, in Allen Thiher’s terms, between “the text of the real” and an “ethical imperative” (27).¹³

¹³ Many other critics of the postmodern or contemporary historical novel emphasize one

This identification of the archive as the means of producing a sort of ethical or redemptive remembrance is, I would argue, a particular manifestation of various interconnected assumptions about temporality, experience, and knowledge that are deeply ingrained in Western culture more generally. In her trenchant discussion of the dubious late twentieth-century fixation on “recovered memory,” for example, Marita Sturken argues that advocates of this syndrome tended to view the process of uncovering previously hidden memories of traumatic experiences such as incestuous sexual abuse as constituting a kind of psychotherapeutic magic bullet, a means of arriving at a determinate, experiential truth that would also correlate to the trauma survivor’s ability to work through and thus move on from a disabling victimhood (241). For Sturken, underlying the increased cultural currency of this syndrome are more general pop-psychoanalytic preconceptions about the proper relation between memory and identity: “The idea of memory storage is a significantly comforting image, precisely because forgetting seems counter to subject formation. While the concept of repression suggests that we forget, it is also based on the idea that memory retrieval is not only possible but healing” (234). In his fascinating philosophical investigation into the history of forgetting, meanwhile, Harald Weinrich similarly—albeit in terms of a much longer historical perspective—argues that, from its ancient Greek foundations, Western culture has consistently identified “truth” or “knowledge” [*alethia*] with the “unforgotten” or “not-to-be-forgotten” (4). From this

or both of these concerns. For further consideration of the “archival” (or more generally documentary or textualist) emphasis of these fictions, see, for example, Hutcheon (*Politics*), Juan-Navarro, Price, Wesseling, and Widdowson. For more on the trope of historical “recovery” as an ethico-political project, see Byerman, Lane, Müller, and Nancy Peterson (*Against Amnesia*).

perspective, in turn, forgetting has usually been linked with subordinated (or even denigrated) concepts such as waste, darkness, and death (4, 24). However, Sturken and Weinrich both seek to challenge this influential binary hierarchization that—in a seemingly natural fashion—equates the various manifestations of “memory” with truth, identity, healing, and so forth. Sturken, for one, views recovered memory syndrome as, at best, a facile emotional sop, and, at worst, a “profoundly depoliticizing” theory (241); moreover, in critiquing it, she suggests that we also need to interrogate “the long-standing equation of memory with healing, whether as the truth narrative of the individual or the cultural healing of collective testimony. Memory needs to be de-fetishized and forgetting un-demonized” (245). Likewise, albeit ironically enough, Weinrich seeks to “remember” the ways in which forgetting can be imagined as a means of accessing truth or generating meaning (4).

In the vein of such cogent probing of accepted orthodoxies, I want to begin to challenge the ostensibly natural or, in any case, inevitable link between the figure of the archive and this “recuperative” orientation toward the past, or what Steedman identifies as the generalized desire “to find, or locate, or possess [a] moment of origin” that structures both archival and psychoanalytic discourses (3). I am under no illusions that such a compelling psychological, cultural, and literary trope can—or even *should*—be done away with entirely (whatever such a banishment would look like). Even a thinker as sophisticated as Derrida, someone who radically deconstructs the archive in one gesture, also concedes with another the magnetic draw of “an irrepressible desire to return to the origin” that

accompanies the activation of every archive, even “right where it slips away” into oblivion (*Archive* 91). We obviously can neither do without archives nor without their often illusory promises of recovered pasts and identities. We are “in need of archives” in that respect, Derrida says (*Archive* 91). At the same time, though, this “*mal d’archive*” that Derrida names here, thanks to the slipperiness of the French idiom, simultaneously refers to a “passion” and a “trouble” [*mal*], with the upshot being that “Nothing is more troubled and more troubling” than archival desire (*Archive* 91, 90). My particular concern throughout this project, then, is with certain American novels that, when read in relation to various theoretical engagements on similar issues, seem to articulate a persistently “troubled” attitude toward the archive. My basic aim in the following chapters is to try to understand why and how these texts resist the lure of archival desire, even if, at times, they succumb to it. In the next section I want to lay the theoretical groundwork for this analysis by exploring how the widely accepted function of the archive as a means of historical recovery and revisionism is, at the very least, called into question (if not entirely foreclosed) by the threat of *violence*.

A Critique of Archival Violence

At first glance the archive would seem to be the antithesis of anything we might usually associate with the notion of “violence.” The stereotypical image of an archive consists of a peaceful, silent, secluded space in which not much—let alone anything of a violent nature—goes on. Such a view is suggested, for example, by the recurrent patterns of archival imagery in “genre” fiction, such as

fantasy, science fiction, and mystery. In these widely read novels, Schmuland argues, the archive functions as a space of refuge for individuals who themselves seem entirely unprepossessing and unthreatening. In this context, the figure of the archivist tends to be depicted as “soft-spoken” and “meek,” a “non-aggressive, mild, and quiet person who is ignored by the other people around him [or her]” (38, 39). Moreover, if a conventional conception of violence is of some kind of *action*,¹⁴ the archive tends to be presented in these novels as a place of stasis or quietude, the abode of people who are more passive “thinkers” than active “doers” (Schmuland 42). Other commonsense assumptions appear to confirm this basic equation with the non-violent. Thus, the archive provides knowledge of history that ostensibly allows people in the present to avoid repeating the mistakes of the past, errors that are often euphemisms for violent events (the rise of European fascism, for instance). The archive also tends to be associated with notions of order and categorization, whereas violence—at least in its stereotypical or unexamined sense—is viewed as chaotic, unmotivated, *disordered*.¹⁵ In that one of its primary mandates is to preserve the past, the archive might be seen as a conservative institution, which would thus oppose it to “revolutionary”

¹⁴ This emphasis on a certain active physicality is evident in the primary definition of “violence” in the *OED*: “The exercise of physical force so as to inflict injury on, or cause damage to, persons or property; action or conduct characterized by this; treatment or usage tending to cause bodily injury or forcibly interfering with personal freedom.”

¹⁵ In analyzing the narrative trope of “the fight,” Wesley notes that “Although violent altercation is commonly assumed to be the loss of control, an aberrant departure from civilized order by a private individual ... fighting is not a deviation from the rules of society; it is, in fact, a product of their realization” (167). In other words, while discrete acts of violence might appear to be the irruptions of uncontrollable, primal urges that threaten the social order, they actually help to sustain that order (Žižek 2). In a more obvious sense, of course, a highly premeditated and mechanized phenomenon like the Holocaust should remind us that violence and organization are not mutually exclusive.

movements and their attendant violence. (Hence, in his or her antipathy toward tradition, the revolutionary's exemplary gesture is the destruction of the archive as space of stagnant patrimony.) Indeed, in this kind of formulation the archive would not just be nonviolent, it would also be a site of an *anti*-violence. Thus, free and accessible archives would be one important index and consequence of a society's move away from, say, a totalitarian regime that deploys unjust violence against its own citizens, since "Effective democratization can always be measured by [the] essential criterion ... [of] the participation in and the access to the archive" (Derrida, *Archive* 4n1).¹⁶ Here, then, the archive is a "safe," non-violent place that, in fact, might enable us to *avoid* violence in the future.

On closer inspection, however, a quite different set of relations between the archive and violence can be detected. In fact, my argument here and throughout this study is that the archive is intimately (and problematically) tied to violence—indeed, might itself be a *form* of violence—in three distinct but interwoven ways. Thus, the archive, by turns: is threatened by an external violence; is put to use as an instrument of violence; and can ultimately be seen as at once constituted by and constitutive of "violence," albeit not in the way we usually understand this last term.

On a quite banal or literal level, throughout its history as a concept and an institution the archive seems to have been continually menaced from the outside by threats of violence, most often in the form of physical destruction or conflagration. Paradoxically enough, this institution that is otherwise seemingly

¹⁶ See, for example, Harris's description of the changes in archival practice that accompanied the transition from apartheid to democracy in the early 1990s South Africa (75).

devoted to, or defined by, its *preservational* impulse has repeatedly been linked to the opposite of this, and in a consistent enough way for such “violence” (whether accidental or of human origin) to begin to be seen as *constitutive of* rather than completely opposed to or divorced from the identity of the archive. Paradigmatic of this ostensibly contradictory state of affairs is the apparent fate of the famed Library of Alexandria around the beginning of the first millennium.¹⁷ According to Daniel Heller-Roazen, this impressive seat of classical learning was designed as a sort of mega-archive of the knowledge and texts produced by the civilized world up to that point. The various extant descriptions of the Library’s origins emphasize its purpose as a “monumental collection”: “an archive in which the totality of literary [and other] works would be meticulously ordered and secured” (141). This totalized collection was in turn the expression of an overarching social and epistemological order in which “the multiplicity of peoples ... formed a single ‘great city’ ... ruled by one law”; hence, “the crowning achievement of Ptolemaic Egypt, was the archive of this ‘megalopolis,’” which “collected works ‘from everywhere’ arranged according to a single order” (142-43). However, that order was destroyed by a “fire that, in one stroke, consumed the monument to classical learning” (148). Crucially, for Heller-Roazen, this “final catastrophe” (147) was less an unexpected occurrence than something that was already anticipated or even called forth by the Library’s very existence as such. An “institution in which the conservation and the destruction of tradition [could] hardly be told apart” (133), the Library was, in a sense, a machine designed to extirpate its own

¹⁷ Heller-Roazen details the basic uncertainty concerning date (and even the facticity) of the Library of Alexandria’s destruction (148).

contents. In analyzing the particularities of the Library's criteria for selection and organization, Heller-Roazen argues that the way in which the collection was constituted—chosen material was often “amended, distorted, and, in the most extreme cases, falsified”—meant that “the price each work paid for its admission” was that “it would be remembered only in being dismembered, placed in the history of letters in being extracted from the fabric of its production”; the Librarians thus “conserved what went before them to the very degree that they destroyed it” (145). For Heller-Roazen, then, a consequence of such conceptual foundations is that “the conflagration remains the supreme emblem of the Alexandrian archive itself, which sheltered the works of the past in exposing them to disaster, constituting and conserving its history in threatening it with its own destruction” (150). Moreover, just as the Library of Alexandria is itself “emblematic” of Western culture's drive to collect and order knowledge—a kind of ur-library—then the same threat of cataclysm would seem perpetually to hang over the contemporary archive as well.¹⁸

Despite Heller-Roazen's intriguing thesis, it still might seem possible to preserve a certain nonviolent image of the archive, for example, by arguing that “violence” comes at the archive from the outside and is thus *other* to what it

¹⁸ This seemingly paradoxical yet perpetual haunting of the archival impulse toward the preservation of culture continues to afflict the world's great patrimonial storehouses to this day, as the bizarre and total collapse of the Historical Archive of Cologne in 2009 attests (see Curry). But while archives in real life seem to be constantly under threat, the same is true of representations of the archive in popular culture, where threats of destruction are even more ubiquitous. It is *de rigueur*, for instance, that the archive in contemporary Hollywood cinema be destroyed or at least under threat. Paradigmatic of this trend would be, for example, the burning of the “World Tree” (the genealogical archive of the alien Na'vi people) in James Cameron's *Avatar* (2010), the young Darth Vader's assault on the Jedi Temple (along with its previously spotlighted archives) in George Lucas's *Star Wars Episode III: Revenge of the Sith* (2005), and the “arks” used in Roland Emmerich's *2012* (2009) to preserve civilization's treasures from being destroyed in the Mayan apocalypse.

menaces. Even as it is perpetually under attack, the archive would still, from this perspective, be figured as a space of potential refuge in which to conceal oneself from, or from which to critique and eventually surpass the threat of violence.¹⁹ However, this argument seems rather less plausible when we bear in mind the similarly habitual placement of the archive itself in the service of acts of violence. In other words, the archive can also be seen as a recurrent *means* by which certain forms of power—and, thus, force and violence—find expression. Perhaps the most extreme instance of this process is what Wolfgang Ernst refers to as the “instrumentalization” of the archive under National Socialism (13). As part of his analysis of the philosophy and praxis of archives management at various stages of Germany’s political history, Ernst argues that “Archival memory became . . . an instrument in the National Socialist programme for the annihilation of European Jewry” (25). One way in which “Archival evidence became a matter of life and death during the ‘Final Solution’ of the ‘Jewish question’” was, for example, in its provision of accurate genealogical “line[s] of descent” to be formulated about the population of Germany, which then allowed for its “Jewish subjects” to be identified, rounded up, and, ultimately, murdered (22). As a consequence, Ernst makes the startling though plausible claim that “the Holocaust was functionally connected to the construction of archival databanks” (25). In this scenario, the archive itself is not “destructive” as such, perhaps, but it nonetheless functions as a kind of institutional scaffolding—an enabling set of epistemic practices, as it

¹⁹ Compare Cowart’s suggestive connection between the contemporary efflorescence of the historical novel and a pervasive cultural “anxiety” caused by the ongoing threat of cataclysmic violence or destruction posed by nuclear weapons. The historical novel in the late twentieth century is thus unavoidably “apocalyptic” in tone (*History* 29).

were—for other, more obvious or literal forms of violence that might thus be seen to follow in its wake.

Comparable arguments in this regard have been put forth concerning the inextricable relation between the archive and the violence of European colonialism. For instance, according to the French anthropologist of science Bruno Latour, the foundation of Western Europe's centuries-long domination of much of the rest of the world lay to a large extent in the archive's technical procedures of textual inscription and totalized collection. In sum, the great, centralized archives of Europe's bureaucratized nation-states enabled what military technocrats today would call global force projection and full spectrum dominance. In Latour's terms, the act of "looking at files" granted the "average mind" a great deal of "power," since domains which are far apart become literally inches apart; domains which are convoluted and hidden, become flat ; thousands of occurrences can be looked at synoptically. More importantly, once files start being gathered everywhere to insure some two-way circulation of immutable mobiles, they can be arrayed in cascade: files of files can be generated and this process can be continued until a few men consider millions as if they were in the palms of their hands ... In our cultures "paper shuffling" is the source of an essential power, that constantly escapes attention since its materiality is ignored. (25-26)

While Latour views the power accorded to the collators of the archive as generally characteristic of a techno-scientific modernity, he also regards the colonial project in particular as emblematic of this process. Hence, through the "mobilization of

all savages [sic] in a few lands through collection, mapping, list making, [and] archives, ... One place [i.e. Europe] gather[ed] in all the others and present[ed] them synoptically to the dissenter so as to modify the outcome of an agonistic encounter” (15). A more concrete version of this somewhat abstract formulation of the imperial archive is provided by Taylor, in her examination of scenarios of cultural contact between indigenous peoples and Spanish colonists in sixteenth-century South America. Like Latour, Taylor views the archive, particularly insofar as it takes the relatively indelible form of written and collated documents, as a “recognized weapon in the colonial arsenal” (41).²⁰

However, to think of something such as the archive as a “weapon,” in the context of, for example, totalitarian or colonial regimes, is also to rethink in a fundamental sense the nature of violence itself. Instead of being seen as merely a “Mundane or empirical” (Grosz 138) fact of human and natural existence that most often takes the form of delimited, recognizable phenomena such as war (Grosz 138) or physical altercations between individuals (Wesley 166), violence also partakes of the order of representation.²¹ As Beatrice Hanssen puts it,

²⁰ The history of colonial representations (in addition to that of subsequent postcolonial interventions in those histories) has provided a particularly rich field for analysis in relation to questions of the archive. Representative works in this regard include texts by Ballantyne, Dirks, Elmer, Richards, Shetty and Bellamy, Spivak (“Rani”; “Subaltern”), and Stoler (“Colonial Archives”).

²¹ In arguing for a more elastic definition of the term, I agree with critics such as Whitehead, for whom violence is generally a “poorly understood” concept in that its quotidian definitions—such as “the illegitimate use of physical force and hurt”—fail to account for violence that has “no immediate material correlates, such as sorcery and verbal aggression” (“Poetics of Violence” 55, 58, 57). See also Wesley on the unsatisfactory nature of many conventional discussions of violence, in which the latter is viewed in simplistic binary terms either as wholly biologically determined or as solely the product of “excessive ... representation” (that is, violent media, video games, and so on produce violence in a straightforward, one-to-one causal relation) (2).

“Stretched beyond its formerly clearly demarcated boundaries, meaning ‘the use of physical force’ ... violence now includes such phenomenologically elusive categories as psychological, symbolic, structural, epistemic, hermeneutical, and aesthetic violence” (9). As a result, while on a certain level it seems to “point to some extra-linguistic social reality,” violence is also imbricated in the description and, ultimately, the constitution of that reality *through* language, and many recent theoretical interventions have drawn attention to its being situated, simultaneously, “within the discursive order of the social” (Angermüller et al. 7). On this level—and there is another level, as we shall see in a moment—the relationship between violence and representation, while “enormously complex” (de Lauretis 246), may be seen as basically chiasmatic. First, rather than being a pure irruption of some pre- or extra-representational real, mundane, physical violence—what Mark Ledbetter calls “body violence” (15)—always occurs in relation to a representational, discursive process through which social meanings in general are produced, negotiated, and contested. As Neil L. Whitehead persuasively argues, physical violence is thus inextricable from a *poetics*: “Violent actions, no less than any other kind of behavioral expression, are deeply infused with cultural meaning and are the moment for individual agency within historically embedded patterns of behavior. Individual agency, utilizing extant cultural forms, symbols, and icons, may thus be considered ‘poetic’” (“Introduction” 9). According to Whitehead, the meaning of violence “cannot be entirely understood by reference to biological origins ... or material and ecological necessities but has to be appreciated for the way in which it is also a

cultural expression of the most fundamental and complex kind,” one that, like other forms of representation, “involve[s] competence in the manipulation of signs and symbols” (“Poetics of Violence” 68).²² But if, to paraphrase Lacan, violence is structured like a language, something like the inverse is also true, in that language—or, more broadly, representation—can itself *do* violence. Thus, for Nancy Armstrong and Leonard Tennenhouse, “symbolic practices” such as writing are often themselves a key means “through which one group achieves and others resist a certain form of domination at a given place or moment in time” (2). From this standpoint, representation as a “mode of violence” inheres in those “descriptive powers” that enable the construction of a differential form of identity (7). “The violence of representation is the suppression of difference” that occurs when discourse is deployed to constitute a “self” by positioning certain “others” in a “negative relationship to that self” (8).

The archive is one of the key discursive formations through which this “negative relationship” is produced. According to Derrida’s formulation in *Archive Fever*, underlying the gesture of archivization is the fundamental structuring principle of “*consignation*” (3). The archive is always contingent upon the collection of a multiplicity at an ideal central point: “the act of *consigning*

²² See Seltzer’s analysis of the figure of the serial killer for a specific instance of this relation between violence and representation, particularly in the latter’s more overtly technological forms. For Seltzer, the distinctly modern phenomenon of serial killing is “marked by the ‘looping’ of collective bodies of information and individual desire ... Repetitive, compulsive, serial violence ... does not exist without this radical entanglement between forms of eroticized violence and mass technologies of registration, identification, and reduplication, forms of copy-cating and simulation” (3). In this formulation, “serial sexual violence” would be produced in relation to certain modes of technologized archivization, since it “depends on an intricate rapport between murder and machine culture. It depends not least on the intimacies between graphic violence and the technologies of registration, recording, and reproduction: the graphomanias of the Second Industrial Revolution” (6-7).

through *gathering together signs*, ... *Consignation* aims to coordinate a single corpus, in a system or a synchrony in which all the elements articulate the unity of an ideal configuration” (3). The archive, for Derrida, thus represents a mode of discursive totalization, a subtending of heterogeneity or diversity to the determining power of a single, fixed frame of reference. As a result, Derrida views consignation as bound up with a singular violence. Later in the text he claims that the “law of *consignation* which orders the archive,” this “gathering into itself of the One,” is “never without violence” since, “As soon as there is the One, there is murder, wounding, traumatism” (78). Elaborating on this general observation, Derrida then posits that consignation may be seen as structurally analogous to the “primordial,” intersubjective process of “Self-determination” whereby “the One”—a supposedly singular, unified national and/or individual subject—forms its identity via the violent expulsion and forgetting of a necessary yet subordinated or abject Other:

L’Un se garde de l’autre. The One guards against/keeps some of the other. It protects *itself* from the other, but, in the movement of this jealous violence, it comprises in itself, thus guarding it, the self-otherness of self-difference (the difference from within oneself) which makes it One ... *L’Un se fait violence*. The One makes itself violence. It violates and does violence to itself but it also institutes itself as violence. (78)

The One/Self here sets itself up in opposition to a denigrated Other that is marked by absolute opposition or difference. So, if we understand the archive as structured by the exclusionary, totalizing mechanism of consignation, it needs to

be viewed less as an *instrument* in the service of other, more obvious expressions of force than as a kind of violence in and of itself.²³

The third way in which the archive is inextricably bound to violence is located not so much in representation itself as in the latter's murky conceptual origins. As has been elaborated from a deconstructive perspective, the thing that we normally think of as "violence" tends to conceal a more originary manifestation, an "arche-violence" that is neither the product of nor an outside to representation but rather is something more like the initial driving force that brings language as a differential mode of expression—as *différance*—into being. As Elizabeth Grosz explains, violence is thus another name for "writing" in the specifically Derridean sense of the "trace," that "aporetic" point of origin that structures all forms of "inscription" in "divergence, ambiguity, [and] impossibility" (136). In the scheme that is elaborated most fully in *Of Grammatology*, Derrida frames the "arche-writing" that is the trace as "a primordial or constitutive violence that inscribes 'the unique,' the originary, the thing itself in its absolute self-proximity, into a system of differentiation, into the systems of ordering or classification that constitute language (or representation

²³ See Dean's analysis of the "violence of collecting" in the context of the colonization of North America for a specific example of an archival violence that functions by subordinating the (cultural) Other via exclusionary and hierarchizing systems of representation. For Dean, that is, in that it "undermine[s] indigenous authority" by privileging the worldview of the Western collector of artifacts and knowledge, the "ethnographic archive ... can do violence to the racial other." So, in the specific context of U.S. colonial history, the archive is "part of the mechanism of racial and ethnic hierarchy" (31). In more general terms, Lawrence and Karim define "rhetorical violence" as essentially the process of imperialistic subject formation: "At the heart of rhetorical violence, which is also cognitive violence, is the assumption that Europeans ... are intrinsically superior to the rest of humankind" (11). Likewise, Armstrong and Tennenhouse state unequivocally that "The violence of representation is the suppression of difference" (8). This process of violent othering could also be seen as characteristic of symbolic scapegoating as described by the philosopher René Girard in his influential *Violence and the Sacred*.

more generally)” (Grosz 137). As a result, what we normally perceive as violence in an empirical or day-to-day register is merely “the reduced and constrained derivative of a more primary and constitutive ... arche-violence that is the very condition of ... writing/violence” (Grosz 137). In fact, Derrida posits a tripartite structure of interrelated violences consisting of: the primary arche-violence/writing at the origin of language; a secondary order of “violence” that works to conceal the first kind, thus presenting itself as a paradoxical form of non-violence (the discourse of the law is one example of this); and, finally, actual violence as it is normally understood—and, usually, condemned (Grosz 137-38). One of the most important effects of viewing “violence” in terms of this particular structure is its insistence on, precisely, the *structuration* of violence: the fact that violence is never an “unheralded” irruption onto “an otherwise benign or peaceful scene,” but rather emerges as the complex origin (and, paradoxically, by-product) of “an entire order whose very foundation is inscriptive, differential, and thus violent” (Grosz 138). Consequently, instead of being reducible to certain recognizable but nonetheless aberrant “signifiers” such as “evil, war, indiscretion, rape” (de Lauretis 253), violence would be systemic and normative: “a fundamental force in the framework of the ordinary world” that, rather than being chaotically “opposed to structure” should be seen as “another form of structure, of processes, of practices” (Lawrence and Karim 7).²⁴

²⁴ Likewise, Žižek posits that material violence (what he calls “subjective violence”) is merely the less significant surface manifestation of “a more fundamental form” that he calls “systemic” or “objective” violence. This form is the usually invisible (or at least sublimated) consequence of the “imposition of a certain universe of meaning”; thus, rather than posing a threat to the social or cultural order, it is attendant upon it, as upon the “smooth functioning of our economic and political systems.” For Žižek, one of the insidious functions of a focus on subjective violence—in, say, humanitarian campaigns against war and famine in “Africa”—is that it tends by

A similar sense of the normativizing effects of an originary, structuring violence is elaborated by Derrida in “Force of Law: The ‘Mystical Foundation of Authority.’” Written, in part, as a commentary on and response to Walter Benjamin’s equally complex and elusive piece “Critique of Violence,” Derrida’s essay is long and difficult but its underlying attempt to deconstruct the concept of the law is pertinent for our purposes here. On the one hand, Derrida acknowledges that, in a certain tradition of thought, “the law” tends to be viewed as the opposite of force or violence [*Gewalt*]. On the other, however, he insists that, rather than being opposed (or, for that matter, accidentally or fortuitously connected in instrumental terms), violence and force are inseparable from the outset: “law is always an authorized force, a force that justifies itself or is justified in applying itself ... No law without force ... Applicability, ‘enforceability,’ is not an exterior or secondary possibility that may or may not be added as a supplement to law. It is the force essentially implied in the very concept of *justice as law*” (233). In fact, as with the concepts of arche-writing and arche-violence, the idea of the law has its beginnings in an originary violence: “the operation that amounts to founding, inaugurating, justifying law, to *making law*, would consist of a *coup de force*, of a performative and therefore interpretative violence that in itself is neither just nor unjust and that no justice and no earlier and previously founding law, no preexisting foundation, could, by definition, guarantee or contradict or invalidate” (241). Instead of being devoted to the maintenance of a peaceful order in

its very nature to cover over the perennial existence of its objective counterpart, which is thus judged—to the extent that it is noticed at all—as *not violent*: “Objective violence is invisible since it sustains the very zero-level standard against which we perceive something as subjectively violent” (2).

contradistinction to the menacing presence of its violent Others (e.g. crime, terrorism, revolution), the law would be inescapably coextensive with the primal, differential violence that inaugurates the very possibility of such a menace.

If we appear to have strayed away from the archive in the course of this discussion, it pays to bear in mind Derrida's suggestion that this "*mystical foundation of authority*" ("Force" 242) is a mobile concept, one that is applicable beyond this particular discursive situation. As such, Derrida asserts that "the violent structure of the founding act" of the law is also to be found "at the origin of every institution" ("Force" 242)—including the archive. Thus, as we recall from *Archive Fever*, any "science of the archive must include the theory of [its] *institutionalization*, that is to say, the theory both of the law which begins by inscribing itself there and of the right which authorizes it" (4, my emphasis). In Derrida's various formulations, the archive and the law are closely linked. On the one hand, the archive's primary significance in the Western tradition is "*nomological*" since it originates simultaneously with the foundation of the law. Etymologically "archive" derives from the Ancient Greek "*arkheion*," which refers to the house or "domicile" of the magistrates (*archons*) who were invested with the authority to collect, file, and ultimately interpret official documents; it was through this process that was at once acquisitive and hermeneutic that they were granted with the authority of "*speaking the law*" itself. The archive is thus, effectively, the space in which the law originates—a "*topo-nomology*" (2, 3). By the same token, Derrida's conception of the law is itself "archival." In a practical sense, the law is elaborated on the basis of a documentary heritage, a

“transformable textual strata”²⁵ that enables the law to unfold via supplemental and interminable “interpretation[s]” of legal precedent (“Force” 242, 251):

the reinstating, reinventive and freely deciding interpretation of the responsible judge requires that his ‘justice’ not consist only in conformity, in the conservative and reproductive activity of judgment ... for a decision to be just and responsible, it must ... be both regulated and without regulation, it must preserve the law ... and also destroy or suspend it enough to have ... to reinvent it in each case.

(“Force” 251)

According to Derrida, the archive occupies a similarly ambivalent position to the law in relation to the demands of preservation and innovation: “every archive ... is at once *institutive* and *conservative*” (*Archive 7*). Indeed, it is at this exact moment in *Archive Fever* that the questions of the law, violence, and the archive intersect most insistently. For Derrida, that is, this simultaneously “Revolutionary and traditional” archive has, precisely, the “force of law” and is thus the expression of “the violence of a power (*Gewalt*) which at once posits and conserves the law, as the Benjamin of *Zur Kritik der Gewalt* would say. What is at issue here ... is the violence of the archive itself, *as archive, as archival violence*” (7).

In “Force of Law,” Derrida tells us, “violence thus belongs in advance to the order of a law that remains to be transformed or founded” (268). He thus cautions: “For a critique of violence—that is to say, an interpretive and meaningful evaluation of it—to be possible, one must first recognize meaning in a violence that is not an accident arriving from outside the law. That which

²⁵ According to Grosz, “the law is writing par excellence, and the history of legal institutions is the history of the reading and rewriting of law” (140).

threatens law already belongs to it, to the right to law[,] ... to the origin of law” (268-69). A similar injunction confronts us in the case of the archive, particularly as it relates to the possibility of a mode of historical representation that would be simultaneously reparative and ethically responsible. Does the foregoing discussion of what James R. Giles refers to as “‘structural’ or ‘systemic’ theories of violence” (x) undermine the very possibility of constructing resistant histories, due to the apparent necessity of viewing the archive—a key site at which such “counter-memories” are often produced—as implicated in such violent structures and systems? At the very least, this realization should prompt our reflection upon the possibility that, in “simply condemning or deploring violence ... where it is most obvious and manifest,” intellectuals and artists run the risk of failing to detect violence “where it is less obvious, and rarely called by this name, in the domain of knowledges, reflection, thinking, and writing” (Grosz 134).²⁶ At a certain point, does the politicized, “revelatory gesture” of a determined “writing *against* violence” point the way, via a “fraught itinerary,” to an unexpected destination? “The ‘discourse of violence’ thus becomes, in the mirror, the ‘violence of discourse,’” since any writing that “takes violence as its subject matter is at the same time faced with the inverse of its project: the violence, not *in* discourse, but the violence *of* discourse” (Potter 76, 85).

But this multilayered violence of archival discourse is admittedly difficult to specify. Complicating matters in this regard is something that I have

²⁶ See also Armstrong and Tennenhouse: “This idea of violence as representation is not an easy one for most academics to accept. It implies that whenever we speak for someone else we are inscribing her with our own (implicitly masculine) idea of order ... [e.g.] in presuming to speak for ‘woman,’ feminist theory sometimes resembles the very thing it hates and suppresses differences of class, age, and ethnicity, among others” (25).

deliberately withheld thus far, in part since it is a phenomenon that is itself constituted by a gesture of radical concealment or effacement. It is, in fact, the fourth and most profound order of archival violence: a violence that is inscribed *within* the archive but which, paradoxically, is concealed by the production of that same violence. I am talking here about what Derrida calls “archivolithics.”

Analogous to the Freudian death drive, the archivolithic is that inescapable self-violation which is at once constitutive *and* destructive of the archive, in one and the same gesture; it is that which is paradoxically congruent with the archive’s emergence into being and cause of the archive’s immediate disappearance. As Derrida puts it in *Archive Fever*, the archivolithic names a principle that “works to destroy the archive ... on the condition of effacing but also with a view to effacing its own ‘proper traces’” (10); the “archivolithic drive” thus effectively “leaves no monument” and “bequeaths no document of its own,” but rather “commands the radical effacement ... [of] the archive” (11). However, on the other hand, the archive would not exist at all *without* such a drive: “There would indeed be no archive desire without the radical finitude ... of this death drive” (19). It turns out that—on the most basic level of its functioning—the archive is dependent for its very existence on the violent erasure of all traces of itself. Thus, any archival project, to borrow O’Driscoll’s terms, always “engenders the destruction of the very archive in which it takes shape” (299). In effect, this is a violence of the archive that cannot ultimately be traced because it is, by definition, radically sublimated. At the very least, the serpentine contradictions inherent in the notion of archivolithics should give us pause in the attempt to figure the

archive as the site of various, more obvious *signs* of (empirical) violence that can then be analyzed, critiqued, mitigated, rejected, and so on. To think the archiviolithic drive, then, is to consider the possibility that the most dangerous forms of archival violence are precisely the ones we do not immediately perceive as such. Foucault once claimed, in what was admittedly a quite different theoretical and historical context, “it is not possible for us to describe our own archive” (130); just so, it might be equally impossible, finally, to detect and critique the violence that is at once produced and masked in the “archivization of the archive” (O’Driscoll 299).

Chapter Outline

Each of the four novels examined in this study depicts the archive as the primary means through which knowledge about American history is produced, but each also adopts an ambivalent stance toward this paradoxically self-violating representational process. Like the character of Baby Suggs in Morrison’s *Beloved*, these texts find that “digging up” the past—particularly when that past consists of something as brutal and dehumanizing as enslavement—can be a counterproductive or even dangerous business (146-47). Overall, they equate the recovery of the past via the mechanism of the archive less with the promise of redemption, healing, knowledge, or catharsis, than with a range of outcomes that we would normally view as negative or “violent”: failures of understanding, the fracturing of social bonds, entropy, silence, imprisonment, war, and death. Various phenomena like these appear perpetually to *shadow* the models of

historical investigation and representation that these novels depict as integral to their narratives. Amy S. Gottfried's argument concerning the issue of violence in historical fiction by American women is equally applicable in the context of my chosen texts, which, on the one hand, depict "histories and memories [that] are either inherently violent, or have been violently repressed," and, on the other, suggest that the traces of those histories "require a kind of epistemological violence to be recovered." The novels of McCarthy, Morrison, Mukherjee, and DeLillo thus suggest, to borrow Gottfried's terms, the "very high stakes concerning narrative strategies used to recover history, to remember or recover a memory" (8).

I begin with an analysis of McCarthy's revisionist Western *Blood Meridian or The Evening Redness in the West*. The novel follows a gang of savage American mercenaries as they traverse the deserts of the mid-nineteenth-century southwestern U.S. and northern Mexico, hunting down and murdering Native Americans—and ultimately other cultural groups—for their valuable scalps. Unsurprisingly, given its subject matter, *Blood Meridian* is particularly noteworthy for its baroque depictions of extreme violence that present a profound challenge both to readerly comprehension and to the often sanitized myths of the Frontier, in which the West was "won" by the progressive forces of civilization and enlightenment. The central claim of Chapter One, however, is that the novel's endemic, unsettling violence is inextricable from McCarthy's concern with the work of collection that is fundamental to the constitution of the archive. In particular, I argue that the gigantic, learned yet perverse figure of Judge Holden—

an outsized intellectual who accompanies the scalp-hunters on their travels—embodies the novel’s engagement with the Derridean notion of “consignation.” In the form of his ledger-book and wallets, the judge produces an encyclopedic archive comprising the cultural and natural “signs” of the American West; concomitant with this archive, though, the judge also produces *himself* as a powerful, unified subject who exercises power over a violently subordinated (usually racialized) Other. In *Blood Meridian*, then, the judge’s totalizing project of archival “gathering” figures the broader process of Euro-American continental expansion—what is often referred to as “Manifest Destiny”—itself. But while McCarthy clearly seeks to challenge the predominant triumphalist vein of Western history by thus “reveal[ing] the darker realities of American conquest” (Frye 74), I argue that he is finally unsure of the validity of such an interrogatory project. In depicting the repeated failure of the protagonist (“the kid”) to transform his own violent past into a more redemptive vision of the future, *Blood Meridian* ultimately rejects the equation that would link reparation for historical injustice with what Derrida calls the act of “remember[ing] the others” (77).

In *Blood Meridian* the judge attains symbolic suzerainty over the indigenous and *mestizo* peoples of the West by collecting representations of their material culture and destroying the objects themselves (not to mention by physically killing many of the people themselves). In depicting this project McCarthy necessarily focuses on the role that the archive plays in constituting what Derrida refers to as “the One”: that privileged, totalizing subject position brought into existence by the mechanism of consignation, whereby “the Other” is

at once gathered in toward an ideal central point and incorporated within the archive, *and*, paradoxically, violently excluded from this totality (77-78). In *Beloved*, by contrast, Morrison tries to imagine the effects of archival violence as they are seen and felt by the “forgotten” others—not the archivist, in other words, but those who *have been* archived. The archive is a particularly vexed trope for an African-American author who is concerned with representing her people’s experience of enslavement and its debilitating historical reverberations. In one sense, the archive is a crucial historiographic technology that provides Morrison with the necessary means of recovering the lost or occluded traces of the lives of her forebears. *Beloved* thus incorporates and reworks a series of documentary fragments (most notably, an 1850s newspaper clipping about an incident of infanticide) in order to tell a story about the tremendously straitened conditions under which nineteenth-century African-American men and (particularly) women could exercise some degree of limited agency. However, in its self-conscious engagement with the processes by which the past gets transmitted to the present, *Beloved* also draws attention to the limitations of the archive for such “recollections of kin” (Wall, *Worrying* 85). Drawing on the insights of trauma theory, Chapter Two discusses how the extreme nature of slave experience—the physical and psychological toll it takes on African American bodies and minds—makes it virtually impossible to capture adequately in the empirical or mimetic form of representation that Morrison associates with the recurrent figure of a newspaper clipping. More profoundly, though, via the depiction of the “book-writing” slave-master known as schoolteacher, *Beloved* ultimately suggests that

the trauma of enslavement as such needs to be understood as a kind of “archival” violence. Given this realization, Morrison presents “pass[ing] on” (*Beloved* 274-75) the history of black suffering as a painful and dangerous process in and of itself.

Like *Beloved*, *The Holder of the World* is concerned with the vexed process of “retrieving” from the archive information about the experiences of hitherto marginalized subjects, thereby enabling the articulation of a revisionist narrative of history. By way of a dual narrative structure, Mukherjee depicts her researcher-protagonist Beigh Masters discovering certain textual and material traces of the life of Hannah Easton, an obscure but extraordinary woman in Puritan-era America whose transnational trajectory—Salem, Massachusetts to Mughal India and back—results in a radical expansion of her sense of self as well as a destabilization of conventional assumptions, in both her own time and in Beigh’s contemporary moment, about race and gender in American and Indian history. At the same time, Mukherjee’s novel is a complex engagement with the politics of the archive, particularly as it concerns broader theoretical and political debates about the often strained relations between feminist and postcolonial concerns. Thus, on the one hand, through Beigh’s serendipitous encounters with a series of documentary sources detailing Hannah’s Indian sojourn, Mukherjee critiques the “patriarchic” dimensions of the conventional documentary archive, while simultaneously gesturing toward a feminist recovery project that will supposedly correct the historiographic imbalances of masculinist-imperial ideology. On the other hand, however, Beigh’s—and, indeed, Mukherjee’s—

revisionist orientation toward the “gendered” archive is complicated by a consideration of the “postcolonial” archive. Echoing such intractable disciplinary questions as the relevance of “First World” feminism for the plight of “Third World” women, Mukherjee’s engagement with the archive in *The Holder of the World* appears to privilege the self-realization of white women—Hannah and Beigh—over and against the subordination of Bhagmati, the novel’s main example of what Spivak would call the subaltern “brown woman” (“Subaltern” 296). The central claim of Chapter Three is thus that Mukherjee represents the archive as the site of a violent, racialized process of “self-restitution” (Williams 230) by which the “audacious yearnings” (Mukherjee, *Holder* 15) of certain white feminists for liberated, agential subjectivity in resistance to patriarchal discrimination are produced in necessary relation to a sublimated scenario of subaltern abjection.

Chapter Four brings the dissertation to a close with an analysis of *Libra*. As with *The Holder of the World*’s parallax view of Puritans and postmoderns, DeLillo’s novel features a drama of archival retrieval that explicitly juxtaposes the depiction of historical events (in this instance, the assassination of President John F. Kennedy) with the belated perspective of a contemporary researcher-protagonist. Whereas Mukherjee’s novel focuses on the reclamation of a particular individual’s life-story from the archive, however, what the “archivist” figure in *Libra* seeks to recover is something much larger (and, in a sense, more nebulous) than a human subject. Retired CIA analyst-cum-historian Nicholas Branch, like many of his compatriots in the 1980s of the novel’s present, continues to be

disturbed by the radically destabilizing effects that Kennedy's violent death has had on his society; those "seven seconds that broke the back of the American century" (181) in a political sense have also more generally precipitated an era of unprecedented moral and epistemological uncertainty in which even the lineaments of physical space appear at issue. In effect, then, Branch's quasi-empiricist historiographic project marks his attempt to order the present moment by describing and thus comprehending a particular event—one that can be identified in retrospect to have been what Cowart would call a historical "turning point" (*History* 8)—via the initially confusing welter of archival traces strewn in its wake. But if we can indeed consider Lee Harvey Oswald's murder of JFK to be the first "postmodern historical event" (Carmichael 207), the inaugural moment of a culture increasingly dominated by recursive, simulacral systems of representation, then Branch's desire to attain a position of discursive mastery by representing that occurrence from a putatively stable, "meta-historical" vantage point proves at best to be impossible. In fact, what *Libra* persistently demonstrates is the way in which, under the conditions of postmodernity, the historical event cannot occupy a position of exteriority in relation to the archive; on the contrary, to borrow Derrida's words, Branch's project of "archivization produces as much as it records the event" (*Archive* 17). In *Libra*'s depiction of the conspiracy against the President as a protracted exercise in the production and management of documents and artifacts by a coterie of "men in small rooms" (181), DeLillo suggests that the shattering violence of November 22, 1963 can only be augmented, carried down into the future, by reiterative acts of archiving.

Chapter One

“All the World in a Book”: Consigning the West in Cormac McCarthy’s

Blood Meridian or The Evening Redness in the West

In the Zone

The early chapters of Cormac McCarthy’s extraordinary 1985 novel *Blood Meridian or The Evening Redness in the West* describe the wanderings of the nameless protagonist, a teenaged “kid” who, somewhat like Huck Finn before him (Fielder 162), has lit out for the territories on the mid-nineteenth-century Frontier in an attempt to escape his past by fashioning himself anew in the crucible of those “terrains so wild and barbarous” (McCarthy 4-5). Arriving in the Texas town of Bexar (now San Antonio) in 1849, the kid indeed seems to have been “raised . . . up” (30) in the course of his journey. Back east, in Tennessee, he was merely an impoverished “child,” “pale and thin” with a “thin and ragged linen shirt” (3); now, more properly kitted out after signing on with a local militia (“bathed and shaved” and wearing “a pair of blue cord trousers and [a] cotton shirt”), the outwardly remade youth begins to resemble “a new *man* altogether” (37, my emphasis). On one level, then, the kid’s ceaseless mobility—both in terms of geographic location and his very appearance and identity—seems to resonate with certain powerful archetypes by which the American West figures as a supposedly unbounded space of individual liberty and transformative possibility, or what Michael Kowalewski identifies, in his discussion of emergent currents in

the “new,” late twentieth-century Western writing, as a “geography of hope” (Introduction 9).

However, even as he ostensibly reinforces one important aspect of American mythology, McCarthy simultaneously interrogates others. If the conventional or generic Western’s narrative of “single-handed masculine conquest” tends to be dominated by the “central metaphor” of a privileged Anglo-American individual’s self-actualizing “westering impulse,” many contemporary critical engagements with the legacy of the Frontier have sought to disrupt this singular linearity by, for instance, emphasizing the multiple, cross-hatched trajectories that together produce the complex skein of the West’s actual history (Kowalewski, Introduction 2, 9). Thus, in San Antonio de Bexar, the kid is inserted into a strange, polyglot cultural milieu, full of complexity and contradiction—and menace. One night, accompanied by two companions from Texas and Missouri, the kid finds—or perhaps, rather, *loses*—himself in the uncanny space of *la frontera*:

They rode through a plaza thronged with wagons and stock. With immigrants and Texans and Mexicans and with slaves and Lipan indians and deputations of Karankawas tall and austere, their faces dyed blue and their hands locked about the shafts of their sixfoot spears, all but naked savages who with their painted skins and their whispered taste for human flesh seemed outrageous presences even in that fabled company. (37-38)

Here, various kinds of borders—between races, different historical epochs, even the one separating fantasy and reality—are made porous. According to Mark A. Eaton, *Blood Meridian* is in fact best read as a “postnational narrative” that “carefully delineates the competing interests of various groups who make claims upon the same geographical space”; the text examines “the formation of a decidedly *mestizo* culture from the panoply of cultural practices, ethnicities, and material bodies inhabiting the border region” (162).²⁷ Eaton thus identifies the uncertain, multilingual borderland of McCarthy’s Southwest as that arena of colonial interaction known as the “contact zone” (174).

In Mary Louise Pratt’s influential formulation, contact zones are “social spaces where disparate cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in highly asymmetrical relations of domination and subordination,” as exemplified by the histories of “colonialism, slavery” (4)—or, we might add, that of the United States’ gradual annexation of indigenous and Mexican territory throughout the nineteenth century. According to Pratt, from the mid eighteenth century onward the “expansionist enterprises” of western colonialism both produced and were enabled by the development of a “Eurocentered form of global or ...

²⁷ Several critics have drawn attention to the ways in which *Blood Meridian* appears to undermine notions of stable national-cultural boundaries and identities. For instance, in arguing for what she sees as McCarthy’s “transnational” focus, Newman contends that “the novel ... relates its protagonists not to a national family or imperial nation but to a global genealogy” (134). See also Parrish, who points out that Glanton’s scalp-hunters usually kill indiscriminately, “regardless of their victims’ national affiliation”; they are thus “Without any true national identity” themselves (*Civil War* 100-101). Conversely, for critics such as Douglas, McCarthy is not so much suggesting that nationalism is irrelevant to the understanding of the West, as attempting to de-naturalize “the nation” by demonstrating its contingent, discursively mediated origins; thus, *Blood Meridian* analyzes “the formation and deformations of nations in the historical Southwest as a site of colonization and imperialism” (5). Similarly, while suggesting McCarthy’s postnationalist orientation, Eaton nonetheless also describes the novel as “a record of forgotten atrocities committed in the name of nationhood” (159).

‘planetary’ consciousness,” where “consciousness” refers both to the sense or idea of the “rest of the world” as an ordered totality and to the controlling mind or gaze of the supposedly disinterested white, male, bourgeois subject to which that totality is subordinate (4, 5). Pratt argues that this crucial “planetary” ideology was in part the result of the development of Linnaean natural history, whose taxonomy was premised on the detailed description of plants’ “visual parameters”—specifically, the “number, form, position, and relative size” of their reproductive organs—by which the “chaos” of the botanical, and, by implication, animal and mineral, worlds could be ordered (25). Aimed at a “systematizing of nature” (29), natural history “compose[d] an order” that took the form of a kind of “universalized” world-picture: in concert with other, related classificatory systems, the Linnaean schema set itself “the task of locating every species on the planet, extracting it from its particular, arbitrary surroundings (the chaos), and placing it in its appropriate spot in the system (the order—book, collection, or garden)” (31). The key protagonist of this “vast epistemological enterprise” (Fielder 38) of scientific classification is the figure of the “naturalist-collector,” who, “armed with nothing more than a collector’s bag, a notebook, and some specimen bottles” (Pratt 33, 27), sets out to produce an archive of encyclopedic proportions—in Derrida’s terms, to gather the heterogeneous “signs” of the physical world within the “ideal synchrony” of natural-historical description (*Archive 3*).²⁸

²⁸ Significantly, Pratt indicates that the discourse of Linnaean natural history was dependent on the material archive. As a system of knowledge production, in other words, it was inextricable from a substrate of particular techniques, technologies, and institutions that comprised an articulated network of “verbal and non-verbal practices”: the basic “linguistic apparatuses” of

Concerning the later “imperial archives” of the Victorian era, Thomas Richards has argued that putatively disinterested or objective modes of knowledge production and storage were in actuality intimately related to the exercise of power (32). Pratt similarly suggests that the discourse of natural history collection emerged concomitantly (and troublingly) along with analogous “Enlightenment processes of standardization, bureaucracy, and normalization,” such as state surveillance (enabled by “record-keeping apparatuses which elaborately documented and classified individual citizens”), capitalist primitive accumulation (another form of totalizing “collection”), and the rationalistic horrors of the slave trade and plantation system (“massive experiments in social engineering and discipline, serial production, . . . [and] the standardizing of persons”) (35-36). In other words, if the decidedly unthreatening persona of the “herborizer” (27) tends to appear in contemporary discourses as an innocent abroad—Pratt notes that in eighteenth-century travel writing, for example, there is “often a certain impotence or androgyny” about the figure of the roaming natural historian (56)—this seeming innocence belies an underlying will to power that enables at once the epistemological control of the natural environment by “a rationalizing, extractive, dissociative understanding” and the very real domination of colonial space by means of “territorial surveillance, appropriation of resources, and administrative control” (38-39). Thus, for instance, Pratt argues that natural history’s basic operation, whereby “One by one the planet’s lifeforms were to be drawn out of the

“writing . . . speaking, and reading,” such as the printing press; improved navigational instruments, as well as new techniques for “preserving, transporting, displaying, and documenting specimens”; “patronage networks” that provided much-needed funding for expeditions; various “amateur and professional societies” for the dissemination of gathered information; and specialized spaces for collection and display, such as botanical and zoological gardens (29).

tangled threads of their life surroundings and rewoven into European-based patterns of global unity and order,” also inevitably had the effect of subordinating (or even eliding altogether) indigenous or non-western epistemologies that understood those same surroundings in complex, holistic terms (31). The abstractions of natural history, then, effected a symbolic “deterritorialization” or dispossession of native peoples and others that was a crucial facet of the broader process of “colonial appropriation” (53).

In this chapter I argue that *Blood Meridian*, itself a narrative of travel or “transit” in which one of the central protagonists, the enigmatic, horrifying Judge Holden, is, among other things, a “botanize[r]” (McCarthy 247, 127), similarly implicates the intersecting archival practices of classification, inscription, and, most importantly, gathering or “consignation” in a totalizing—indeed, “planetary”—epistemological project that is also, unavoidably, a form of colonial, if not genocidal violence. Like Pratt’s emblematic natural historian, McCarthy’s judge continually seeks to “extract” the life-forms and objects he encounters from their original contexts in order to install them within a hierarchized, tabulated system of his own devising, thereby “compos[ing]” order from chaos (Pratt 31). Imagining his collection as a great, panoptic “zoo” (McCarthy 199) in which the contents of the universe are undressed—“made to stand naked before him” (198)—by his penetrating gaze, the judge is thus a version of Pratt’s great imperial “eye,” the superintending “observer” who assimilates everything he sees “into the language of the system,” while he himself remains outside this regime of

description (31-32).²⁹ The archive thus functions for McCarthy as a key figure by which to re-imagine the violent annexation—at once epistemological and material—of the Western lands.

Crucially, however, Judge Holden’s seemingly total control over the archive of *natural* history (usually figured in the novel as his ever present black-leather ledger-book) also implies his ability to manipulate the enabling conditions of historical representation—*historiography*—in general. Ultimately, as a result, the judge’s powerful presence in the text raises troubling questions concerning the viability of the alternative understanding of the Frontier’s legacy that McCarthy ostensibly proposes. If, in many ways, *Blood Meridian* purports to be a “revisionist” historical novel that is based on a critical reinterpretation both of the extant documentary record and the literary and cultural mythology of the West, it also self-consciously represents a version of this very representational project: the (re)writing of history.³⁰ In particular, the totalizing archival presence of the judge

²⁹ As Fielder explains, the judge’s gaze entails “a theoretically omnipotent specular denuding, in which the acts of seeing, naming, and dominating the world are collapsed into one movement,” whereby “the staggering diversity of life forms on earth ... [are] conceptualized within a single epistemological order” (39). On the relation between vision and power in *Blood Meridian*, see Pitts who argues that the judge represents the “tyrannical ambition of the American eye to see all” in his “optical drive” toward the attainment of knowledge (8). Pitts explicitly equates a Cartesian perspectivalism that “privileges an ahistorical, disinterested, disembodied subject entirely outside of the world it claims to know only from afar” with the expansionist ideology of Manifest Destiny (19). More generally, on the equation of encyclopedic knowledge with the figure of the “colossal cartographer,” see O’Driscoll (289).

³⁰ Various critics have noted the origins of much of *Blood Meridian* in the documentary archive of Western history, and they have further suggested that this gesture of retrieval is, in large part, what enables McCarthy to articulate his critique of America’s expansionist ideology. Thus, Fielder notes that the novel’s events have been “exhumed from beneath the apophysis of the historical record” in such a way as to reveal the mythic narrative of the West as a “constructed and violently imposed fiction” (41). Holmberg also situates *Blood Meridian* itself within the archive, reading the novel as “an alternative document” which enables the “historical reinterpretation of the settlement of the West” as a story of “violent depravity” rather than one of triumphant national self-actualization (145).

implies that any such discursive project, however well intentioned, runs the risk of repeating, at the level of representation and ideology, the very “violence” it ostensibly seeks to salve. As a result, in its depiction of the futile and, ultimately, destructive effort of another character, “the kid,” to understand his past in order to remake his present and future, McCarthy’s text places in doubt the possibility of articulating any sort of resistant counter-memory of the history of the American West.

“A Taste for Mindless Violence”: Problems of Interpretation

From the outset, deadly violence hangs over *Blood Meridian* like a pall. This insistence is exemplified by the career of the kid, whose brutal existence begins with an inaugural (if unwitting) act of destruction: the narrator informs us that his “mother dead these fourteen years did incubate in her own bosom the creature who would carry her off” (3). Violence seems to be the kid’s default setting, the result of a natural predilection that inexorably “broods” in him (3). He soon gets to indulge this “taste” after he runs away from his home in Tennessee and arrives on a frontier that is populated largely by atavistic throwbacks, “Men whose speech sounds like the grunting of apes” and who “fight [him] with fists, with feet, with bottles or knives” (4). Barely surviving this series of skirmishes, the kid moves on through a landscape that, with its “reefs of bloodred clouds” (21), “whitehot stars ... rifling down the dark” (46), and lashing winds that cause weeds to move violently, “like the earth’s long echo of lance and spear in old encounters forever unrecorded” (105), seems to mirror or perhaps predetermine

the violence that the kid encounters in the social world. Throughout the novel, “old encounters” do indeed seem to echo in ceaseless reverberation. As we follow the kid’s initially purposeless movements through this “terra damnata” (61), we are witness to events of a moral extremity that “few men ... [see] in a lifetime” (305):

The kid had already let go the bottleneck and he pitched the second bottle into his right hand in a roadagent’s pass before it even reached the floor and he backhanded the second bottle across the barman’s skull and crammed the jagged remnant into his eye as he went down. (25)

The way narrowed through rocks and by and by they came to a bush that was hung with dead babies.

They stopped side by side, reeling in the heat. These small victims, seven, eight of them, had holes punched in their underjaws and were hung so by their throats from the broken stobs of a mesquite to stare eyeless at the naked sky. Bald and pale and bloated, larval to some unreckonable being. (57)

The white man looked up drunkenly and the black stepped forward and with a single stroke swapt off his head.

Two thick ropes of dark blood and two slender rose like snakes from the stump of his neck and arched hissing into the fire. (107)

Chosen at random, these examples are nonetheless representative of the novel's relentless—and, it must be said, at times stomach-turning—assault on the wholeness and dignity of the human body. It is perhaps no wonder that, by the end of the novel, even the *naturally* violent kid seems traumatized by what he has seen and done: “his mind had come uncottered by the acts of blood in which he had participated” (305). Like many of his fellow “Americans” (177)—an unprepossessing gallery of rapacious gold-prospectors, lunatics, escaped convicts, racist filibusters, and brutal mercenaries—the kid ends up “half crazed with the enormity of [his] own presence” in the “immense and bloodslaked waste[s]” comprising the border region that straddles the south-western U.S. and northern Mexico (177).

From the moment of publication, the novel's violence has drawn considerable critical commentary. As Steven Frye notes, what scant attention *Blood Meridian* received in early reviews was characterized by “confusion and uninterest” in response to the text's “horrific descriptions”; reviewers were left “disoriented” by McCarthy's “extreme rendering of violence” (70). The idea of violence as a fundamental *problem* for the reader was further elaborated in the first full monograph on McCarthy's work, Vereen M. Bell's *The Achievement of Cormac McCarthy* (1988). In his chapter on *Blood Meridian*, Bell observes that the novel's characters “kill and rape and pillage without restraint and on a scale that staggers the imagination and repeatedly affronts the eye with gory spectacle.” For Bell, such actions appear non-instrumental, without purpose, and, rather than being explicable by external ends such as “mere greed,” speak instead to

McCarthy's perception of something "darker and more irrational at work in the human psyche" (123). More recently, Barclay Owens has similarly argued for seeing the question of violence as fundamental to the reader's experience of the novel. Like both Frye and Bell, Owens stresses the affective, almost phenomenal response called forth by McCarthy's depiction of various atrocities. The seemingly endless scenes of violence create a sense of "shock and dismay" in readers who will look in vain for any sign of ethics or morality in McCarthy's excessively "naturalistic" worldview (7, 49). For Owens, moreover, the theme of violence is indissociable from its formal presentation. The novel's aimless plot "assaults" the reader desirous of the clear development of narrative or character, while the "minuteness of detail" of McCarthy's ornate language, particularly at moments of extreme violence such as the famous description of the Comanche attack on Captain White's filibusterers, creates a sense of "agonizing slow motion" indicative of the novel's "painful realism" (3, 5). Indeed, the relation between violence and language or style has proven a key question for these and other critics. As Frye suggests, the "essential paradox" of McCarthy's work is a product of the reader's inability to "reconcile the lyrical power of the author's language and narrative style, which blends words and imagery in a remarkable alchemy of the sublime and the picturesque, with a rendering of violence and depravity largely unparalleled in Western literature" (70). Likewise, for Owens, the unmitigated violence of *Blood Meridian* "repulses yet attracts," largely due to the tension between the novel's horrific content and its frequently gorgeous prose (8).³¹

³¹ The "paradox" of the novel's violent beauty has continued to elicit a wide range of

According to Jason P. Mitchell the novel's excessive brutality resists the reader's natural sense-making predilections (299-300). In fact, amidst these various attempts to account for the extreme "body count" (Owens 7) of *Blood Meridian*, a critical consensus has coalesced around the issue of "interpretation" itself. McCarthy's depiction of violence seems at once to encourage and radically refuse the basic readerly desire to seek out and uncover the text's meaning. Jonathan Pitts, for example, analyzes a particular scene in which the somewhat affectless narrator describes, in some detail, the vicious murder of two babies. Pitts holds that the scene's phenomenal clarity paradoxically belies its conceptual and ethical pointlessness:

The violence is simply too much to take in, to get the imagination
around ... we begin to wonder why, after all, we would want ... a

critical responses. Some critics have argued that McCarthy presents violence as a transhistorical phenomenon, an inherent, almost hard-wired aspect of human nature itself. According to Rothfork, for instance, the novel's third epigraph (which details a contemporary archaeological expedition that uncovers "evidence" that scalping has been common practice since prehistory) suggests that "humans are instinctively depraved and violent," and that, in fact, "violence is [just] another name for man" (25). In a more extended analysis of McCarthy's engagement with anthropological discourse—particularly the popular late twentieth-century theories of ethology in which the image of "man the hunter" was propagated (139)—Newman similarly notes the novel's apparent vision of violence as an "inbuilt determinism" that connects technological modernity, as represented by Judge Holden, with the most atavistic, bestial past (132). Newman also argues, however, for the need to interrogate such putatively transhistorical theories (138), and a second key critical tendency indeed posits the brutality evident in *Blood Meridian* as thoroughly historicized. Thus, according to Eaton, the novel depicts the "consequence[s] of a larger conflict over land and cultural dominance" and centres on a particular cultural moment when "the United States engaged in an imperialist campaign to incorporate the entire region of the Southwest" (157). In a similar vein, Sepich provides ample evidence that such disturbing events are firmly rooted in documentable reality (123-43). Other critics view *Blood Meridian* as "historical" in more contemporary terms. Godden and Richmond see the novel as a refraction of late twentieth-century US foreign policy (447), while Owens makes a convincing argument for reading it as an engagement with the cultural legacy of the Vietnam War and 1960s civil unrest in particular (19). Finally, the novel's representation of violence has also been interpreted in what we might call "mythological" terms, as an engagement with the ancient trope of the "sacred hunter" (Spurgeon 21) or as a deconstruction of the more recent mythology of the Frontier (Eaton 156-57). From this perspective, as Jason Mitchell argues, McCarthy's depiction of "hundreds of brutal killings" works against a sanitized myth in which "the Western landscape known to generations ... is no place for such violence" (299).

precise image of brains bursting forth, and what possible meaning finally could such an image hold for us? ... The braining of babies seems so meaningless and so aesthetically or perceptually unrewarding, and therefore gratuitous, that our attention may wander. (20)

For Pitts, such descriptions are pure “surface” and hold no deeper “symbolic” meaning; the violence “appears to speak for itself” (20). Likewise, Dana Phillips argues that, for McCarthy, violence is only ever *itself*, “not a sign or symbol of something else” (435), while Eaton also notes that such events usually occur in the novel without explicit commentary or editorializing and are thus difficult to “explain” (164). Many of the novel’s critics make similar points about the apparently deliberate resistance of the novel’s violence to interpretation, if not to linguistic representation itself: the action is, by turns, “pointless” and “tediously redundant” (Lincoln 83, 85), indicative of an empty nihilism (McGilchrist 192; Wallach 12), without “comprehensible purpose” (Shaviro 147), and “mindless” (Owens 4).

Many of the characters who commit brutish acts in *Blood Meridian* do indeed seem rather mindless—witness the “halfwitted killer from Missouri” whose response to the judge’s eloquence is to “[guffaw] softly like an asthmatic” (85). On another level, however, their violence evinces a perceptible and persistent organizational principle that attests to McCarthy’s, if maybe no one else’s, quite deliberate purpose. To the extent that death tends everywhere to leave behind material traces in *Blood Meridian* (Shaviro 145), violence in the novel is

repeatedly shown to be structured by what we might refer to as *a logic of collection*.

Time and again, McCarthy depicts acts of violence leaving behind in their wake physical objects that characters variously behold silently, fondle, preserve, value, or arrange in some kind of order. McCarthy, in other words, frequently pairs violence with gestures of accumulation, gathering, and ordering. This motif is established early on when the kid encounters a crazed old hermit in the middle of a wasteland. The man has virtually no possessions aside from one that lies concealed amidst a collection of “hides,” a “small dark thing” that he shows the kid proudly and which turns out to be the desiccated heart that once “hung inside” one of the human beings that the ex-slaver used to trade in (18). Here, an eviscerating violence done to the human body makes available an otherwise concealed object—an internal organ—that the old man then fetishizes as a symbol of putative white supremacy.³² Admitting that he became “Sick of niggers” even as he profited from the bodily labour of dehumanized African Americans, the hermit now obsessively “cradle[s]” the man’s heart in his hand in order to assuage his own fears of racial apocalypse (18).

As the kid continues to journey throughout the Southwest, he has a series of similar encounters with objects that are gathered and displayed in the aftermath

³² Given that the concept of the collection implies the necessity for more than one object—that is, a single object cannot by definition constitute a collection as such—the hermit’s heart would seem not to qualify. However, a further defining characteristic of the collection is its fetishistic quality, its encouragement of a “strong, mostly eroticized attachment to a single object or category” (Bal “Telling Objects” 105). The hermit’s investment here indeed seems to be overdetermined, in that it exceeds the “two hundred dollars” that the heart itself cost and prompts a simultaneously jealous and obsessive—though perhaps not strictly sexualized—attitude toward the grisly trophy. Moreover, the heart functions in synecdochic terms, signifying “niggers” as a dreaded collective rather than merely the single man it came from.

of violence. After he miraculously survives the slaughter of Captain White's men, for example, the kid finds himself in a deserted village that has just been attacked, presumably by the Comanche warriors who routed the filibusters. Going warily "from house to house" hunting for supplies, he enters one domicile that resembles nothing so much as an inadvertent museum containing the material culture of Mexico's rural north. Again, an initial act of violence—in place of the hermit's murdered slave is a "smouldering" town, although here too an abject, black ("charred") body is central to the scene (59)—results in a collection of small objects: "There was a niche in the mud wall with figures of saints dressed in doll's clothes, the rude wooden faces brightly painted. Illustrations cut from an old journal and pasted to the wall, a small picture of a queen, a gypsy card ... the four of cups. There were strings of dried peppers and a few gourds. A glass bottle that held weeds" (59-60). Later, the kid finds himself in a bazaar in Chihuahua City that repeats the same pattern whereby violence culminates in concerted gestures of gathering and exhibition. In the town plaza are arranged various exotic objects, including "stout willow cages clogged with vipers" and "great limegreen serpents," amongst which pride of place is given to "a glass carboy of clear mescal" containing, with its "hair afloat and eyes turned upward," the head of the doomed Captain White, "[l]ately at war among the heathen" (69-70). Here again, the motif of a dismembered body functions as the sign of one ethnic group's triumph over another: echoing the hermit's solicitous presentation of the slave's heart, the citizens of Chihuahua exult in the kid's forced "consideration" of a fellow Anglo—part of him, at least—captured on foreign soil (70).

But why would McCarthy so persistently link motifs of violence and gathering?³³ The answer, I will argue, may be found by further considering the singularly dominant figure of Judge Holden.³⁴ At once an inveterate collector and apologist for “war” (248-50), the judge espouses a complex philosophical position in which violence functions as an assertive *response* to meaninglessness rather than an empty gesture itself.³⁵ For Holden, order is produced by “the assertion of will upon will,” which ultimately means “violence upon violence” (Frye 84). Late on in the novel, speaking to the now mature “kid”—a character with whom he shares an uncanny bond, at once fiercely antagonistic and oddly intimate—the judge admits that he views the world as a “vast and . . . ultimately empty” desert (330). He then affirms that, in the face of this void, a form of existential “agency”

³³ Numerous other examples could be adduced in which McCarthy connects various forms of violence—whether material or symbolic—with the motif of deliberate or accidental gathering or collection. See, for example, the Chihuahua City meat-market, where “all wild things from the country round” have been gathered together and skinned (73); the story of the “Lipan burial” in which a mass ceremonial grave of “a thousand indians” is violated by Mexican villagers, who “carr[y] off whole indians to their homes and set em in the corner all dressed up” (77); the description of one of the scalp-hunters walking along “with a collection of heads like some strange vendor bound for market” (157); the “wood and leather trunk” in which Glanton “amass[es]” a fortune in valuables by violently robbing travelers at the ferry (263); and, of course, the great, morbid work of the gathering of bones that occurs in the apocalyptic aftermath of the “ransack[ing]” of the buffalo (317). Of course, the primary form of violent collection in the novel would be scalping itself, which I discuss in further detail below.

³⁴ Many critics articulate some version of the argument that, while the kid is at least nominally the protagonist of the novel’s abortive bildungsroman-like plot, Judge Holden ultimately must be seen as its main character. See, for instance, Campbell (224), Frye (78), Holloway (190), Rothfork (27), and Shaviro (149). See also the final section of this chapter for further discussion of whether or not McCarthy envisages an “exteriority” to the judge’s totalizing ideology.

³⁵ Parrish similarly contends that the presence of the learned judge lends “order to what might otherwise be seen as chaos, random bloodshed, [and] killing for its own sake” (*Civil War* 104). For discussions of the judge as representative of “order” or “system,” see Douglas (15), Fernie (44-45), and Masters (2). From an anthropological perspective, Whitehead comments on the connection between violence and order. The “idea that violence might be integral . . . to cultural practice” tends to be resisted by many, since it is viewed “as precisely the absence of order and meaning, a total negation of the very idea of culture and social association.” Conversely, Whitehead contends that “violence is often systematic, always rule governed and replete with meanings for both victims and victimizers” (“Introduction” 8, 9).

can only be had through the use of force: “We are not speaking in mysteries. You of all men are no stranger to that feeling, the emptiness and the despair. *It is that which we take arms against*, is it not?” (329, my emphases). While I am of course wary of taking the words of this “trickster” (Stinson 12) at face value, I would like to draw on the judge’s argument as a point of departure for a somewhat modified version of the critical commonplace concerning the meaninglessness of brutality in the novel.³⁶ Rather than reading the violence endemic to *Blood Meridian* as empty of significance, I want rather to relate it to McCarthy’s self-conscious engagement with the very question of meaning itself. Violence, that is, is one way in which McCarthy interrogates the larger issue of interpretation, particularly in relation to the possibility of historical knowledge. I thus agree with Pitts’s more nuanced argument that the “perceptual torsion” produced by the novel’s welter of “pure gore” in fact forces us to “come to terms on some fundamental level with the nature of violence and the history of its representation” (20). Violence, in its traumatic, corporeal immediacy, seems to preclude the possibility of thought or reflection (Peebles, “‘There It Is’” 15). But in *Blood Meridian* this apparent challenge to conventional ratiocination instead serves to draw our attention to the

³⁶ Throughout the novel, the “obscurantist” (Wallach 8) judge is repeatedly associated with lying and the use of manipulative, deliberately obfuscating rhetoric. For Phillips, such untrustworthiness means that while the judge’s various philosophical disquisitions have a patina of authenticity, “they are first and foremost literary performances” of “a thoroughly rhetorical, somewhat ersatz nihilism” (441). Nevertheless, in this final tavern scene in the town of Griffin, Texas, the judge seems at least momentarily sincere in his desire for the kid to understand and agree with his complex philosophy of human agency; note, for instance, the accommodating tone by which the judge signals his acceptance of some of his interlocutor’s retorts as well as the provisionality of his own argument (“That’s so, said the judge . . . Bear with me . . . You speak truer than you know” [328, 330, 331]), or the fact that, unlike most of his speeches, this one does not end with a characteristic negation of all that has gone before. Like the kid, then, I continue to regard the judge “warily” (328), but I also want to be open to the possibility that he sometimes speaks “truer” than we realize—or, indeed, desire.

contingency of interpretive desire, and thus forces us to reflect on the complex epistemological processes by which that desire for signification is fulfilled (or, indeed, frustrated). In the next section, I analyze the sometimes perplexing figure of the judge in order to elaborate in more detail on McCarthy's use of the archive—notably in the gesture of “consignation,” or totalized gathering, that Derrida has proposed is fundamental to any archival project—to connect violence with “meaning,” or the process by which knowledge about the world and the subjectivity that produces that knowledge are both constituted.

“The Book of Absolute Knowledge”: Judge Holden's Ledger

McCarthy's complex engagement with the trope of the archive is centred on the singular Judge Holden. Arguably one of the most extraordinary figures imagined in recent American fiction, the judge³⁷ is like an amalgam of the great, often doomed transgressors of Western literature and culture; he resembles, by turns, Prometheus, Moses, Marlowe's Dr. Faustus, Milton's Satan, Melville's Ahab, Conrad's Kurtz.³⁸ Initially not a member of Captain Glanton's crew—the

³⁷ The narrator most often refers to Holden simply as “the judge.” In this chapter, I follow McCarthy's lead in capitalizing the title when it is used with the surname (“Judge Holden”) and using lower-case when it stands alone (“the judge”). (Conversely, “the kid” is always lowercase.) This particular discrepancy reflects McCarthy's idiosyncratic approach to the use of capital letters more generally, whereby proper nouns such as “indians” and adjectives like “spanish” are always uncapitalized (see 77, 84).

³⁸ On the literary and cultural allusiveness of *Blood Meridian*, see for example Godden's and Richmond's discussion of the various echoes of Melville's *Moby-Dick* throughout McCarthy's text. In broader terms, Phillips notes that the novel has been read as a sometimes “outlandish” blend of everything from “Hieronymus Bosch and Sam Peckinpah,” to “Faulkner and Fellini,” to “Shakespeare,” “the Bible,” and “Dante” (434). McCarthy is himself on record as adhering to the “ugly fact” that “books are made out of books” and “The novel depends for its life on the novels that have been written” (Woodward). As well as being a kind of literary composite, though, Judge Holden has roots in historical fact. McCarthy derived (albeit even as he *exaggerated*) many of his

“viciouslooking” (78) group of itinerant, mainly Anglo-American mercenaries whose quest for Apache scalps furnishes the novel with its main narrative line—he joins up after the gang encounters him one day, sitting inexplicably, as one character remembers, “on a rock in the middle of the greatest desert you’d ever want to see ... like a man waiting for a coach ... Like he’d been expecting us” (124). Although a relative latecomer to the group, the judge quickly assumes the mantle of de facto leader after “conversin” [sic] briefly with Glanton in private (126). Whether or not, as some speculate, there actually is a “terrible covenant” that has been struck between the two men (126), what is clear is that the judge wrests control over the gang largely through the power of his rhetoric. This interpolated back-story thus points to one of Holden’s key characteristics, the great power he derives from his facility with language. Fluent in at least “five languages” (123) and conversant in the Latinate convolutions of the law (239), the judge (aside, perhaps, from McCarthy’s narrator) is virtually the sole articulate figure in the entire novel—a unique skill-set he frequently uses to great advantage, as when he advocates with the authorities, forcefully and duplicitously, for the gang’s innocence after they have just participated, quite openly, in a brutal murder (237-39). Holden’s rhetorical authority is surely abetted by his freakish physiognomy and almost superhuman strength: able to crush a man’s skull with his bare hands (179) and hurl “an enormous iron meteorite” several feet through the air (240), his gargantuan frame is “seven feet in height” (6), weighs “twenty-four stone” (128), and is, to boot, utterly hairless.

character’s basic characteristics from the life of a man named Samuel Chambers, who wrote an autobiographical account of his violent journey through the West (Sepich 130).

If Judge Holden literally towers over everyone else in the novel, he does so on an intellectual level as well. His excessive corporeality in turn suggests that he is the embodiment of the “encyclopaedian” tendencies of Enlightenment culture (Sepich 130). The judge’s very being, in effect, functions as an “immense repository” of the “different branches of Western institutional knowledge” (Fielder 36), or, in other words, a *body* of knowledge, as McCarthy’s punning description of his character’s “vast corpus” intimates (McCarthy 167).³⁹ Along with his professional familiarity with “civil and martial” court-cases (239), then, the judge seems to have completely mastered almost every available field of human inquiry and practice, becoming in the process a kind of backwoods or frontier Renaissance man: he has an artist’s flair for sketching and storytelling (140, 142); is the “greatest” fiddle player his companions have seen, as well as being a “nimble” dancer (123, 335); is adept at oratory and rhetorical persuasion (6-7, 129); has a deep familiarity with both classical literature and the biblical tradition (84); is a cosmopolitan globetrotter, with a passing acquaintance with numerous different cultures (123, 169); has acquired knowledge of the “latest” sciences, both human (anthropology, history, phrenology [84, 224, 238]) and physical (geology, chemistry, palaeontology [116, 128, 251]), and seems to be an exponent of natural and social Darwinism (146); balances this up-to-the-minute

³⁹ Many of the novel’s critics have noted that the “polymath” (Ellis, “Country” 88) judge clearly represents a sort of belated apotheosis of the characteristically Enlightenment ideal of encyclopedic, totalized knowledge in the service of anthropocentric domination. For discussions of the judge in relation to “Enlightenment,” see Bell (124-25), Holloway (191), Owens (56), Phillips (435), and Shaviro (149). In terms of considering the judge as a sort of embodiment of a specifically *textual* gigantism, see Wallach’s eagle-eyed note that the character’s weight (after conversion from stones) equals 336 pounds—almost exactly the page count of the published text of *Blood Meridian* itself (10).

science with an in-depth knowledge of mystical traditions such as the tarot (95); and, in addition, has perfected all the practical skills of an expert woodsman and warrior who “can cut a trail, shoot a rifle, ride a horse, track a deer” (123), ride “bareback like an indian” (126), and “go it alone” in the most unforgiving of wildernesses without so much as a canteen (125). But if the judge here seems to evoke the apotheosis of human striving he also represents the downfall that is the inevitable correlate of such hubris; as the judge himself would put it, “His meridian is at once his darkening and the evening of his day” (147). The span of the judge’s various achievements and expertise, then, is equalled only by the unplumbed depths of his nihilism, depravity, and cruelty, off-putting traits best exemplified, perhaps, in his (often sexualized) violence toward the defenceless young (118, 164, 192, 275).

The judge, then, is nothing if not a figure of supreme contradiction, as is suggested when, after first joining the gang, he is described simultaneously as a Christ-figure (the twelve remaining gang-members are like “disciples” who are “saved” by the judge’s intervention [127, 130, 124]) and a “devil” (123, 125) who is leading them a merry dance toward “the locality of hell” (130). As Emily J. Stinson cautions, trying to locate a “single identity” for the judge is difficult since “He is one, and he is all” and thus “does not encompass just one identity” (9). As Stinson further notes, the judge’s fundamentally overdetermined character has been read in a number of widely divergent ways by the novel’s critics: he has thus been interpreted, variously, as a verifiable historical figure (10), God (11), a Gnostic demon (11), a representative of Western colonial discourse (12), as well

as, in Stinson's own terms, the Fool from the Tarot pack (9).⁴⁰ But while acknowledging the judge's fundamentally overdetermined identity, I want to argue that an important—and critically underappreciated—aspect of this “multifaceted” (Campbell 221) character is his connection with the archive.

The most obvious way in which Judge Holden can be read in relation to the archive consists of his marked propensity for amassing knowledge in text-based form. Throughout *Blood Meridian* the judge never seems to be without the “leather ledgerbook” (140) into which he repeatedly, if not obsessively, pours information about his surroundings and a myriad other topics. Thus, on a number of occasions (most often by the fitful light of a campfire), we see him buried in his “little book,” busily “making entries” (133), “sketch[ing]” (140), “making marginal notes” (140), “ma[king] notations” (198), and “scribbling in his ledger” (243). If the topics included between the book's covers often appear to be quite interdisciplinary—in these examples, for instance, the judge seems to be writing about, by turns, the physical environment, weather conditions, and the Spanish conquest—nonetheless the judge's overall intellectual focus is on the past and how it remains to haunt the present. Consequently, as Timothy Parrish argues, Holden may be read as primarily “a kind of historian who collects historical specimens” and “records them in his journal” as part of a desire to recover the absent past as something “known” (*Civil War* 81). The judge thus “absolutizes”

⁴⁰ Stinson cites here Sepich on the judge's basis in documentary history, Peebles on his ostensibly divine (but also diabolical) characteristics (“Yuman”), Daugherty on the context of Gnosticism, and Masters on Holden's status as a representative of colonialist expansionism. Masters, in turn, reads the judge as a “protean” figure who inhabits at once the “roles of trickster, ethnographer, and Adam,” though he also reads each of these various personas as “an aspect of the judge's efficacious textuality” (25).

the discourse of history as “the repository of all that can be known” (V. Bell 120), and central to the creation of this putative universal record is the ledger-book, that “textual enterprise” by which the judge “transcribes, translates, and captures the cultures [and objects] he encounters” (Masters 6).⁴¹

The judge, then, is persistently linked with the archive in quite literal ways, in that he amasses (and stores) a series of documents that often have to do with past events and cultures. However, as a supplement to this somewhat quotidian reading, I would suggest that Holden is an “archival” figure in a slightly more technical sense as well. Indeed, throughout *Blood Meridian* the judge and his activities recall many of the defining characteristics of the archive outlined in *Archive Fever*, making Holden a representative of what Derrida would call the “archontic function” (3).⁴² For one thing, if, as was noted in my Introduction, “archive” can be traced etymologically back to the ancient Greek word *arkhē*, meaning—in at least one of its senses—“the originary, the first, the principle, the primitive” (Derrida, *Archive 2*), then the scholarly project that the judge

⁴¹ Dussere notes the more prosaic origins of the concept of the “ledger” amongst the “commercial tool[s]” of accountancy; strictly speaking, that is, it signifies “the master-book” wherein “all the transactions of the year are recorded finally” (14). However, “ledger” is also a multivalent term with meaning beyond the economic sphere. Indeed, if we read the gesture of writing in a ledger as, “above all, a discursive act,” we can see it as fundamentally imbricated in something like the discourse of historiography. Thus, Dussere contends that the ledger also constitutes “a written mode of narrating past events” (15); rather like the archive, the ledger-book’s “reckoning of accounts is a discursive practice that organizes the material of history” in particular ways (14).

⁴² Although two critics have suggested Judge Holden’s status as an “archon,” neither does so in Derrida’s specific sense. Daugherty derives his use of the term from the demons of Gnostic cosmology, while Wallach deploys it in a somewhat undefined way in order to locate the judge within the tradition of the charismatic, malign scoundrel in American literature (1). Given the fact that Wallach’s 2002 essay usefully attempts to relate McCarthy’s philosophically complex depiction of the judge to such Derridean notions as the *pharmakon*, *différance*, and the trace (9-12), it is rather surprising that it makes no mention of Derrida’s discussion of the “archon” in 1995’s *Archive Fever*.

undertakes using his ledger is itself repeatedly shown to be concerned with the ultimate *beginnings* of things, as when he reaches back into the “eons . . . [of] ancient chaos” via an examination of geological strata, or speculates about the “propagation” of racial difference in a series of originary or prehistoric calamities (McCarthy 116, 84).

The latter scene, in which the judge mollifies simmering tensions between the Glanton gang and a rival squad of Mexican soldiers by means of an extended speech on the history of racial thought, provides a further point of connection between Holden and the concept of the *arkhē*. Although, in one sense, *arkhē* means “origin,” it also, we recall, has a divergent juridical or “*nomological*” significance: the residence of the magistrates who were “accorded the hermeneutic right and competence,” and thus had “the power to interpret the archives” and to “impose the law” through the reading of those documents (Derrida, *Archive 2*). Of course, as his ubiquitous soubriquet suggests, *Judge* Holden is an obviously “nomological” figure who is frequently shown “speaking the law” (Derrida, *Archive 2*). An expert in “jurisprudence,” the judge first appears in the novel when, posing as an officer of the “law,” he interrupts a makeshift church service in order to bring specious charges of bestiality and pedophilia against the preacher (McCarthy 293, 7). We later discover that Holden joined the scalping expedition ostensibly to “represent Captain Glanton in all legal matters” (McCarthy 237), but the judge could also be seen to engage in legal “representation” in more than one sense. That is, while obviously an instance of orality, the judge’s performance in the example of the confrontation with the

Mexican soldiers is nonetheless described by the narrator in terms that clearly invoke a *textual* logic of citationality and inscription. Thus, the oration is rendered as a scholarly interpretation of certain—metaphorical or virtual—documentary fragments, “passages” and “references” which the judge “adduce[s]” from a range of biblical, classical, and scientific discourses. In addition, the description of the rhetorical manipulation of this collected knowledge as an artistic “drafting” or “sketch[ing]” clearly foreshadows the later scene in which the judge is shown to be a skilful “draftsman” in a literal sense, as he “deftly sketche[s]” in his ledger book with “an economy of pencil strokes” (84, 140).⁴³ In this instance, that is, the judge persuades and controls those around him, strategically convincing the scalpers and soldiers not to come to blows. The crucial point, however, is that he exercises this form of social power by performing an “authorit[ative]” (84) reading or interpretation of a series of figurative “documents” or “texts.” Overall, too, the quite literal text of the judge’s ledger-book is the source of the almost hypnotic sway he has over his uneducated companions. In these examples, then, the guardianship of and ability to interpret the archive confers on the judge a certain “authority” (Derrida 3) amongst his peers. Endlessly fascinated by the ledger’s contents, for instance, the illiterate gang-members repeatedly question the

⁴³ Judge Holden’s speech would thus correspond to what Diana Taylor calls the repertoire, a range of “embodied” practices and knowledges that includes “spoken language, dance, sports, [and] ritual,” and which Western culture has tended to subordinate to the privileged archive of “supposedly enduring materials”: “texts, documents, buildings, [and] bones” (19). However, Taylor argues that this binary tends to break down on closer inspection, with archive and repertoire existing “in a constant state of interaction.” Thus, if archival documents are ephemeral—as with bodily gestures and performances, subject to “change and “corruptibility” over time—“the repertoire, like the archive, is mediated,” and entails a “process of selection, memorization or internalization, and transmission” of knowledge (19, 21). In a similar fashion, I am claiming here that the judge’s oral performance—his repertoire—may be read in relation to his more obviously “archival” practices.

judge about his motives for writing (140, 198) and evince a wary respect for the power of inscription he wields, as when one named Webster refuses to “match words” with the judge and requests that the latter exclude his portrait from the book for fear that this will mean his being imprisoned or “tabernacled” within its pages (141).

Of course, McCarthy’s teasing choice of name for this minor character also intimates the encyclopedic reach of the judge’s endeavours, and it thus it also calls to mind Derrida’s claim that the totalizing, centripetal work of collection is a key characteristic of any archive.⁴⁴ According to Derrida, that is, the operation of an archive does not consist merely in, say, the uncovering of (or, at least, the search *for*) origins, or the interpretation of the documents of the law. Underlying these same gestures is the fundamental structuring principle that Derrida refers to as “the power of *consignation*” (3). In this sense, the archive is always contingent upon the spatialized gesture of a “gathering together” of a multiplicity of elements in relation to an ideal central point:

By consignation, we do not only mean ... the act of assigning residence or of entrusting so as to put into reserve (to consign, to deposit), in a place and on a substrate, but here the act of *consigning* through *gathering together signs* ... *Consignation* aims to coordinate a single corpus, in a system or a synchrony in which all the elements articulate the unity of an ideal configuration. (3)

⁴⁴ Godden and Richmond suggest that the inclusion of a character named “Webster” in a scene in which the notion of an all-encompassing textuality is discussed represents McCarthy’s sly nod to another totalizing or encyclopedic text, Webster’s *Dictionary* (454).

The archive, for Derrida, thus essentially represents a mode of discursive totalization, a subtending of heterogeneity or diversity to the determining power of a single, fixed frame of reference. This centralization, in turn, thereby ostensibly produces a kind of epistemological transparency whereby nothing is hidden from the gaze of the archivist. In this ideal archive, Derrida goes on to suggest, “there should not be any absolute dissociation, any heterogeneity or *secret*” that eludes the purview of the archivist’s knowledge (3).

It is in the terms usefully provided by Derrida’s theorization that I want to read Judge Holden as a figure of consignation—or, more prosaically, as a *collector*. The judge’s interest in collecting is evident from his chronologically first appearance in the novel (it actually occurs belatedly, about a third of the way through), in the course of a sort of campfire adventure tale related to the kid by Tobin, the “expriest” (124-34). In this narrative, the latter describes his and the gang’s first encounter with the judge, whom they meet by chance while they are being pursued by the Apache war-party they were themselves once hunting.⁴⁵ Having “Shot ... up” their entire store of gunpowder in previous battles, the cornered mercenaries are on the verge of despair: from the safety of retrospect, Tobin admits that “Every man jack of us knew that ... we’d be driven to a stand with those empty guns” (125). In the midst of such dire straits, the riders fortuitously encounter the judge, who leads them toward a distant mountain range. There, ingeniously and over several painstaking days, he locates the various natural ingredients necessary for the concoction of a rudimentary, backwoods

⁴⁵ In McCarthy’s deconstructive scheme the distinction between predator and prey is arbitrary, meaning that the terms are effectively interchangeable (Newman 141).

gunpowder. With “half of all Apacheria” upon them (126), the harried scalp-hunters finally make a stand at the lip of a volcano. The judge adds the finishing touches—an unholy brew of brimstone and urine—to his powder, tests its efficacy, and then distributes it amongst the men who proceed to massacre their erstwhile pursuers down to “the last poor nigger” (134).

Many of the varied attributes that define Judge Holden as a character are in evidence in this interpolated tale. Tobin describes his enigmatic smile (125), his erudite familiarity with the classical tradition (125), his tendency to lecture those around him on abstruse subjects couched in impenetrably gnomic fragments of discourse (129-30), and his startling physiognomy, which combines grotesque obesity and matchless grace in a single contradictory frame (128, 134). However, what I want to draw particular attention to in this paradoxically non-ordinary origin-story is the way that it establishes the judge’s primary identity as a collector-figure: a gatherer of objects, data, fragments of knowledge, anything he can get his oddly “small” (6) yet capaciously acquisitive hands on.⁴⁶ At several points during the course of Tobin’s tale, the gang-members look on with chagrin while the judge calmly and without concern collects plant specimens and notes down in his ledger various data relating to the surrounding environment: “He would go up the side of the mountain and make notes in a little book and then he would come back down. Could not have been more cheerful ... The judge would stop to botanize and then ride to catch up ... Pressing leaves into his book ... and

⁴⁶ Bearing in mind that the judge at times resembles an ethnographer (Masters 28), it is interesting to note that, according to the influential anthropological theorist James Clifford, ethnography represents “a form of culture collecting” (231).

all the time the savages in plain view below us” (126-27). Later, with the Apache drawing ever closer and the gang cornered at the rim of the caldera, the judge continues collating data placidly, only “clos[ing] up his little book” once the gunpowder is finally—in the nick of time—tempered and ready for use (132, 133). This basic pattern, whereby Judge Holden amasses objects and information while the Glanton gang hunts down (or, at times, is hunted down *by*) its indigenous enemies, recurs throughout *Blood Meridian*. Immediately following Tobin’s narrative, the judge shifts away from his formerly botanical focus to become more of an archaeologist or antiquarian: he “roam[s] through the ruinous kivas” of an ancient settlement of the vanished Anasazi people, “picking up small artifacts” that he then “arrang[es] . . . before him” and “deftly sketche[s]” into his book (139, 140). Along with these products of human culture, he later includes in his collection a range of zoological specimens, as when he shoots, preserves, and “pack[s] . . . away in his wallets” certain “colorful birds,” or “stalk[s] tiptoe the mountain butterflies” so as to press them “into his book” alongside the “leaves of trees and plants” (198). Finally, this collector’s desire extends to the very “bones of things” themselves—the ancient bedrock of creation—including “ore samples” from an abandoned mine that the judge fills the gang’s “panniers” with, and the actual bones of “some great beast long extinct” that he anatomizes with “tailor’s tape,” before, yet again, “sketching [it] into his log” (116, 251).

But what are the motives behind the judge’s “mania for collecting” (Beck 60)? To borrow the terms of Derrida’s discussion, what Judge Holden finally seeks to do is “coordinate a single corpus”—most obviously, of course, in terms

of his ledger-book, but also figuratively in terms of his acts of intellectual encompassing—in which multiple “elements” (the varied cultural, biological, and mineral specimens, and fragments of knowledge he collects and describes) are brought together in a systematized “unity,” the ultimate end of which is the banishment of the “heterogen[eous] or *secret*” and the subordination of everything to the judge’s epistemological control (Derrida, *Archive* 3). In fact, it is the judge himself who explicitly describes his archival project as a means of effecting a unified epistemological field in which nothing can remain hidden from the knowing self. When pressed one evening by the appropriately named Toadvine as to the purpose of his collection of creatures and plants, as well as of the ledger-book notations about them, the judge responds with a series of extraordinary statements that equate his great work of “gathering” with the desire to dispel all mystery from the universe through making everything in it *known*. From the judge’s point of view, the greatest terror inheres in ignorance: a person without knowledge, one who accepts the fundamental unknowability of the world, is fatally bound—indeed, enslaved—by “Superstition” and “fear” (199). Such a subject places him- or herself at the mercy of a chaotic object-world, whose “smallest crumb can devour us. Any smallest thing beneath yon rock out of men’s knowing” (198). Conversely, the quasi-heroic act by which that figurative rock is lifted and the thing beneath it revealed enables a “singling out [of] the thread of order” from the heterogeneous, terrifying “tapestry” of noumenal existence (199). This ordering, by which “the secrets of the world” are denuded is effected by the act of gathering itself, the fundamental means by which the judge seeks to

“acquaint himself with everthing [sic] on this earth” (198-99). In the beginning there is only a chaotic (and traumatic) Real, an unbounded and irreducible “strangeness ... that no man’s mind can compass” (245); however, by thus enfolding “all the world in a book” (141), the judge strives to force “the *unity* of existence” (249, my emphasis).

The judge’s emphasis on “unity” or the singular here clearly calls to mind Derrida’s argument that consignation—the totalized gathering that underpins the archive—is invariably bound up with the production of a totalized “One,” and that this Oneness, in turn, implies a form of “structural” violence. As we saw in the Introduction, Derrida asserts that the “law of *consignation* which orders the archive,” this “gathering into itself of the One,” is “never without violence”; indeed, “As soon as there is the One, there is murder, wounding, traumatism” (78). Crucially, the impulse toward the One in *Blood Meridian* is inextricable from a kind of will to power by which the judge situates himself at the centre of this unified field. As the judge “plunders the world for knowledge,” he “reduc[es] life to its constituents, its bones” so that “he can ‘read’ it, engulf it[,] and ultimately control it”; the judge’s intellectual endeavours thus reflect a philosophy of “dominant individualism” in which “there is ‘*only room for one*—one desire, one will, one power’” (Campbell 223, 224, my emphases).

In the previous section I suggested that McCarthy often hints at a pervasive connection between collecting and violence. Judge Holden’s ledger-work is no exception in this regard, as is clearly indicated in the course of Tobin’s narrative. Admittedly, the expriest initially views the judge’s predilection for

collecting as an irrelevancy, a distracting dalliance that is inexplicable given the gang's current predicament. Tobin's tone when describing what he refers to as "botaniz[ing]" is incredulous: "My hand to God ... Sure I never saw the equal to it and all the time the savages in plain view below us" (127). Elsewhere, Tobin also critiques the judge's erudition—his collection of knowledge, languages, and skills—by both mockingly reducing it to a repertoire of somewhat superficial social niceties (it enables Holden to discourse on "Paris this and London that in five languages") and comparing it unfavourably with the Christian tradition's conventional rejection of intellectual hubris (God privileges the inarticulate and sets "little store ... by the learned") (123). But while the incredible reach of the judge's mind could indeed be described as Faustian, Tobin's morally orthodox position indicates that he has, in fact, missed the point of his own narrative. Far from being a distraction from the bloody business at hand, the judge's practice of collection is precisely what *enables* the gang's survival in the violent arena of the Frontier in the first place. On a practical level, the judge's interest in collecting (and writing about) botanical samples is of a piece with his broader store of knowledge of the natural environment, and thus with his ability to "reckon ... [what] was in them mountains," "[h]ow to find it," and, finally, "[h]ow to put it to use" (126). When the judge collects information about the hordes of bats emanating from a particular cave in the mountainside, for instance, the "notes" he takes are for the express purpose of finding the nitre that is a crucial ingredient for gunpowder (126-27). Moreover, as is suggested by the fact that the gang subsequently puts the nitre into the same "wallets and panniers" that the judge

will later keep his specimens in (127), the very act of concocting this “devil’s batter” (132) is itself metonymically represented as a kind of collecting. In other words, just as the judge gathers various sorts of objects, artifacts, and data within the bounded space of his wallets and between the covers of his ledger, so does he use these containers and this book in order to combine various minerals—charcoal, saltpeter, and sulfur—and meld them into a singular (and explosive) “matrix” (132). The gang’s hides are quite literally “saved” (124) by Judge Holden’s work of collection. In particular, it is the judge’s ledger—and the praxis it represents—that *produces* the scene of “butchery” (134) with which the story culminates, a fact that is neatly reiterated by McCarthy’s recurrent linking of textuality and violence in this episode: thus, while the judge’s rifle features “an inscription from the classics,” and the charcoal with which he will subsequently arm it is so dark “you could have made ink from it,” his two-fisted gun-fighting prowess is traced back to the fact that he is also able to “write with both hands at a time” (125, 128, 134).

Furthermore, throughout *Blood Meridian* in general, the act of collecting heterogeneous “things” tends to be shadowed by the radical compromising—or even, at times, the outright destruction—of those same objects, whether they be artifacts, flora or fauna, or even people. Occasionally, the violent effects of “gathering” might be identified as a quite innocent or accidental collateral damage. When the judge collects rock samples prior to delivering an “extemporary lecture in geology,” for example, it is made clear that for him the true significance of the rocks—that is, their collectability—resides within, and

that access to the samples' meaning is thus dependent on the shattering of their wholeness or integrity: "[the judge] sat in the compound breaking ore samples with a hammer, the feldspar rich in red oxide of copper and native nuggets in whose organic lobations he purported to read news of the earth's origins" (116).⁴⁷ But while breaking open an anonymous, inanimate object such as a rock does not seem a particularly egregious act in and of itself, the violence inherent in the very gesture of *opening up* something in search of the knowledge therein becomes more overt when the "object" in question is a living being. Thus, when the judge shifts his attention to collecting examples of the exotic desert birds that flock around the gang during their travels, he can only do so after killing them and replacing their insides in order to preserve their extant form: "in the evening he would dress expertly the colorful birds he'd shot, ... stuffing them with balls of dried grass and packing them away in his wallets" (198). Again, the judge's act of incorporating an object or being within his ledgers and wallets necessitates an initial physical violation. McCarthy's choice of implicitly forceful verbs further on in this passage reinforces this sense; the fact that the judge is described "press[ing]" plant leaves life into the pages of his book, or "stalk[ing]" butterflies with a net (198) connotes the dangerous and predatory imposition of the collector's will onto the things that surround him.⁴⁸

⁴⁷ Holden is frequently depicted breaking things in this manner, as when he precedes his disquisition on war by "crack[ing] with the back of an axe the shinbone on an antelope," causing the "hot marrow [to drip] smoking on the stones" (248).

⁴⁸ The fact that the judge is half naked, "his shirt outheld in both hands" (198), as he attempts to trap the butterflies suggests a possible correlation between the work of collection and Holden's other habitual activity, sexual predation. That is, as he collects zoological and botanical specimens, the judge also, in a sense, "collects" children in the course of victimizing them. See, for example, the "Mexican or halfbreed boy maybe twelve years old" whom the gang encounters

As the judge collects these things he produces a paradoxical and unceasing inversion of conventional spatial relations, especially those between inside and outside. The judge first violates the ontological, a priori wholeness or unity of these collected objects and animals by penetrating their insides, unveiling their hidden core to his gaze. But he does so in order to enclose them again within *another* “inside”—literally, the textual or material containers represented by the wallet or the book; epistemologically, the bounded space of collection—thereby reconstituting the whole in the form of the ordered, systematized totality of his knowledge.

We also see this “inside-out” logic at work in the judge’s appropriations of the traces of the Native American cultures he encounters throughout the gang’s journey across the frontier. After an early skirmish between the gang and a band of Apache leaves a member of the latter lying dead “in a sandy wash,” the judge and a few others ride up to inspect the body (110). As if evoking the searching gaze of the judge, the narrator initially provides a minutely detailed, almost anthropological description of the dead body and its accoutrements, from the “pointed toes” and “parfleche soles” of his buskins and the lice scuttling in his

in an abandoned mine, and whom, McCarthy implies, the judge subsequently violates and murders (116-18). It is surely no accident that this crime is directly juxtaposed with a more literal example of the judge’s collection, his gathering up and cracking open of ore samples (116). In a sense, the judge here also *consumes* his victim: just before the boy’s body is found, the judge is depicted “picking his teeth with a thorn as if he had just eaten” (118). Of course, the act of vampiric consumption by which the judge symbolically incorporates his victim into his own body anticipates the final subsuming of the kid into the judge’s “immense and terrible flesh,” an act that is explicitly referred to as a kind of “gather[ing]” (333). Indeed, in the lead up to this scene, the kid—who by this point has been incarcerated—is subtly paralleled with the butterflies the judge earlier stalked and collected. Whereas the judge tried to catch these creatures by “speaking” to them “in a low whisper” (198), here he attempts to seduce the already trapped kid in a comparable fashion: “Come here, he said. *Let me touch you ... Come here if you’re not afraid, whispered* the judge ... He *spoke softly* in the dim mud cubicle” (307, my emphases).

hair, to the close-up of “the hole where the ball from Toadvine’s rifle had gone in above the lower rib” (110). This detached, systematic delineation of the physical form of the dead man is merely prelude to a more overtly probing sequel as the judge then physically removes the former’s possessions:

The judge knelt with his knife and cut the strap of the tigre-skin warbag the man carried and emptied it in the sand. It held an eyeshield made from a raven’s wing, a rosary of fruitseeds, a few gunflints, a handful of lead balls. It held also a calculus or madstone from the inward parts of some beast and this the judge examined and pocketed. The other effects he spread with the palm of his hand as if there were something to be read there. Then he ripped open the man’s drawers with his knife. Tied alongside the dark genitals was a small skin bag and this the judge cut away and also secured in the pocket of his vest. (110)

Again, we see the characteristic double movement of violent revelation and enclosure that I have identified as central to Judge Holden’s practice of collection. The judge cuts open and empties out the Apache man’s bag, in turn revealing a “madstone”—an accretion of the gullet—that comes from a further, doubly concealed interiority (“the inward parts of some beast”), before, in parallel acts of symbolic castration, he “open[s]” the man’s clothing and takes the “bag” from between his legs and “cut[s] away” and “seize[s]” the scalp. After being thus revealed or opened up, each of these objects is subsequently “secured” in the judge’s capacious “pocket” (100). Again, then, the initial violation of the

opening—and here we should also recall the Apache’s multiply perforated body, with its tattoos and lance- and bullet-wounds—is followed by the suturing work of a re-interiorization that produces what we might call an eclipsing totality: the enclosed space of the pocket that evokes, in miniature, the virtual space of the ordered collection.

In this instance, that totality is reinforced by the concluding image of an all-encompassing solar presence (the ransacked Apache warrior is abandoned “to scrutinize with his drying eyes the calamitous advance of the sun” [110]). The depiction of the judge collecting up the warrior’s things is structured by a contrast in powers of vision. Since he is dead, the Apache man himself obviously cannot *see*, and the text emphasizes this blindness by drawing repeated attention to his compromised or impeded eyes: there is “sand stuck to the eyeball,” an “old sabre wound” nicking “the corner of his eye,” and, of course, the description of the macabre “drying eyes” whose inverted “scrutiniz[ing]” of the sun can only ever be ironically ineffectual (110). Conversely, the judge’s scrutiny—like the sun overhead—is panoptic or total, as is further indicated by the narrator’s almost microscopic anatomization of the dead body, along with the fact that the corpse is literally laid bare, stripped “naked” like the objects in the judge’s collection themselves (110, 198). As John Beck usefully argues in more general terms, in *Blood Meridian* the “all-pervasive light” produced by the “sun’s bald illumination” figures the concept of epistemological totality. This “total illumination functions as a trope for total transparency and a promise of unambiguous correspondence between what is shown and what is seen”; the

image of the sun thus evokes “an apparent totality where everything is connected, unambiguous, and shown as it really is” (67). If, as the judge himself claims, noon’s zenith symbolizes the culmination of all human endeavour (146-47), here the sun’s “calamitous” beams and the visibility they enable are metaphors, on the one hand, for the power of the judge’s scrutinous gaze—the all-seeing eye that “read[s]” the otherwise “obscure” signs of the Apache’s body (110)—and, on the other, for the triumphant apotheosis of the totalizing collection itself.⁴⁹ In sum, the judge’s work of archiving in this scene—his gathering up of the Apache’s possessions and body-parts—produces an ideal unity that McCarthy identifies at once with the fantasy of the totalized collection itself, and with the judge’s very selfhood figured as a comprehensive and controlling perspective.

Scappling/Scalping

The alternative or conjoined title of McCarthy’s novel is, of course, “The Evening Redness in the West,” with “redness” signifying at once the hue of the setting sun and the bloody end toward which many of McCarthy’s characters tend. (Like that of DeLillo’s *Libra*, this novel’s plot wends deathward.) As one of the dominant or structuring metaphors of the text, then, the sun—likened at one point to “the head of a great red phallus” (44)—symbolizes the process of Anglo-American continental expansion as a violent, patriarchal penetration of feminized

⁴⁹ McCarthy frequently links the judge with the motif of the sun; see, for example, his initial appearance in Tobin’s story, which occurs at “the meridian” of the day, the highest point of the sun’s transit (125). In addition, the judge’s head is sometimes described in a way that recalls the sun’s appearance: it is an “enormous dome” which, when “bared,” is “blinding white and perfectly circumscribed” (79).

space. Elsewhere, McCarthy uses solar imagery to figure the seemingly inexorable movement of white people across North America as a deadly “heliotropic plague” (78), a kind of sun-crazed malady drawing those infected—settlers, explorers, mercenaries, soldiers, bureaucrats—toward a general “holocaust,” “some great fire at the earth’s end” (105, 21-22).

But for McCarthy this spreading “plague” shares its etiology with archive fever. Indeed, as the violent appropriation of the deceased Apache warrior’s things that was discussed in the previous section clearly intimates, Judge Holden’s archival project—and thus his self-constitution as a controlling, unified subject—can be situated in relation to the broader cultural-ideological logic of Manifest Destiny. The judge is certainly no Captain White, the deluded (and doomed) filibuster who is the novel’s most obvious exponent of an explicitly xenophobic and expansionist politics.⁵⁰ Nonetheless, there are clear if perhaps subtle connections between White’s threadbare political theories and the judge’s

⁵⁰ The kid meets Captain White early in the novel and briefly enlists in his shabby paramilitary force, mainly because he has nothing better to do. The racist, aptly-named White is disenchanted by the U.S. government’s ostensible rapprochement with Mexico under the terms of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo (1848) and believes that the soldiers and mercenaries who “Fought and died down there in that desert” during the Mexican-American War “were sold out by their own country” (33) when it refused to press home its military advantage. Consequently, White “intend[s] to finish the job that the U.S. government failed to complete: to turn all of Mexico into United States territory” (Parrish, *Civil War* 93). He thus clearly “speaks in the language of Manifest Destiny” (Parrish, *Civil War* 93), a discourse in which a structure of racially hierarchized cultural difference provides the justification for Euro-American territorial expansion. See, for instance, the somewhat comic scene in which the Captain lectures a captive audience—his drowsy underling and the somewhat bemused kid—on his vision of a Mexico populated by “a race of degenerates . . . little better than niggers” (33-34). White here firmly believes that, since Mexicans are “*manifestly* incapable of governing themselves,” upstanding Anglo-Americans such as himself must “come in to govern for them” (34, my emphasis). Of course, White’s speedy and horrific end at the hands of the very “tribes of naked savages” he earlier dismisses as irrelevant (33) signals McCarthy’s radical rejection of the white supremacist platitudes that structure this kind of rhetoric and more broadly buttress the discourse of nineteenth-century American imperialism. For further discussion of historical context and reverberations of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, see Heidler and Heidler (141-43).

admittedly more complex project of epistemological control. Generally speaking, the Frontier—that labile spatial concept, most closely associated with the writings of historian Frederick Jackson Turner, which came to dominate late-nineteenth-century expansionist thought about the American West—was itself the product of a great “archivization” of space. As Beck notes, Federal agencies such as the Topographical Bureau “were ordered to examine the plants, animals, Indians, and geological formations of the [trans-Mississippi] country,” with the aim of producing ““a total geographic inventory of the West which would have meaning and utility for Westbound Americans”” (71). The historical business of westward expansion, that is, quite materially depended on discursive processes that are figured in Judge Holden’s work of consignment. Furthermore, just as the judge’s archive produces a secure sense of self on an individual level, a primary discursive effect of this massive project of collation was the creation of a cultural imaginary of continental boundedness and unity: “This inventory [of the West’s cultural and biological diversity] function[ed] in part to contain the previously unknown and unpredictable, to mark out the perimeter of what is possible. The physical removal of specimens for classification further implie[d] a process of containment and abstraction” (Beck 71-72). Archiving thus constituted the West as a space, to borrow from Campbell, of “Connectedness, wholeness, unity,” and “closure” (218).

This image of an ideally enclosed Frontier also uncannily echoes Derrida’s concept of consignment: Oneness constituted via violence done to the Other. In historically specific terms, the “One” here simultaneously signifies a bounded

individual subject (the ruggedly individualistic “male Anglo Saxon hero” [Spurgeon 8]) and the securely bordered geopolitical space in which that subject is situated (the “unbroken continental totality” of the newly expanded United States itself [Beck 49]). But these boundaries are, of course, the contingent product of a violent material-discursive labour that necessitates at once physical removal and, retroactively, that Other’s sublimation by the discourses of cultural memory. Thus, as Sara L. Spurgeon contends, if the expansion of the Frontier inevitably involved the actual “conquering [of] a wild, hostile racial Other,” it also called for the reiterated erasure of that Other in the exculpatory historical texts produced subsequently by Turner and others, texts in which “Indians, Mexicans, and other non-Anglos are ... virtually invisible ... as active participants in the unfolding of history and the shaping of myth. They lurk in the background as shadowy figures, objects acted on by Anglos with no more agency than trees in a forest that must be cleared to allow for white settlement” (8-9).

At almost the exact midpoint of *Blood Meridian* are three brief scenes that precisely allegorize the “winning” of the West in the service of Anglo-American expansionist ideology as an archivization that produces an ideal white subject through the incorporation and occlusion of the non-white Other. Initially charged by the governor of Chihuahua with killing Gómez, a feared Apache chieftain who has been marauding trade routes throughout the southern U.S. and the northern states of Mexico, the Glanton gang wanders “the borderland for weeks seeking some sign of the Apache ... Spectre horsemen, pale with dust, anonymous in the crenellated heat” (172). Having little luck, the gang camps one night amidst the

Hueco tanks, “a group of natural stone cisterns in the desert” (173) decorated with hundreds of ancient indigenous rock paintings that Judge Holden is immediately drawn to. During the night, the judge copies some of the enigmatic images into his ledger-book, before peremptorily erasing one of the original paintings from the rock face. The gang rides on. Three days later they finally locate an indigenous encampment. These people are not the formidable Apache, however, but “a band of peaceful Tiguas camped on [a] river” (173). A couple of the seasoned mercenaries—including the kid—are made suddenly uneasy about participating in such egregiously unmotivated slaughter; the native group consists largely of women, children, and the elderly, and, according to the usually brutish and unsympathetic Toadvine, “aint botherin nobody” (173). However, this ineffectual demurrer fails to deter the others, who proceed to slaughter the entire native group. McCarthy, needless to say, spares us little in the way of detail, and the scene is characteristically cool and methodical in its rendition of graphic violence: “At the first fire a dozen [Tigua] ... crumpled and fell ... others had begun to run, old people flinging up their hands, children tottering and blinking in the pistolfire. A few young men ran out with drawn bows and were shot down and then the riders were all through the village trampling down the grass wickiups and bludgeoning the shrieking householders” (174). After the assault comes the inevitable dénouement of the scalping, a grotesque estrangement of the human form rendered in startling figurations: “the dead [lie] with their peeled skulls like polyps bluey wet or luminescent melons cooling on some mesa of the moon” (174). In the wake of this carnage, meanwhile, the scalp-hunters appear somehow

to have grown more substantial: “Those riders seemed journeyed from a legendary world and they left behind a strange tainture like an afterimage on the eye and the air they disturbed was altered and electric” (175). As if in inverse, cannibalistic relation, the destruction of the Tigua has made the identities of Glanton’s men preternaturally resonant, larger than life.

At first glance there seems to be no obvious connection between these individual scenes, aside, maybe, from the exigencies of advancing the plot. The gang wandering through the desert, the judge copying and erasing the rock paintings, and the Tigua massacre would appear to be linked by a purely metonymic contiguity; one thing occurs after another but not in any meaningful or causal fashion. Indeed, according to Beck, *Blood Meridian* tends more generally to call in question “the very idea of sequence and causality” itself (71). However a closer examination reveals an underlying continuity of theme and image, suggesting that these scenes can in fact be considered as importantly interrelated. For instance, each in some way connects imagery of rock to questions of self-identity. At the outset, the wandering gang-members are compared to “beings provoked out of the absolute rock and set nameless ... to wander ravenous and doomed and mute as gorgons” (172); the rock paintings consist of similarly monstrous figures, including “constructions of such singular vision as to justify every fear of man and the things that are in him” (173); while, just prior to the slaughter, the Tigua people’s tragic destiny—the occlusion of their group identity—is described as “prefigured in the very rock for those with eyes to read” (173). Similarly, each scene revolves around a key moment of dissolution or

disappearance. The gang leaves behind a trail of carnage in which “what had been and what would never be alike [lies] extinguished on the ground,” while the judge similarly erases one of the rock designs in such a way as to leave “no trace of it only a raw place on the stone where it had been” (172, 173). Both of these actions thus anticipate—“prefigure,” to use McCarthy’s term—the total annihilation of the Tigua themselves, the “frail black rebuses of [whose] blood . . . crack and break and drift away,” leaving all trace of their presence as a people seemingly “erased” (174).

If this brief episode comprises the novel’s structural fulcrum it is also thematically central in its articulation of the concept of archival violence, especially in relation to the process of collective or even “national” subject formation. Judge Holden here is clearly engaged in furthering his encyclopedic archival project in his intense scrutiny and then gathering up of the native images, here “collected” as textual representations sketched or transcribed into his ledger. The judge’s archive obviously enables, on one level, a kind of preservation, since he makes copies of the images “to take away with him” (173). But McCarthy also demonstrates that this project is paradoxically concomitant with or even premised on an act of destruction: the original image is “scappled away,” leaving the simulacral copy in the ledger-book as the only one in existence. The judge’s archival project thus represents a destructive act of appropriation of indigenous cultural forms, one that, McCarthy suggests, is analogous to—or even at the core of—the genocidal erasure of many of the indigenous cultures of North America: “scappling” and “scalping” are almost identical acts, a fact hinted at by the

uncanny doubling of the terms themselves (Godden and Richmond 454). In other words, McCarthy intimates that the judge's study of the images inscribed on the rock face, which takes the form of a labour of archival interpretation, transcription, and elision, *enables* the literal destruction—and, ultimately, too, the forgetting—of the Tigua, whose violent destiny is, again, “prefigured in the very *rock* for those with eyes to read” (173, my emphasis). *Blood Meridian* thus suggests that the discursive violence of the archive is inextricable from the material violence of colonial dispossession and genocide that underlies the course of much of American history in general, and that the novel identifies with the brutality of Anglo-American continental expansion—the material acts attendant on the ideology of Manifest Destiny—in particular.

Further and more specifically, McCarthy posits archival violence as the means by which an ideally bounded, white self is constituted in relation to a racialized other whose cultural forms are appropriated even as the culture itself is destroyed. That is, through the figure of the judge McCarthy figures the unified subject's achievement of total dominance over its surroundings (what the judge would call “suzerain[ty]” [198]) by means of the violent incorporation of the other—whether this “other” is nature, the animal, or the non-white subject—within the determinate boundaries of the ordered archival collection. The Tigua episode thus exemplifies the violence of subject formation; it plots a trajectory from an initial moment of crisis in which the very lineaments of the white/Anglo subject are in question (the riders are at first “primal, provisional, devoid of order” [172]), to the triumphant reconsolidation of that self via the violent destruction of

the racial other. That is, the act of slaughtering the indigenous Tigua transforms the previously indistinct, anonymous scalp-hunters into “legendary,” heroically autonomous individuals (175). Again, this process of self-fashioning hinges, crucially, on the judge’s acts of archival appropriation, in which graven images depicting “every fear of man” (173)—in other words, those “nameless,” primeval terrors that had previously threatened the gang’s sense of collective identity (172)—are symbolically domesticated through their inclusion within the epistemological order represented and, indeed, *constituted* by the judge’s ledger-book. At the culmination of the episode the gang, then, unlike the local populace, is no longer “made vacant by old terrors” (175). The subjectivities of Glanton’s Anglo-American followers are finally secured by and through the archival violence done to indigenous cultures, as well as to the landscape itself.

Significantly, McCarthy understands the material dissolution of the unfortunate Tigua nation as leading to a kind of representational sequel. “In the days to come,” we read, “all trace of the destruction of these people would be erased. The desert wind would salt their ruins and there would be nothing, nor ghost nor scribe, to tell any pilgrim in his passing how it was that people had lived in this place and in this place died” (174). Here, *Blood Meridian* confronts us with compounded material and discursive violations. “Real violence in the borderlands is followed by the virtual violence of a sort of willed forgetting” (Eaton 159). In other words, if, as I have been arguing, McCarthy imagines the violence of the archive in terms of consignment, he also connects this primarily spatial gesture to an unfolding *temporality*—or, more particularly, to the important (and self-

reflexively framed) question of historical representation. The Tigua people seem to disappear from the archive that underwrites the discourse of historiography; there is no “scribe” present to transmit their story to future generations, meaning that the injustice done to these people also goes unarchived. In a sense, of course, it could be argued that the author of *Blood Meridian* himself responds to this implicit demand for an ethically minded memoriousness, since McCarthy attempts precisely to recall those bloody events of Western history that have tended to be repressed by the apparently seamless unfolding of American exceptionalism. In this way, as Campbell argues, *Blood Meridian* in effect challenges “a whole tradition of historiography” that is “predicated upon a narrative told by the victor in which the dominant story is represented as a triumphal procession” (217). Until relatively recently, of course, American culture enthusiastically propagated this “mythicized view of the West,” a sort of “creation myth” in which the enlightened and beneficent forces of civilization, Christianity, individualism, capitalism, and so on, push back and finally tame the “wilderness” and its inhabitants (Campbell 218-20). If subsequent representations of this process, so pervasive over the past century or so of popular culture (especially cinema) and scholarly discourse, have tended to sanitize or sublimate the reality of violent expropriation and genocide in favour of a narrative of binaristic morality and seemingly inevitable conquest, McCarthy’s novel, at the very least, confronts us with the ugly “truth” (V. Bell 124) of a history in which “there is no progressive myth of good overcoming evil, no courageous men taming the West for civilization” (Owens 7).

McCarthy thereby depicts the Frontier immediately prior to U.S. national consolidation as a “landscape of changing meanings” and “contesting forces” (Campbell 220), a figuration that corresponds closely to recent revisionist interventions in which the history of imperialism in general is seen to consist in complex, shifting power relations, rather than the straightforward or unproblematic imposition of European—or, here, Euro-American—dominance.⁵¹ The novel does at times seem, in Parrish’s words, “to speak, haltingly, for the lost ones” of American history (*Civil War* 116), or, in Derridean terms, for the lost *Others* that the One has deliberately misplaced in the exclusionary gestures of its self-constitution. Ghostly traces, both of violent acts and violated victims, will remain to haunt and thus to disrupt the spurious unity of the racialized National Symbolic: “The stories told by the dominant culture in America about the past and the present, the modern frontier myth through which we view ourselves and the

⁵¹ There is some division concerning whether or not *Blood Meridian* actually is a “revisionist” text at all. On the one hand, critics such as Eaton have read the novel’s depiction of American history as an ideologically “contested field” in relation to postcolonialism and critical race theory (173). Similarly, Douglas connects the work of the (white) McCarthy with that of the Native American writer N. Scott Momaday, suggesting that both effect “critiques of European-American imperialism in the Southwest” (5). At the other extreme, the explicit, even gratuitous violence in *Blood Meridian*—most of which is directed at non-white characters—has led one critic to dismiss the novel as a neo-conservative, “Reaganesque romp” (Ellis, “Country” 88). Less shrilly, Newman wonders about the critical efficacy of certain generically postcolonial tropes once they have been co-opted by the mainstream: “the image of the racially fluid borderlands may equally well be understood as catering to [contemporary America’s] racist fears of . . . barbarians at the gates” (133). A more measured Owens settles for cautioning us that the “New Western revisionists’ focus on Anglo-American conquest is not akin to McCarthy’s all-encompassing vision of man’s pervasive genetic propensities for violence” (38). Certainly, I am made uncomfortable by the way the narrator refers, apparently unironically, to Native characters as “stoneage savages” (McCarthy 228); the repeated use of phrases such as this problematizes any straightforward claims about the novel’s revisionist credentials since it runs the risk of normalizing the same destructive assumptions it is attempting to undermine. In general terms, this tension indicates, perhaps, the extent to which the old myths and assumptions of the Old West manage to survive even in texts that purport to be oppositional or “antiheroic” (Kowalewski, Introduction 3). In this sense, *Blood Meridian* could only ever be a complicitous critique, an “oppositional voice [that] necessarily inhabits the structure of what it opposes” (Holloway 195).

world, are pierced with the lives, voices, and experiences of non-Anglos” (Spurgeon 9).⁵² However, as will be seen in the next section, the concluding chapters of *Blood Meridian* place even this muted historical revisionism in doubt. In a series of archival scenarios featuring the unlikely figure of the kid, McCarthy suggests that not only does the attempt to refigure our understanding of the American past end in failure; it also might entail dangers of its own.

“Whoever Would Seek Out His History”: The Limits of Revisionism

In that it is inextricable from Judge Holden’s positing of certain boundaries by which he can define his appropriative “claim” (McCarthy 199) on the landscape of the American Frontier, the collecting process in *Blood Meridian* is obviously *spatialized*. In the collecting process the objects in question are turned into “space,” a “property” that belongs to the collector (Dean 44). However, collecting must at the same time also be considered in its temporal dimensions, since, as Jean Baudrillard unequivocally states, the “problematic of temporality is fundamental to the collecting process” (15). What Baudrillard calls

⁵² Spurgeon here draws on theorist Lauren Berlant, whose concept she summarizes in the following terms: “In the modern American imagination, the pervasiveness of images of the Western frontier and its heroes is so extensive even one hundred years after the official close of the frontier, those archetypes have become important building blocks in what ... Berlant terms the National Symbolic.” The National Symbolic may be defined as a “tangle of legal, territorial, linguistic, and experiential forces continually at work defining the nation and the citizen,” a discursive melange that is itself, in turn, constituted via a “National Fantasy, those ‘images, narratives, monuments, and sites that circulate throughout personal/collective consciousness’” and that help to “define nationality and identity ... on the level of national consciousness in the form of collective memory, popular stories, and official and unofficial histories” (10). In that it draws on generic structures deeply embedded in American popular consciousness, *Blood Meridian* would presumably be, on some level, constitutive of the National Symbolic. On the other hand, McCarthy’s tendency to deconstruct aspects of the genre of the Western—through, for instance, his refusal of comfortable narrative resolution—also means that the novel undermines the National Symbolic through a process of denaturalization. See also Eaton, who discusses *Blood Meridian*, as well as McCarthy’s later Border Trilogy, alongside Berlant’s theory (165-66).

the “system of collecting” provides human beings with one of the fundamental means by which we domesticate the intractable materiality of temporal existence. In his view, time itself—the inescapable physiological reality of temporal succession ending in death—is traumatizing: its “*irreversibility and contingency*” creates a frightening sense of powerlessness in the human subject (17). However, through the act of collecting objects, Baudrillard contends, the subject is able to exert control over time, thus transforming it into something manageably finite and ultimately manipulable:

It is through our cutting up of time into those patterns we call “habits” that we resolve the potential threat of time’s inexorable continuity, and evade the implacable singularity of events. Likewise, it is through their discontinuous integration within sets and series that we truly dispose of our objects, and thus truly come to possess them. Here we confront the very discourse of subjectivity, of which objects represent one of the most privileged registers—interposing, in that space between the irreversible flux of existence and our own selves, a screen that is discontinuous, classifiable, reversible, as repetitive as one could wish, a fringe of the world that remains docile in our physical or mental grip, and thus wards off all anxiety. Not only do [collected] objects help us master the world ... they also help us ... to establish dominion over time, interrupting its continuous flow and classifying its parts in the same way that we classify habits, and insisting that it

submit to the same constraints of association that inform the way we set things out in space. (14-15)

Baudrillard goes on to argue that the “synchronic haven” constituted by the act of collection—the ideal realm in which, as we manipulate and order objects in our possession, we are able to control our phenomenal experience of time—also provides for the control of *historical* time, the narrower temporal stage upon which human events play out. In other words, collections also produce a kind of stabilizing metanarrative for the ordering of history, one that takes the place of certain other controlling narratives or myths that (as Lyotard has also reminded us) have lost their ability to structure perceptions of the collective experience of temporality. “In our era of faltering religious and ideological authorities,” Baudrillard suggests, collections are “the consolations of consolations, an everyday myth capable of absorbing all our anxieties about time and death” (17).⁵³

I mention the emphasis placed on time by a key theorist of collection in order to underline the significant temporal—and ultimately *historical*—dimension of McCarthy’s depiction of Judge Holden’s archive in *Blood Meridian*. For the judge’s great project of gathering aimed at physical suzerainty (in essence, a kind of spatialized political power) also clearly marks, to use Baudrillard’s terms, an effort “to establish dominion over time” (15). The objects that the judge collects

⁵³ If the concepts of collecting and narrative might seem to have little in common at first glance, ultimately they can be connected in suggestive ways. Bal argues, for instance, that the “syntagmatic relations” that structure all collections are analogous to narrative plots. By the same token, while narrative consists of grouped linguistic signs, objects included in a collection also thereby become “sign[s]” in that they stand in for “other objects with which [they have] this representational capacity in common” (“Telling Objects” 111). Finally, Bal agrees with Baudrillard concerning collection’s fundamental relation to mortality. If “Collecting can be attractive as a gesture of endless deferral of death,” then narrative, too, is a key means by which human beings “repeat events in order to hold off death” (“Telling Objects” 112-13).

throughout the novel are predominantly what we could call “remains,” physical traces of the past that still exist in the present and which thus seem to provide a stratified record of the passing of time. In each instance of collection, moreover, the judge uses the object in question as the basis for elaborating a kind of narrative; that is to say, the judge—like a “historian” (Stinson 9)—draws on the material record of the past to produce an explanation of the unfolding of history. The rocks that we have seen the judge collecting and breaking open, for example, enable him to counter the biblical tradition with his own version of a vast geologic time-scale, an “ordering up of eons out of the ancient chaos” (116), while the dinosaur femur which the judge later “sketch[es] into his log” functions as evidence for a comparable tale of “temporal immensities” (251). In both examples, the judge’s archive is the source for a revised narrative of universal history whose boundaries far exceed those hitherto accepted. In a comparable scene, the judge investigates the deeper, prehistoric origins of human culture by first examining the relics of an ancient people—their “old flints and broken pottery,” among other “artefacts” (139)—before responding to the pointedly historicist question of one of the scalp-hunters (“What kind of indians has these here been, Judge?” [142]) by recounting the story of their disappearance: “The people who once lived here are called the Anasazi. The old ones. They quit these parts, routed by drought or disease or by wandering bands of marauders, quit these parts ages since and of them there is no memory. They are rumors and ghosts in this land and they are much revered” (146). In that the judge’s ledger-book, in particular, documents these artifacts’ existence by preserving information about

them, as well as enabling the concomitant production of explanatory narratives about those objects' ultimate significance, it clearly functions as a kind of archive, a "socio-cultural [and geo-physical] record of collective memory" (Woodson 202).

It is a curious form of preservation, however, since Holden's book usually contains "the final document of an artifact's existence" (Masters 7). As we saw in the last section, the judge's acts of collection are always also acts of destruction, and the avowed purpose of his note taking is to "expunge" the objects he describes therein "from the memory of man" (McCarthy 140). The judge's fundamental realization here concerns the power of the archive—and representation more generally—to shape perceptions of material reality and thus to grant those who control the order of archival representation suzerainty over that reality. To that extent, he is not so much concerned with destroying the objects *per se* as with annexing their existence to the authority of a textual order that *he* determines. As David Holloway argues, the "Ledgers that Holden uses to store the copies he makes of natural and human artifacts are ideological scripts, where the representations of the Real which he makes in sketches or in works supercede the originals which he destroys or expropriates" (191). The judge's powers of representation are indeed uncanny: his sketches are, as one onlooker observes, "like enough the things themselves," while another feels as though the "short disquisition" the judge gives on the history of a particular Spanish mission is so accurate and detailed that he cannot believe Holden has "never been there" in person (McCarthy 141, 224). What the judge produces between the covers of his

ledgers is not, as his various interlocutors wrongly suppose, an absolute mimesis, but rather a series of hyperreal simulations in which, as Holden himself avers, “What is to be deviates no jot from the book wherein it’s writ” (141).

In the end, then, for the judge the archive is not a matter of the *past* at all. In his philosophy history is sublimely unknowable, an in- or supra-human phenomenon that is perennially beyond the ken of people who misguidedly think they are its “agents.” As the judge himself states, given that people’s “acts will ultimately accommodate history with or without their understanding,” the “possession of the facts” is thus irrelevant (85). Instead, the judge espouses a radically relativistic view of history in which “Men’s memories are uncertain and the past that was differs little from the past that was not” (330). What matters, in other words, is not *what* happened but rather what can be *said* to have happened: historical “truth” is an effect of rhetoric.

This radically “constructivist” theory is certainly evinced during our first encounter with the judge, in the early scene in the hapless Reverend Green’s tent where Holden spins what is in essence a spurious historical narrative—a kind of salacious biography that provides the back-story of the Reverend’s sexual crimes against children and animals—that, despite its ironically “fraudulent” basis, has undeniably *real* (and violent) effects in the present (7). Crucially, the judge constructs this narrative as an appeal to the image of an archive, even if it is an absent one: we can be sure the Reverend is an “imposter” since “He holds *no papers* of divinity from any institution recognized or improvised” and has “only committed to memory a few passages from the good book” (6-7, my emphases).

Here we see the judge exercising power over material and social reality—causing a violent uproar and the preacher to be run out of town—through a completely baseless rhetorical appeal to the authority vested in the image of a collection of documents. A parallel scene bookends the novel. Yet again, the judge engages in narrative improvisation combined with an appeal to an imaginary archive, all with a view to condemning before the law an otherwise (more or less) innocent individual. After the kid is taken into custody in San Diego the judge visits him in jail, where he betrays his symbolic “son” with another historical fiction. “[I] told them the truth,” the judge tells the kid:

That you were the person responsible [for the gang’s atrocities]. Not that we have all the details. But [the authorities] understand that it was you and none other who shaped events along such a calamitous course. Eventuating in the massacre at the ford by the savages with whom you conspired. Means and ends are of little moment here. Idle speculations. But even though you carry the draft of your murderous plan with you to the grave it will nonetheless be known in all its infamy to your Maker and as that is so so shall it be made known the least of men. All in the fullness of time. (306)

Once more, the judge exerts a determining control over the environment and people around him by purporting to explain the meaning of history, or how events are “shaped,” in relation to an archive (here, the document represented synecdochically by the metaphorical “draft” of the kid’s plan) that contains the putative “truth” (the knowledge “made known” *in toto* via the mind of God).

While the kid is accused of being the author of a diabolical plot, he is, of course, the one who is being “scripted unwillingly” into the judge’s revised version of the history of the Glanton gang in which he is the chief culprit (Fielder 33-34).

It is in these concluding chapters, as the major events of the novel start to recede into the past and *Blood Meridian* in turn gestures toward a “modern time” that is increasingly distant from its “prehistor[ic]” imagining of the frontier (Newman 149), that McCarthy begins to focus his attention most pointedly on the theme of the preservation and transmission of historical knowledge—that is, on the question of who gets to tell the history of the West, what versions consequently get passed on, and, ultimately, why such questions carry ethical weight for us in the present. Ironically enough, such questions are posed most directly by—or, at least, in relation to—the kid, whose illiteracy and ostensible ahistoricity (by the novel’s second page he has already “divested [himself] of all that he has been” [4]) would seem to make him an unlikely historical subject. Nevertheless, in three implicitly interconnected scenes at the end of the novel, McCarthy places his protagonist in a series of archival scenarios in which the kid attempts to produce his own counternarrative, an account of his past that runs counter to, and thus on some level *resists*, the nihilistic metanarrative of human history posited by the judge, under whose edict “Moral law is an invention of mankind for the disenfranchisement of the powerful in favor of the weak” and for whom the ultimate significance of the course of human events is a product of the “historical absolute” of war alone (250).

By way of concluding I will return to the earliest and most enigmatically significant of these three scenes in which the kid “enters” the archive: his dream, while under the influence of ether, of the judge and the “coldforger” (309-10). It is significant, however, that each of the other two examples in question focuses precisely on an embodiment of the “weak”—an elderly woman in one case, orphaned children in the other—who would be excluded from Judge Holden’s amoral “Historical law” (250) in which only the fittest survive. In the first of these two later examples, the kid—having survived into his late-twenties, he is now referred to as “the man”—is seemingly at a loss concerning what to do with his life and finds himself wandering “in a country he had never seen” (313). In the middle of a desolate, anonymous mountain range, he crosses paths with a sect of penitents who parade dolefully by, all the while mutilating their own bodies and “leaving only bloody footprints on the stone.” These marks do indeed foreshadow “some unspeakable calamity,” since the penitents are soon after found brutally murdered by unknown assailants (314-15). The kid locates what he takes to be the single survivor, though, an old woman hiding in a stone alcove whom he promises to “convey ... to a safe place.” However, as he reaches out to touch her, the kid suddenly realizes that “she had been dead in that place for years” and that his entreaties are useless (315). Soon after, a second incident occurs in which the kid, now descended to the plains of northern Texas, finds himself amongst the squads of “bonepickers” scavenging the apocalyptic landscape for the “sunchalked bones of the vanished herds” of buffalo (317). At camp one night, the kid encounters a makeshift family consisting of a few of the many “violent children orphaned by

war” who currently wander the blasted plains of the late nineteenth-century American West (322). The children somewhat diffidently engage the kid in conversation about “sin,” “meanness,” and “whores,” before they ask him about the “aged scapular” of severed ears he wears around his neck (319). The kid explains the grisly trophy’s origins in his experience of warfare with the Apache, but after the child named Elrod churlishly expresses doubt as to the provenance, the kid dismisses the group from his campfire. However, when Elrod returns later that night with the apparent intention of resolving this dispute with violence, the kid is forced to shoot him in self-defence (322).

Both of these scenes thus end with the kid contemplating someone else’s death, but the key point I want to make is that both also feature metaphors for the archive as the site of historical representation. In each instance, the kid discourses about his past in response to some of its extant physical remains; thus, despite being illiterate and inarticulate, the kid mimics one of the founding gestures of historiography by producing retrospective, explanatory narratives that are prompted by the encounter with or handling of the past’s primary, material traces. In the first scene, for example, McCarthy clearly depicts the old woman, whom the kid refers to as “Abuelita,”⁵⁴ as though she were a kind of preserved relic: “gray and leathery and sand[y],” she is presented to the kid as if on display in “a small niche” in the mountainside (315). Almost with a kind of reverence, the kid responds to the old woman’s presence by recounting, “in a low voice,” a

⁵⁴ “Abuelita” means “little grandmother” or “old dear one” in Spanish (Parrish, *Civil War* 114), although a more idiomatic usage would be something like “granny” or “nanna.” My thanks to Libe García Zarranz for this translation.

rudimentary historical chronicle—a series of events succeeding each other in time, signified syntactically by the repetitious use of conjunctions (“and ... and ... and ... and ... and”)—in order to explain how he has come to be in this place: “He told her that he was an American and that he was a long way from the country of his birth and that he had no family and that he had traveled much and seen many things and had been at war and endured hardships” (315). McCarthy further encourages this reading of the Abuelita as an “archival” object of historical narrativization by subtly paralleling this scene with the one earlier in the novel in which the kid encounters the museum-like space of a deserted village. The Abuelita’s “dried shell” ensconced in its “niche” of rock (315) echoes the more obviously archival image of the deserted house’s “niche,” in which are arrayed wooden “figures of saints” that are themselves surrounded by “Illustrations cut from an old journal and pasted to the wall, a small picture of a queen, a gypsy card that was the four of cups” (59).⁵⁵

⁵⁵ The odd detail of the gypsy card at the end of this earlier scene further indicates the Abuelita’s function as a displaced trace of the kid’s past. Despite the fact that the kid has ostensibly never seen this old woman before, a metonymic circuit of imagery connects the Abuelita with things that he *has* encountered: the Abuelita is, as I have noted, echoed in the wooden figures in the burned out house, which are in turn juxtaposed with the gypsy card (“the four of cups” [59]). The card then reappears in the subsequent Tarot-reading scene, where the kid fortuitously selects precisely the “Cuatro de copas,” and, indeed, wonders why it seems uncannily “familiar to him” (94). The circuit is then completed by the clear link between the clothing worn by the juggler woman who interprets the kid’s choice of card and the dusty dress of the Abuelita. Where the gypsy seer, along with her husband and children, wears a costume “with stars and halfmoons embroidered on,” and whose “once gaudy colors” are now “faded and pale from the dust of the road,” the latter wears a shawl that is similarly “much faded of its color” yet which still features “like a patent woven into the fabric the figures of *stars and quartermoons* and other insignia” (89, 315, my emphases). This is not to suggest that the Abuelita and the “blind interlocutrix” (94) are literally identical, although I agree with Parrish that this is not out of the question (*Civil War* 111). Rather, it adds plausibility to my argument that the preserved corpse with which the kid attempts to converse is meant to be read as a kind of spectral, overdetermined embodiment of the events that comprise his personal history, not just as yet another instance of redundant collateral damage in the conquest of the West.

In a comparable fashion, the second scene centres on the kid's construction of a brief narrative of the signal events of his past, with a preserved body—or, in this case, body *parts*: “perfectly black and hard and dry” ears (320)—again providing the impetus for such reminiscence. The Abuelita's corpse and the scapular of ears are clearly connected on the level of diction and imagery. They share a marked lack of colour, as well as the more tactile qualities of dessication and hardness (the one is “gray ... rigid ... dried,” the other “black ... hard ... dried” [315, 320]), while McCarthy also links them on the basis of a kind of paradoxical absence-in-presence: although both are physical objects that can be touched, both are also strangely indistinct or flickering in terms of their material qualities (thus, where the old woman's body “weigh[s] nothing,” the ears are described as having “no shape at all” [315, 320]). Moreover, if, as I have argued, the Abuelita, read in relation to the earlier scene of the burned museum-like house, can be seen as a kind of archival object or “exhibit,” then the kid's encounter with the young bonepickers also has a similarly exhibitionary resonance. As Parrish notes regarding the children's skeptical interrogation of the kid about his scapular, “It is as if the kid has been put in a museum to be gawked at and disbelieved” (*Civil War* 112). After these curious “tourist[s]” (Parrish, *Civil War* 112) catch a glimpse of the “aged scapular” around the kid's neck, they begin peppering him with questions as to the identity of the “strange dried pendants”:

“What kind of ears? ... Niggers, aint it? ... Where'd you get em at?” (McCarthy 319, 320). The children themselves then propose a range of possible back-stories to explain the intriguing ears' provenance, one supposing that the kid was once “a

scout on the prairie [who] killed ever one of them sons of bitches” (320).

However, the youth named Elrod suspects their genealogy is far less heroic or glamorous: “Them ears could of come off of cannibals or any other kind of foreign nigger. They tell me you can buy the whole heads in New Orleans. Sailors bring em in and you can buy em for five dollars all day long them heads” (321). Elrod here effectively accuses the kid of peddling history as a commodified and thus degraded simulacrum rather than as authentic experience, and the kid responds with an assertion of eyewitness experience for which the ears—cradled prominently “in his hands” while he is talking—function as macabre proof: “They wasnt cannibals, he said. They was Apaches. I knowed the man that docked em. Knowed him and rode with him and seen him hung” (321). In a way, then, the kid proffers a corrective narrative based on historical “truth”—the rhetorical ethos of which is premised on material, archival evidence—in order to counteract the already inaccurate perceptions of the next generation, whether they take the form of aggrandizing tall tales or embittered cynicism.

But the histories told by the kid in these scenes are also “corrective” in a more profound and perhaps even ethical sense. Both narratives signal a fundamental transformation in the kid’s attitude and behaviour, from those of a person for whom fighting and killing are reflex actions to those of someone who actively attempts to protect the defenceless from harm. Indeed, it is as if the kid’s very ability to narrate his own history, no matter how spare or brief it may be, is paradoxically concomitant with the rejection of the very violence in which that narrative consists. Thus, while the kid’s stories are themselves *about* violence on

the level of manifest content, the contexts in which they are told—the scene of narration, if you will—involve the *renouncing* of violence: the kid as “historian” abjures the violence of the kid as historical actor. For example, after telling the Abuelita a history of “war” and “hardships,” not to mention the ambiguous but certainly traumatic “many [other] things” that such a life forces one to witness, the kid promises to protect the old woman from similar dangers: “He told her that he would convey her to a safe place ... for he could not leave her in this place or she would surely die” (315). Of course, the fact that this scene of narration occurs in the midst of a murdered “company of penitents” hints that the kid is, in some ways, confessing to or doing penance for his complicity in such acts in the past (as Parrish argues, the kid’s “desire to convey this woman to a safe place” reflects his desire to “make restitution for past acts” [*Civil War* 111]).⁵⁶

The bonepicker scene also focuses, albeit not quite as overtly, on questions of sin and penance or redemption. In a seeming effort to impress the older kid, the orphans at first prattle on about the various forms of debauchery on offer in the nearby town of Griffin, which, as well as being “Full plumb up” with prostitutes, has a reputation for being “the biggest town for sin in all Texas” due to the frequency of “murders,” “[s]crapes with knives,” and every other “kind of

⁵⁶ Such a reading is also supported by the fact that the Abuelita echoes another figure from earlier in the novel, a “weathered old [Apache] woman” whose violent death furnishes the gang with its first scalp (97-98). In the details of her dress (a “shawl”), seated positioning (she is “squatting” in the dust), and extreme passivity (“She stared at the ground nor did she look up”), the earlier woman foreshadows the literally dead and unresponsive woman encountered by the kid (97). Of course, the brutal manner in which she meets her end—shot in the head by Glanton and then scalped by another, with the kid watching on all the while—is in stark contrast with the hospice later extended to the Abuelita by the kid himself. Hence, the juxtaposition of these two scenes is meant to emphasize the kid’s relative ethical development by the end of the novel, from someone who would look on as a defenceless old woman is murdered, to someone who would try to rescue such a figure.

meanness you can name” (319). On the surface, the story that the kid subsequently tells of the scapular’s origin seems to replicate and thus endorse this catalogue of sins through its depiction of knife-play and butchery (321). However, as in the Abuelita episode, the violent content of the narrative itself is set in opposition to the present attitudes and actions of its teller. Indeed, the kid has already effectively rejected the children’s own taste for violence by responding to their breathless approval of Griffin’s depravity with a pointed and curt question that is meant to be deliberately deflating: “You all like meanness?” (319). Further, following the story of the scapular, the kid more actively renounces “meanness” by refusing to use violence in response to Elrod’s reckless provocations. As their confrontation escalates dangerously, the kid mentions by way of a warning that he was Elrod’s age “when [he] was first shot.” Elrod responds by asking whether he “aim[s] to shoot [him]” now, to which the kid retorts that he “aim[s] to try to keep from it” (321). He then advises Elrod to join his less belligerent companions, who have all the while begun edging nervously away: “Go on ... They’re waiting on ye” (322). This admonition may not seem as beneficent as the earlier promise to “convey [the Abuelita] to a safe place” among “her countrypeople” (315), but as protective gestures they are more or less formally identical. In both cases the kid attempts to reunite a solitary individual who is in imminent danger with the social collective that will keep him or her safe from harm.⁵⁷ In sum, then, in both of these scenes the kid produces historical narratives in relation to “archival” objects

⁵⁷ As if to emphasize this connection between the two collectivities—the Abuelita’s people and Elrod’s surrogate family—McCarthy uses the word “party” to refer to both groups (315, 322).

(that is, bodies or body parts preserved in time) in an effort to constitute a present whose relation to the violent past is one of *difference*. In this regard, the kid's dismissal of Elrod doubles as a rejection of his earlier self—he, too, was once a “child” with a “taste for mindless violence”—and thus represents the culmination of his attempt to rewrite the deterministic “history” in which “the child [is] the father of the man” and violence begets itself in an interminable cycle (3).

However, the kid's history of violence proves impossible to alter or transcend completely. McCarthy ultimately suggests that these attempts to transform the present by re-narrativizing the archived past are futile or even ultimately themselves destructive. For instance, in his remorseful gesture of restitution toward “the lone survivor of the sort of massacre in which he used to participate” (Parrish, *Civil War* 110), the kid tries in effect to rewrite history by substituting a different (and supposedly more positive or redemptive) ending for all those life-stories he has helped cut short over the years: instead of being murdered and violated, this defenceless woman, at least, will be saved. But of course the Abuelita “ha[s] been dead in that place for years” (McCarthy 315), meaning that the kid's desire to provide redress through an acknowledgment of his own culpability in countless other acts of cruelty is finally as insubstantial as the old woman's weightless body. Like the kid's own mother, dead in childbirth, or the forever absented fathers of the judge's parable about the Anasazi, the grandmother is “gone before [the kid] arrives” (Parrish, *Civil War* 112). The attempt to revise the past in the present can thus only ever be belated and ineffectual, less a properly transferential scenario in which perpetrator and victim

both attain the status of agential, responsible subjects, than a self-interested if somewhat unwitting attempt by the kid to “salve” his own conscience by positing a “sentimentalized history” of convenient forgiveness (Parrish, *Civil War* 111).

In the other example in question, the kid’s paradoxical desire to *transcend* violence by *representing* it similarly founders, albeit in a more causally direct fashion. As I have argued, the kid’s rejection both of Elrod and of the “meanness” the latter embraces represents a repudiation of the predilections of his own earlier self. But the attempt to repress this uncanny double only leads to its inevitable return: Elrod literally comes back to the campsite later that night with the intention of murdering the kid. The latter manages to get off a shot first, however, and Elrod is killed.⁵⁸ When the boy’s companions themselves return the next morning to collect the body, it becomes apparent that the kid has, again, perpetuated the cycle of violence that his attempted rejection of all “meanness” was designed to break. In killing and thus symbolically rejecting the avatar of his earlier self, the kid has in fact paradoxically recreated that self anew, in the form of Elrod’s younger brother Randall, yet another “orphan” whose “insane” appearance and readiness to take up “the dead boy’s rifle” (323) suggests that he represents another link in the endless chain of substitutions inaugurated by the

⁵⁸ Elrod’s death at the kid’s hands paradoxically appears, at first, to reinforce the kid’s apparent repudiation of violence. McCarthy depicts the shooting in an oddly elliptical way, as if to suggest that the kid himself had little part in it. Although the superficial implication is that the kid kills Elrod, this act is in fact never shown. Textually speaking, Elrod is the only one who shoots: “The boy swung the rifle and fired.” The next line has the kid speaking to his obviously dead opponent: “You wouldnt of lived anyway” (322). In a symbolic sense, perhaps, the effect of this ellipsis is comparable to the kid’s attempts to make amends for his past by saving the Abuelita. Where, in the earlier scene, the kid’s culpability is ostensibly assuaged by his offer of succour to the old woman, any responsibility for killing Elrod is evacuated by a precise narrative lacuna (along with the fact that the act is literally one of self-defence). In the light of the argument I have been making, of course, this seems a tenuous exoneration at best, one that in the end merely serves to cast further doubt on the kid’s ability to leave his former identity behind.

novel's opening injunction for us to "[s]ee" the prototype of this orphaned, nomadic, and eternally violent every-child (3). Indeed, McCarthy himself encourages this interpretation by connecting Elrod and Randall with another of the judge's parables, the one about the harness-maker. One of the other bonepickers tells the kid that the two brothers headed west after their parents died and their "granddaddy was killed by a lunatic and buried in the woods like a dog" (323). The judge's earlier narrative, of course, concerns a traveler brutally murdered by a harness-maker "in a deep wood" and "buried ... in a shallow grave" (144). On his deathbed years later, the harness-maker admits to his son that he killed the traveler, before asking for (and receiving) the son's forgiveness for this shameful act (144). However, the harness-maker's son then desecrates the traveler's grave in a fit of jealousy, before going "away to the west" and becoming "a killer of men" (145). The key point is that this Cain-and-Abel allegory—the traveler earlier admonished the harness-maker about being hospitable to one's "brother" (143)—illustrates a historical pattern in which the act of violence is inextricable from the subsequent attempt to be absolved of it. If, as Newman argues, the judge's parable of the harness-maker describes a "genealogy of violence" in which the crimes of the father repeat themselves endlessly throughout time (147), then by killing Elrod the kid has himself unwittingly authored the next chapter in this reiterative, bloody history.

Like many of the novel's readers, I contend that *Blood Meridian* is structured around a fundamental ideological conflict between judge and kid. (The judge himself acknowledges this foundational status when he tells the kid that

their “animosities were formed and waiting before ... [they] met” [307].) For some critics the kid does provide a viable alternative to Holden’s destructive outlook, and he thus represents the possibility for a successful critique of the latter’s ideological position more generally. Jay Ellis, for example, interprets one episode, in which the kid is separated from the gang and journeys upwards, high into the mountains, as signifying his moral ascension in a broader sense: “away from the judge” in particular, the kid’s climb “through a shaky recapitulation of evolved human morality ... constitutes a refusal of the judge’s worldview” (*Home* 162). Likewise, Rick Wallach interprets the superficially inarticulate double negative with which the kid repudiates one of the judge’s convoluted statements in the final tavern scene—“You aint nothin” (McCarthy 331)—as, in fact, a perceptive subversion of the judge’s “illusory fullness of presence” (Wallach 11).

But other commentators are less confident. Holloway, for example, reads the judge as an “irresistible force” against which the kid’s newfound morality and the novel’s own deconstructive logic both founder. The Gordian knot of the novel, for Holloway, consists in the fact that “in the act of opposing one succeeds only in confirming the intractable presence of what one might hope to remove. The enduring of the judge, in other words, is a proposition which McCarthy’s deconstructive approach to meaning and to language seems powerless to resist” (195). Masters, finally, argues that the kid’s unsuccessful revolt against the judge is really a failure of *authorship*: the kid is unable finally “to tell his story and construct a text ... capable of transcending the judge’s textual order,” since that capacious textuality extends to the limits of the known world and thus admits of

no critical exteriority (35-36). While I generally agree with Masters's claim, I would modify its terms slightly and propose that the kid's difficulty results from an inability to "construct a text" from the "archives" at his disposal. If the kid's transformation into "the man" is accompanied, as has been argued here, by his repeated attempts to reinterpret the material traces of his own history and thus lay the foundations for the construction in the future of non-violent or salvaging narratives, these attempted interventions are foreclosed by the judge's symbolic control over the discursive possibilities represented by the archive itself.

Looking Awry

After he is freed from the jail in San Diego following the final trek across the desert, the kid visits a surgeon in order to have an arrow removed from his leg. While anaesthetized he has a hallucinatory dream in which the judge looms over him in the form of a "great shambling mutant, silent and serene" (309). The terrified kid futilely "ransack[s] the linens of his pallet for arms," although the judge merely "smile[s]" rather than assaulting him (310). Before the dream ends, the kid dimly perceives another man lurking behind Holden's massive form, a figure that can "never be seen in [its] entirety" but which seems to be some kind of "worker in metal" (310). Abruptly, the dream appears to end—though the narrator does tell us that the kid experiences it again "in sleeps to follow" (309)—and its significance is admittedly hard to gauge. What is certain is that, brief as the scene is, it is a key moment in the novel. Earlier on, after hearing about Holden's first meeting with the gang, the kid had asked Tobin: "What's he a judge of?"

(135). Then, the expriest deflected the question; here, at the end of the dream sequence, the narrator does not: “Of this is the judge judge,” we are told (310). But the unequivocal tone of this statement is misleading. We have just finished reading two of McCarthy’s more stylistically tangled and thematically enigmatic paragraphs, and it is not, finally, at all clear what the antecedent of the pronoun “this” actually is.

On the other hand, the form of McCarthy’s prose here—specifically, its grammatical ambiguity—perfectly matches its content, for it is precisely the question of *antecedence* that is at issue in the kid’s dream. As the narrator pointedly informs us earlier in the sequence, the identity of the judge is impossible to pin down because of the ambiguous nature of his relationship to his past, to whatever it is that came before him: “Whatever his antecedents he was something wholly other than their sum, nor was there system by which to divide him back into his origins for he would not go” (309). Moreover, it is not just the judge as a figment of the kid’s dreams—or, rather, nightmares—that is *sui generis*. As Tobin recollects, when the gang-members initially encountered him, he appeared “out of nothing at all” such that “You couldnt tell where he’d come from” (125). For my purposes, though, what is most noteworthy about the repeated difficulty various characters seem to have in parsing out the judge’s origins is that McCarthy explicitly frames it as a problem of the archive. The judge is thus defined in the terms provided by the kid’s dream-vision as a figure of *unarchivability*: “Whoever would seek out [Holden’s] history through what unravelling of loins and ledgerbooks must stand at last darkened and dumb at the shore of a void without

terminus or origin and whatever science he might bring to bear upon the dusty primal matter blowing down out of the millennia will discover no trace of any ultimate atavistic egg by which to reckon his commencing” (309-10). If, as has been discussed, the judge uses “ledgerbooks” and various “science[s]” in order to descry the “origin[s]” of the cosmic, natural, and social orders, his own presence conversely resists explication by a similar methodology. There is no *arkhē* here; the histories inscribed in genealogies (“loins”) and historical documents contain no locatable transcendental signified to stabilize the meaning of the judge’s existence.

Further, in an iteration of the “inside-out” pattern I identified earlier, whereby the judge’s mode of archivization consists of an initial “opening” of an object or body followed by a subsequent “enclosure” within the bounded space of his collection, the kid’s attempt to comprehend the judge here (both in the sense of “understanding” and “containing” him) can only lead, paradoxically, to his *own* reinscription within the purview of the judge’s discursive authority. Similar to the fate of Nicholas Branch in DeLillo’s *Libra*, the kid’s attempt to achieve mastery over the past by means of the archive merely produces, *en abyme*, “more archive” (Derrida, *Archive* 68) than the kid can control. Years later, of course, the kid will die by suffocation in a latrine, when the judge “gather[s] him in his arms against his immense and terrible flesh” (333).⁵⁹ But this awful fate is, in a sense,

⁵⁹ In actual fact, as with the death of Elrod (see above), the kid’s demise takes place within the nonspace of a textual aporia. The last thing we see in the latrine is the judge ramming “the wooden barlatch home behind him” (333). Later on, when two men attempt to use the latrine, there seems to be something horrific or off-putting in it: when one of the men opens the door against the other’s warning—“I wouldnt go in”—his response is “Good God almighty” (334). However, McCarthy leaves the cause of this reaction ambiguous; when someone asks the second

anticipated in the dreamscape, when he is similarly gathered—consigned, as it were—within the judge’s all-encompassing archive. Thus, gazing into Holden’s “small and lashless pig’s eyes,” the kid perceives inscribed therein “his own name which nowhere else could he have ciphered out at all logged into the records as a thing already accomplished, a traveler known in jurisdictions existing only in the claims of certain pensioners or on old dated maps” (310). What the kid sees here “logged into the records”—in other words, archived—is, in effect, his own peripatetic future (we learn that in later years he “travel[s] about from place to place” [312]), albeit viewed from the retrospective vantage provided by an even more distant time. However, this long historical view does not appear to provide anything productive in the way of understanding or development. Whereas Derrida views the archive’s radical futurity as a source of hope, McCarthy envisions a quite different mode of archival temporality, one in which the future (here, the kid’s later career as a “traveler”) is paradoxically “dated,” and has already vanished into a closed-off past (“a thing already accomplished”) over which the judge holds jurisdiction. The judge’s archive thus resembles nothing so much as an epistemological black hole—recall how the kid, after supposedly “unraveling” the ledgers, “stand[s] at last *darkened* and dumb at the shore of a *void*” (310, my emphases)—out of whose gravitational pull the light of history itself cannot escape. Moreover, if the illiterate kid is somehow able to decipher his own name written there, he also simultaneously catches a glimpse of “whole bodies of decisions” made by Holden that are “not accountable to the courts of

man what is wrong, “He [doesn’t] answer” (334). Although we may logically *assume* that the man has seen the kid’s violated corpse, there is absolutely no direct textual evidence for this.

men” (310). No one, it seems, will finally be able to judge the judge and his “vast abomination” (243).

In positing “no thinkable alternative space” to the judge’s “world order,” McCarthy seems, ideologically speaking, to have created in *Blood Meridian* a “text with no outside” (Holloway 190). Indeed, in tonal terms, it is often quite difficult to separate the totalizing point of view of the judge from the perspective of the equally eloquent and grandiose narrative voice (Sørensen 21), and Holden does frequently take on the “metafictional qualities of an author-figure” (Owens 50).⁶⁰ As a result, it might be argued that McCarthy shares a (symbolically) similar fate to the kid, suffocated in the noisome embrace of his own creation, since, as James D. Lilley avers, “the border between the judge’s philosophy ... and McCarthy’s own authorial perspective” is difficult to ascertain (115). In broader terms, this co-option or enfolding implies that McCarthy’s attempted “demystification” of the historical and ideological foundations of “US imperialism” seems to be a simultaneously “urgent and hopeless” project (Godden and Richmond 449).⁶¹

But then maybe the most productive and interesting aspects of *Blood Meridian* consist in its repeated demonstrations of the limitations of the very gesture of “demystification” itself. As Beck cogently argues, McCarthy’s overall

⁶⁰ See also Phillips’s suggestion that the judge is “in implicit dialogue with the impersonal, highly detailed, and verbally ingenious narration” (441). By contrast, Pitts holds that the narrator’s view of the judge is fundamentally ironic or “mocking” (13).

⁶¹ Godden and Richmond argue here that McCarthy’s political pessimism is symptomatic of the broader cultural and geo-political climate in which *Blood Meridian* was written and published, particularly the context of the American government’s interventions in places like Nicaragua and El Salvador in the 1980s (449).

point seems to be that the notions of political “transparency” and epistemological “clarity”—that is, the supposed end results of the demystifying work of ideology critique—are themselves *symptoms* of the original obfuscation. Analyzing McCarthy’s extended and complicated thematics of “optical democracy,” Beck suggests that it is at those times in *Blood Meridian* when things seem clearest that they are, in fact, most ambiguous (66). Thus, in relation to a striking passage concerning the nature of perception in the desert (the narrator mentions how the landscape’s “neuter austerity” grants everything in it an incredible sharpness that is, paradoxically, simultaneously estranging [McCarthy 247]), Beck comments that “clarity does not mean that we know more about things ... What the direct light of the sun [in this passage] actually produces is an uncanny effect whereby familiar objects are made to appear otherwise” (66). Beck extrapolates from this particular instance to argue that McCarthy’s lightshow functions as “a sort of ideological special effect,” a way of suggesting that “we cannot look directly at the source of power but can only perceive its effects”; in other words, for Beck, McCarthy’s sense of “what is really powerful about power is the way it conceals itself through the act of revelation” (66, 67). This movement of ideological sublimation also thereby limns certain intractable problems connected to the possibility of historical refiguring: “What *Blood Meridian* suggests is that transparency produces what can only be a *perceived* and ‘strange’ equality. To mistake this strangeness for clarity is to invest too heavily in the value of notionally empirical evidence in the facts before one’s eyes” (67-68). From this perspective, in other words, history cannot really be “known” as such—or, rather,

the moment we think we *do* know it is exactly when it most profoundly eludes our grasp. For Beck, this slippage suggests in turn “the limit of what McCarthy’s book can do as ‘revisionist’ history since the very idea of a revisionist reading infers that something can now be revealed which was once hidden ... any historical ‘truth’ the novel may be imparting in its description of the bloody pursuit of America’s Manifest Destiny ... can only be read by looking awry” (68).⁶² The profound failure of the kid to comprehend the judge via the “ledgerbooks” of his dreams would thus represent not so much McCarthy’s outright rejection of “the archive” per se, as his sense of the difficulties and risks inherent in a *particular* kind of archive fever: that desire to locate the “origin,” the “atavistic egg,” by which “to reckon” a finalized or “ultimate” historical knowledge (McCarthy 310).

If light misleads us, perhaps we need to embrace darkness instead, or, at the very least, engage in the “awry” glancing suggested by Beck. It is just these kinds of imprecise visual qualities that characterize the third figure in the kid’s dream, the aforementioned coldforger, who is “enshadowed” by the judge and who thus cannot be seen “in his entirety” (310). Despite his apparent inscrutability, this “artisan” (310) may clearly be read as an allegory for the artist or writer.⁶³ In general terms, of course, he creates form from formlessness: by

⁶² Compare Potter on the misguided “revelatory gesture” evident in certain forms of feminist critique that attempt to unveil the supposedly concealed truth of domestic violence, with a view to mitigating its deleterious effects (76).

⁶³ We might also suggest that he represents the *historical* novelist in particular. As well as generally creating a kind of aesthetic form from formless material, the coldforger’s trade involves transmuting something that is otherwise redundant or outmoded into an object of interest or desire in the present. In other words, the attempt to “render ... residual specie current in the markets” (310)—in literal terms, to make an older form of currency into legal tender once more—can be read as analogous to the historical novelist’s attempts to make the “residual” traces of past reality “current” for contemporary readers.

converting shapeless “slag” into a form of currency that circulates successfully “in the markets where men barter,” the coldforger also, in a more figurative sense, shapes “brute” matter into a comprehensible “image” that potentially has social and cultural meaning (310). In addition, many of the terms that McCarthy uses to describe the man’s labours have aesthetic or fictive connotations. The coldforger variously “render[s]” objects, “contriv[es]” false currency that nonetheless “pass[es]” mimetically for reality, and creates “coinage[s]” using implements of inscription (“gravers and burins”) (310)—not unlike McCarthy himself, perhaps, whose extraordinary prose style regularly deploys startling neologisms. Finally, apparently “under some indictment and an exile from men’s fires,” the man works at the margins of society in a manner that makes one think of the post-romantic ideal of the artist as rebellious outsider. Of course, this may all amount to a “false” (310) rebellion. Just as the judge had earlier argued that war subsumes “[a]ll other trades” (249), here he similarly lays claim to the work of the servile seeming forger, who, “crouched,” appears to exploit his “trade” in order to seek “favor with the judge” (310).⁶⁴ Then again, whereas the kid’s futurity has already been inscribed within the judge’s archive, it is the ostensibly unpromising, entirely co-opted figure of the coldforger who is able, by means of an admittedly violent

⁶⁴ It is perhaps significant in this context that, throughout *Blood Meridian*, the judge is linked with coins on several occasions. See, for instance, the “double handful of coins” that Holden draws from in order to buy the kid a drink early on (8); the “small gold coin” he uses to buy from another boy two small puppies that he subsequently attempts to drown (192-93); the “specie” that is wagered on the judge’s trial of strength with a great anvil made of “slag” (240); the coin trick that the judge pulls as a demonstration of a larger philosophical point about the subjectivism of any “order” humans perceive in the universe (245-46); and, finally, the “half a bucketful of gold coins of every value” with which Holden attempts to buy Toadvine’s hat when the final remnants of the Glanton gang are in extremity in the desert (283).

“hammering,” to gesture toward the radical opening of “his own conjectural destiny” (310).

Chapter Two

“Out of the Mouths of Witnesses”: Trauma and the Archive in Toni

Morrison’s *Beloved*

Unarchivability

Near the end of *Blood Meridian*, after his odyssey across the American desert, McCarthy’s kid finds himself in San Diego, where he is eventually detained by a detachment of federal soldiers for his role in the violent events detailed in the novel. Although the judge’s summary charges against him—that he and he alone was “the person responsible” for the litany of massacres and atrocities that resulted from the Glanton gang’s westward progress (306)—are patently false, the kid does seem to feel something resembling contrition, something that compels him to talk endlessly to his captors concerning what he has seen and done: “In his cell he began to speak with a strange urgency of things few men have seen in a lifetime and his jailers said that his mind had come uncottered by the acts of blood in which he had participated” (305). As was discussed in Chapter One, the final pages of *Blood Meridian* are characterized by a considerable shift in the kid’s overall attitude toward the violence in which he has perennially been immersed. This shift toward compassion for others, for the weak, is consonant, I argued, with McCarthy’s ostensibly revisionist orientation toward the history of the American West. The previously taciturn kid’s “strange urgency” in this scene of telling, then, corresponds to a sea change in his character

that also signals the beginning of the novel's belated attempt to critique the history of violence it simultaneously renders so vividly.

Yet the kid's uncharacteristic outburst in this scene suggests the relevance for thinking about the archive of a slightly different critical concept, one that I will explore in further detail in this chapter. For the kid, here, could be read as a victim—or, perhaps, survivor—of *trauma*.⁶⁵ He has, in the novel's words, been through things that “few men have [experienced] in a lifetime,” and such occurrences, along with the “acts of blood in which he had participated,” have almost caused him to lose his mind or to become dissociated from his environment (305). As a result, the kid seeks to transmit the subjective truth of his extreme experiences to those around him, perhaps as a means of mitigating the fact that his tortured memories seem to be driving him “crazy”; at the same time, however, his version of events is called into question by the judge's deposition (306). The details provided in this jail scene resonate in many ways with

⁶⁵ The question of trauma inevitably entails certain difficulties with terminology. For example, the term “victim,” while it might seem appropriate in some cases of extreme suffering, has a radically different valence from something like “survivor” (the one suggesting, perhaps, abjection or weakness, the other maintaining some form of agency in the face of powerlessness). In a similar vein, there has been much debate and controversy in trauma studies over whom we can refer to as “survivors” in the first place. While some perpetrators of trauma (the Nazis here are paradigmatic) might subsequently exhibit certain traumatic symptoms, it would, of course, be highly problematic—indeed, irresponsible—to equate their experiences with those of the actual survivors of the Holocaust. On the other hand, the notion of the “grey zone”—the region of ethical and epistemological undecidability, often brought into being by limit-case events, in which the lines between victim and perpetrator are blurred—has at least the potential to destabilize any absolute distinction we might make along these lines, however immediately attractive such an opposition might be. For an excellent discussion of these conceptual and terminological issues, see LaCapra (*Transit* 188-89). LaCapra is cautiously sympathetic toward the idea of an undecidable grey zone, while at the same time not wanting to collapse the different subject positions of survivor and perpetrator entirely. For a less conciliatory stance on these issues, see the comments of Claude Lanzmann, the director of the renowned nine-hour Holocaust documentary *Shoah* (1985). Lanzmann understandably regards as “obscene” any attempt to rehabilitate the experience of Nazi perpetrators as properly traumatic (212-13). For comparative readings of *Shoah* and *Beloved* in the light of trauma theory, see articles by Garbus, and Vickroy.

contemporary descriptions of the nature of psychological trauma and its aftermath, and Dominick LaCapra's description of the fundamental stages of traumatic neurosis could just as easily be about the kid's situation: "Trauma is a shattering experience that distorts memory in the 'ordinary' sense and may render it particularly vulnerable and fallible in reporting events"; the subsequent act of "Giving testimony involves the attempt to address or give an account of the experience one has had oneself and through which one has lived" (*Limits* 61). Just so, the kid's sense of self has been shattered by the direct experience of an unending series of brutal occurrences: shootings, bar-fights, and mass murders, as well as pain and suffering caused by hunger, climatic extremes, loss or grief, and so on. While the oddly "blank" (Parrish, *Civil War* 93) kid offers little or no reaction to these events as they occur, the latter seem nonetheless to have stoked in McCarthy's protagonist an urgent desire to *account* for himself, to give narrative shape those experiences that have "uncottered" his mind.⁶⁶ Again, then, the "strange urgency" of the kid at this juncture invokes the phenomena that the noted psychiatrist and theorist of trauma Dori Laub has called the "imperative to tell," something that characterizes many seriously traumatized individuals.

Speaking specifically about his own harrowing experience of interviewing people who had lived through the Holocaust, Laub equates their witnessing with a desire to survive: "There is, in each survivor, an imperative need to tell and thus to come

⁶⁶ McCarthy's neologism (the verb "to uncotter" is not in the *Oxford English Dictionary*) comes from the root word "cotter," a noun referring to a pin that holds a larger structure together. The suggestion, then, is that the kid's mind is unraveling or disassembling in the wake of his experiences. For more on McCarthy's depiction of the kid as a detached, almost mechanical observer who lacks the usual indicators of interiority, see Shaviro (151) and Fielder (32). Bell extends this claim to encompass the novel's entire cast of characters, whom he views, almost without exception, as (deliberately) blank and unreflective (V. Bell 116-18).

to know one's story, unimpeded by ghosts from the past against which one has to protect oneself. One has to know one's buried truth in order to be able to live one's life" ("Truth and Testimony" 63).⁶⁷

When the kid comes down from the desert, then, he is wounded in more than just a physical sense. As well as having "the blackened shaft of [an] arrow" still protruding from an open gash in his leg (308), he is simultaneously prey to other, more profound injuries that, far from being immediately or corporeally evident and treatable (a "soft fistula" in the leg, say [308]), are difficult to locate, diagnose, or cure. According to Cathy Caruth, while a "precise definition" of trauma is difficult to attain, there is general theoretical and clinical agreement on its key pathologies: post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) involves "a response, sometimes delayed, to an overwhelming event or events, which takes the form of repeated, intrusive hallucinations, dreams, thoughts or behaviors stemming from the event, along with numbing that may have begun during or after the experience" (Introduction 4). The kid clearly manifests variations on these kinds of symptoms, particularly in the ether dream that I discussed at the conclusion of the last chapter. If this dream can be seen, in part, as an unconscious response to the kid's hellish experiences in the desert, it is, indeed, a delayed or belated one, coming as it does after he has reached the comparative safety of the coast. In

⁶⁷ The kid is repeatedly identified as a "witness" in the novel's two concluding chapters, an equation that consistently conflates the notions of *seeing* (or, perhaps, *having seen*) and *telling*. So, just as the kid talks endlessly about what he has "seen" in his San Diego jail cell (305), he later also "witness[es] a public hanging" after which he and the other "witnesses who had stood in silence began to talk again" (311). We might also read the two moments of contrition discussed at length in Chapter One as scenes in which the kid testifies compulsively to things he has witnessed: thus, the kid unburdens himself to the Abuelita about having "seen many things" as a result of being "at war," while he similarly talks to the young bonepickers about having "seen" the deaths of his comrades (315, 321).

addition, although we are only made privy to one instance of the dream's occurrence, the narrator makes it clear that it repeats itself over and over ("In that sleep and in sleeps to follow" [309]). Subsequently, numbed by the "icy cloth" soaked in ether (309), the kid descends into a troubling dream that is at once hallucinatory in the vividness of its presentation and intrusive in its manifest content; thus, lost in "delirium," the kid experiences consciousness-expanding visions of the beginning and end of time (from "dusty primal matter" to a "conjectural destiny") and the nightmarish collapse of ontological boundaries (as evident in the bestial judge's "lashless pig's eyes"), while the judge's inexplicable presence "enshadow[s]" all and seems to compromise the defenseless kid's ability to make sense of his situation (310).

But, of course, as well as being traumatic—a belated, repetitious, hallucinatory vision that insistently intrudes upon consciousness—the ether dream is, as I have already argued, centrally concerned with the *archive*. In particular, the dream-judge figures, on the one hand, the final impossibility of comprehending the origins of his history by recourse to a documentary archive consisting of collections of "ledgerbooks," "records," and "old dated maps," and, on the other, the problematic co-option of both the kid and the allegorical figure of the artist within the totalizing structure of the judge's self-authored discursive system (310). McCarthy suggests here that the judge has final control over the archive of Western history, to the extent that the kid cannot even *dream* of alternative models. That this apparent ideological foreclosure of the archive occurs within a dreamscape that can simultaneously be interpreted as symptomatic

of post-traumatic stress intimates the potential relevance of theories of trauma for thinking through the imbrications of the archive and violence in American history. To what extent is the trope of the archive as it appears in contemporary American fiction also a figure of *trauma*? Given that trauma is often theorized as being somehow beyond or in excess of representation, can the testimony of the trauma survivor be preserved in an archive that would seem to comprise, precisely, the space of representation? Is such testimony inevitably characterized by what Giorgio Agamben refers to as “unarchivability” (158)? Or, following Caruth, should we attempt to draw on the “crisis” prompted by trauma’s challenge to the order of representation so as to “recognize the possibility of a history that is no longer straightforwardly referential” (*Unclaimed* 5, 11)? Alternatively, should we consider the possibility that, rather than functioning as its “exteriority” (Agamben 158), trauma might be constitutive of the archive (archive *as* trauma)?

I take up these and other questions in more detail in this chapter, thereby attempting further to limn the complex relationship between two critical-theoretical concepts that have both assumed a considerable degree of intellectual prominence in recent years.⁶⁸ In addition to considering the intersection of trauma and the archive in contemporary theoretical discourse, this chapter draws on these

⁶⁸ If there has been a marked turn to the archive, particularly since Derrida’s overt engagement with the topic in the mid-1990s, there seems to have been a similar academic swerve toward the thinking through of trauma. For instance, in his *Present Pasts: Urban Palimpsests and the Politics of Memory*, Huyssen claims that whereas “the 1980s were the decade of a happy postmodern pluralism, the 1990s seemed to be haunted by trauma as the dark underside of neoliberal triumphalism.” From the late-twentieth century on, then, trauma theory has “radiate[d]” out from a central concern with the Holocaust to encompass discourses of “AIDS, slavery, family violence, child abuse, recovered memory syndrome, and so on.” The 1990s were thus marked for Huyssen by a widespread concern with “repression, specters, and a present repetitively haunted by the past” (8). Of course, the fact that a central figure in *Beloved* is a “spectral” victim of the Middle Passage positions Morrison’s (late-1980s) novel firmly within the zeitgeist described by Huyssen.

interrelated concepts to perform a close reading of Toni Morrison's important 1987 neo-slavery novel *Beloved*.⁶⁹ In particular, it argues that, when it comes to "traumatic" histories such as that of chattel slavery in the United States, the archive occupies a highly problematic position. Although, in one sense, the archive provides a writer such as Morrison with a means of accessing what she refers to in a slightly different context as the "unspoken" presence of African Americans in an historically white supremacist culture ("Unspeakable" 9), this discourse at times founders and proves inadequate as a means of representing great trauma. Moreover, Morrison extends this critique in order to suggest that the archive is *itself* implicated in a continuing violence done to the black community by exclusionary constructions of the American past. After a general discussion of the issues of cultural memory and historical recovery in the novel, as well as in relation to its historical context and critical reception, I turn to an analysis of Morrison's figuration of the archive, focusing to begin with on her inclusion of a fragment of the documentary record at a crucial moment in the plot: a newspaper clipping that details the central events of the novel's background story (the

⁶⁹ In his entry on the neo-slave narrative in *The Cambridge Companion to the African American Novel*, Rushdy identifies it as a specific sub-genre of contemporary African-American fiction, and links its emergence in the 1960s to the profound social and intellectual changes (including a revisionist orientation toward history) in American society congruent with the Civil Rights movement (88). In essence, the neo-slavery novel is an intertextual form: in self-consciously engaging at once with the history of slavery and slave experience via its invocations of the earlier genre of the slave narrative proper, it "mediat[es] between a nineteenth-century Ur-textual form and a late-twentieth-century period of textual and formal play in American writing" (87). Rushdy argues in addition that neo-slavery novels like *Beloved* tend to emphasize the difficulties and contradictions inherent in representing such a painful history: they thus "draw attention to their struggle to find a respectful way to give voice to the historically muted subjects of slavery" (97). For more on *Beloved* in relation to this genre (especially in terms of its challenge to the desire for a straightforward, factual, or realistic depiction of the past) see Keizer (5), Spaulding (18, 61), and Vint (241-42). Compare Gordon's discussion of the way that the novel critically engages with a key motif of the nineteenth-century slave narrative (the "scene of instruction"); for Gordon, Morrison interrogates the earlier genre's tendency to equate the attainment of literacy by ex-slaves with African-American empowerment (147-49).

protagonist, Sethe, murdered her baby to prevent her former master from enslaving the little girl as well). At first, the clipping merely seems to provide an inadequate approximation of Sethe's harrowing experiences: the document simply has no "power ... to explain" her suffering (Morrison, *Beloved* 161). Ultimately, however, Morrison views the archive not merely as auxiliary *to* but rather as productive *of* a kind of trauma. After a brief discussion of trauma theory's tendency to collapse the boundaries separating "trauma" and "archive," then, this chapter concludes by elaborating further on the ways in which *Beloved* figures these two concepts as mutually constitutive. Specifically, it argues that it is in the note-taking activities of the slave holding "schoolteacher" that the material violence of slavery and the discursive violence of the archive intersect most insistently, each producing a traumatic "cut" or "wound" on the African-American body.

"Remembering Seemed Unwise": Slavery and the Problem of Memory

Beloved ends, famously, with what appears to be the complete passing out of memory of the character for which the novel is named. The mysterious, succubus-like girl who had, with increasing intensity, been haunting the house at 124 Bluestone Road on the outskirts of antebellum Cincinnati, and who, as one character thinks, embodies "the idea of past errors taking possession of the present," has been conjured away in a ceremonial exorcism (256). Subsequent to this event, in the course of which the girl's very physical form "explode[s]" (263), all memory of *Beloved* is seemingly lost. Her presence is quite deliberately

repressed—“Disremembered and unaccounted for”—by the members of the black community:

They forgot her like a bad dream. After they made up their tales, shaped and decorated them, those that saw her that day on the porch quickly and deliberately forgot her. It took longer for those who had spoken to her, lived with her, fallen in love with her, to forget, until they realized they couldn't remember or repeat a single thing she said, and began to believe that, other than what they themselves were thinking, she hadn't said anything at all. So, in the end, they forgot her too. Remembering seemed unwise. (274)

Morrison seems, at least on the surface, to endorse this forgetting, and her narrator punctuates the novel's coda with the refrain-like statements “It was not a story to pass on” and “This is not a story to pass on” (274, 275). As numerous critics have noted, “to pass on” is an ambiguous phrase capable of sustaining contradictory interpretations, but the manifest content of the novel's brief but complex concluding section does seem to emphasize the lure of *forgetting* (not a story to remember or transmit) at the expense of a call to *remember* (not a story to refuse).⁷⁰ Ultimately, then, “all trace [of Beloved] is gone” by the time we reach

⁷⁰ Further to the ambiguity of the phrase “to pass on” in the context of the novel, see Henderson (102), Krumholz (124), Lawrence (244), Mobley (“Different Remembering” 75), Parrish (*Civil War* 142), and Pérez-Torres (93). While on some level, these critics' arguments make sense, I would argue that the more convincing interpretation is that the phrase functions as a kind of admonition to forget. In a way, this reading rests on the question of *tone*. In its relative informality, “to pass on,” in the sense of “passing up,” simply seems rather out of place—too much of a throwaway line—in a coda that otherwise consists of highly condensed, almost poetic formulations. On the other hand, the fact that the coda, and thus, of course, the novel itself, ends with the word “Beloved” does admittedly suggest that a stubbornly persistent presence-in-absence remains behind as a supplement.

the novel's final page, where the titular figure's spectral presence evaporates like "spring ice thawing too quickly" (275).

It seems an appropriate way for Morrison to conclude a novel that depicts a "battle between anamnesis and amnesia" (Brogan 63) in which the latter often tends to prevail. Haunted by memories of their experiences of violence and abjection, Morrison's characters routinely seek the oblivion of forgetfulness. For the protagonist Sethe, in particular, amnesia functions as a form of psychic protection against the horrors of her past. Enslaved from birth, Sethe had witnessed or experienced directly a distressing range of traumatizing scenes and events. As a child on a plantation in South Carolina, she saw the aftermath of the lynching of her mother, whose mutilated corpse was burned almost beyond recognition. Later, following her removal to a plantation in Kentucky (the ironically named "Sweet Home"), Sethe herself was sexually abused in a particularly dehumanizing manner, and, when she dared to complain to the widow of her relatively beneficent former master, was brutally beaten until the skin on her back "buckled like a washboard" (6). Finally, after being tracked down by slave-catchers in Ohio, where she had fled with her family, Sethe chose to kill her own children (she was successful with only one, her unnamed baby girl), a decision that led to years of wrenching guilt, as well as "spiteful" (3) ostracism by a community for whom infanticide—even if it is meant to save a child from an even worse fate (165)—is beyond the pale. Quite understandably, then, Sethe "work[s] hard to remember as close to nothing as [is] safe" since what memories she does have consist largely of "hateful picture[s]" of pain and loss (6, 70). She

thus repeatedly engages in willful acts of forgetting, a process the narrator likens to a kind of physical labour, “Like kneading bread in the half-light of the restaurant kitchen [where she works] . . . Working, working dough. Nothing better than that to start the day’s serious work of beating back the past” (73). Sethe’s goal is to “remember nothing” of her past and to exist instead in a “timeless present” (183, 184). Likewise, Paul D, a similarly traumatized ex-slave who is the “last of the Sweet Home men” (18) and who has recently come back into Sethe’s life after many years, attempts to repress his painful and emasculating experiences of torture, imprisonment, and homelessness by imagining his memories sequestered in a figurative tobacco tin that is “buried in his chest” and which, by this point in his life, “nothing in this world [can] pry open” (72, 113). By “shut[ting] down a generous portion of his head” in such a fashion, Paul D gets by on “the part [of his mind] that help[s] him walk, eat, sleep, sing” (41). In other words, like Sethe mindlessly kneading dough, he seems to live in a purely somatic present moment. For both Paul D and Sethe, then, the “overwhelming pain” of their respective pasts “necessitates a closing down of memory,” a form of psychic repression that Morrison often figures in imagery of burial or locking up (Krumholz 114).

Beloved is pervaded by instances of this kind of willed amnesia. For example, Baby Suggs, Sethe’s mother-in-law, can remember nothing at all of her eight children (all of whom have been taken from her in some way) except the poignant detail that one used to love to eat “the burned bottom of bread” (5). Sethe similarly struggles to answer the simplest questions about her past, such as

whether her mother ever brushed her hair when she was a child (60), while her own daughter appears to reject the very idea of *pastness* itself: “The present alone ... interest[s] her” (119). The novel is populated by a host of nameless or minor characters whose relation to the traces of their pasts are just as problematic. Just as Beloved herself seems to have lost her memory entirely, having from the outset little or no “idea of what she [is] doing in that part of the country or where she ha[s] been” (55), Paul D discovers in his travels that the characteristic response of many of his peers to the myriad depredations of slavery (not to mention ongoing racial discrimination) has been to disconnect themselves from the past: “This girl Beloved, homeless and without people, beat all, though he couldn’t say exactly why, considering the coloredpeople [sic] he had run into during the last twenty years. During, before and after the War he had seen Negroes so stunned, or hungry, or tired or bereft it was a wonder they recalled ... anything” (66).

However, the fact that Morrison’s characters seem to regard forgetting as a potential means of emotional or psychological self-defense is a painful irony, given that one of the most deleterious effects of slavery was precisely its multi-level “prohibition of memory” (Kreyling 118). According to Teresa Heffernan, “in the interests of sustaining the Master’s myth that Africans had no culture and no history, there was [during slavery] an intentional destruction of the archive in the separation of Africans who spoke the same languages, who were of the same families, and who practised the same traditions, ... making it difficult for stories to be passed on and histories and names to be traced” (560).⁷¹ As *Beloved* makes

⁷¹ Several other commentators note that slavery was, in many ways, premised on the destruction of memory. For instance, like Heffernan, Peach points out that enslaved Africans

plain, the very operation of the institution of slavery is inextricable from the production of the enslaved person as a forgetful, atomized subject with little or no meaningful sense of his or her relation to the past. Because of slavery's genealogical interruption, Sethe's memories, whether of her immediate family or of her broader patrimony, are tenuous at best: she has never met her father, whose identity, consequently, is that of a generic "black man" (62), and "[does not] remember" much about her mother, having only ever laid eyes on her "a few times" (60). Likewise, Paul D cannot remember his mother, "Never saw" his father at all, and is dumfounded whenever he meets other black people who, against all odds, *can* remember something of their families (219). The destruction of immediate family bonds is, in turn, implicated in the broader deracination seen in Sethe's disconnection from any cultural inheritance. On a practical level, for instance, as a first-time mother she had "nobody to talk to" about the exigencies of child-rearing: "there wasn't nobody ... who'd know when it was time to chew up a little something and give it to em" (160). Along with such life-ways, Sethe has also entirely "forgotten" her ancestral language (62), while she remembers only vaguely the other forms of cultural expression once practiced by her forebears, such as the "antelope" dance (30-31). As a result of her enslavement, then, Sethe has been left isolated in both a familial and cultural sense, severed from her genealogical roots and cast adrift in history.

tended to be seen by their white masters as being without memory or history, even as slavery itself *created* this history-less condition in the first place (117). For further discussion of slavery's disruption of black cultural memory, see Keizer (32), Rigney (68), and Wardi (38).

Beloved thus confirms, as Michael Kreyling argues in a more general sense, that slavery's "erasure of identity was not only physical ... but also psychological or, in a sense, linguistic or semiotic" (118). By preventing individuals whose cultures of origin placed great value on the *presence* of the past (in the form of genealogical relations and ancestor-worship) from "integrating past, present, and future" into a traditional, holistic mode of being, slave-holders "removed the language or symbols by which the enslaved integrated themselves into 'social reality' and inserted instead their own" (Kreyling 118).⁷² In *Beloved* virtually the only memory Sethe has of her own mother is of the sign inscribed on her body by the man who owned her: "Right on her rib was a circle and a cross burnt right in the skin" (61). The possibility of memory itself—in this instance, Sethe continuing to "know" her mother after her death (61)—is subsumed by the colonizing discourse of the master, a "language" articulated by means of what Orlando Patterson terms the "symbolic instruments" that were "the cultural counterpart to the physical instruments used to control the slave's body" (8). If, as Patterson has influentially argued, a key effect of enslavement for a person of African descent in the Americas was that he or she became "a socially dead person," one of the ways in which this state of fundamental "negation" (38) was created was by means of slavery's problematization of both individual and cultural memory.

In its very historical occurrence, then, the institution of slavery raises the fundamental question of memory. Enslavement works by disconnecting its

⁷² On the crucial importance of the figure of the ancestor in the traditional epistemologies of many African cultures, see Wardi (37).

victims from their cultural pasts, and, as *Beloved* so eloquently demonstrates, compounds this initial forgetting by encouraging amnesia on the part of the victim as a necessary response to its psychological and physical trauma. But a further level on which slavery and forgetting are profoundly intertwined, both in Morrison's novel and in much historical and theoretical work on the so-called "peculiar institution," is that of historical *representation*. In other words, if slavery itself functioned by compromising cultural memory in a number of ways, it also poses what Barnor Hesse calls the "problem of remembering" for subsequent generations: that is, for people who are the descendents of both slaves and slave-owners (154). Just as Morrison casts in doubt her characters' ability to recall memories of their own experience of slavery, she also suggests that the process by which those memory traces are preserved, represented, and thus transmitted to others in the form of knowledge about the past—as *history*—is imperfect at best.

A key figure Morrison uses to articulate slavery's resistance to being represented as an object of historical knowledge is Denver, Sethe's teenaged daughter. As well as being a "historical" subject in her own right—a character inhabiting the more or less mimetic world of the novel's late nineteenth-century—Denver is also a metafictional or meta-historical figure whose orientation to the past is in some ways analogous to the contemporary reader's.⁷³ That is to say,

⁷³ Several critics discuss Denver's significance in relation to the novel's concern with the production of historical knowledge. Krumholz argues that "Denver's relation to the past is primarily historic rather than personal," meaning that she conceives of the events of the novel in terms of a "familial and ancestral inheritance" rather than as direct experience; for Krumholz, moreover, the way Denver works to "retriev[e] the past" echoes the interpretive acts of the reader (120). Similarly, Kreyling notes Denver's oddly contemporary status, and suggests that *Beloved* contains a kind of palimpsest of different temporalities: "Denver is the woman of the present, imagined in the historical present of the novel as a New Woman—educated, independent[,] ... and economically self-supporting" (131). Finally, Wardi suggests that when the infant Denver

because she did not experience or witness first-hand any of the significant events of the novel, Denver's relation to those events is necessarily belated or "posthistorical" in a way that parallels how those in the present necessarily approach the past in a more general sense.⁷⁴ Significantly for my purposes, though, Denver's characteristic response to information about others' past experiences is one of disavowal. We see this guarded reluctance when, for instance, Beloved, seeing that Sethe is about to comb out Denver's braids, asks whether Sethe herself ever had her own hair "'fix[ed] up'" in this way by her "'woman'" (60). Sethe responds by relating those ephemeral childhood memories of her mother she can recall, including her recollection of witnessing the branded mark of their master on her mother's dark skin, and of learning about her mother's experience during the Middle Passage from her wet-nurse, Nan (60-62). What transpires in this scene of fireside storytelling is, in essence, a drama of historical representation, in which a woman from a previous generation attempts to pass on important information about the past to her descendents. Whereas Sethe herself once received a "message" (62) from her surrogate mother Nan, she now tries to

accidentally drinks her dead sister's blood along with her mother's milk (Sethe breastfeeds her immediately following the murder of Beloved), she is also, in a symbolic sense, *consuming* her own history (45-46). (This chapter elaborates, below, on the connection between consumption and history by examining Morrison's yoking of imagery of mouths and archival documents.)

⁷⁴ "Posthistory" describes the notion that events in the past that did not occur to (and are thus temporally and experientially separated from) a particular individual or group can nonetheless have determinable effects. Halloran describes this phenomenon, in the specific context of traumatic histories, as a "condition or state of conscious that second- and third-generation descendents of trauma victims are born into," whereby a "secondhand memory of trauma [is] developed by people who were not the original sufferers" (32). To some extent, this description of the posthistorical relation to the past recalls Morrison's idea of "rememory," which suggests that people's past experiences can be *physically* experienced by other individuals (*Beloved* 35-36). For further discussion of how especially traumatic experiences can be transmitted between generations, see Cvetkovich (38), and LaCapra (*Limits* 80).

convey it to her own daughters. However, when Denver proves resistant to her mother's narrative, the transmission falters and historical knowledge is placed under erasure. Thus, although this rainy day marks "the first time she [has] heard anything about her mother's mother" (61), Denver does not seek to remedy this lack of awareness by becoming a curious or sympathetic auditor. Rather, in the midst of Sethe's painful reminiscence, she "clamp[s] her teeth and pray[s] it would stop," only "sigh[ing] with relief" when her mother finally falls silent (62). Born on the banks of the Ohio River, a "symbolic geography that represents the line between enslavement and freedom" (Wardi 44), Denver refuses to acknowledge any history that occurred beyond a spatial limit that thus also doubles as the boundary of her temporal existence: "Denver hated the stories her mother told that did not concern herself . . . The rest was a gleaming, powerful world made more so by Denver's absence from it. Not being in it, she hated it" (Morrison, *Beloved* 62).

In her almost involuntary refusal of a painful past, Denver arguably functions as an allegorical figure for the similarly ambivalent relation between contemporary American culture and the history of slavery. In the face of this problematic and shameful past, many Americans have opted for a numbing silence instead of a sustained or serious reckoning with what is an admittedly painful patrimony. Recalling in an interview her own trepidations surrounding the composition of *Beloved*, Morrison herself commented on slavery's ambiguous standing in American cultural memory: "I thought this has got to be the least read of all the books I'd written because it is about something that the characters don't

want to remember, I don't want to remember, black people don't want to remember. I mean, it's national amnesia" (Morrison, "Being Black" 256-57). In a forward-looking culture that, from Morrison's point of view, generally discourages "dwelling on ... the truth about the past" in favour of history imagined as a "[clean] slate" (qtd. in Ferguson 129), slavery occupies a space of profound absence. This "occult[ing]" of history (Redding 173) is, of course, especially characteristic of members of the dominant white culture, whose desire to forget slavery represents a perhaps understandable reaction formation to feelings of guilt and shame stemming from the crimes perpetrated by their forebears. However, this collective will to forgetfulness crosses the colour line, and many African Americans seem to want to forget this history as much as do their white counterparts (Henderson 101).⁷⁵

But amnesia may constitute its own form of violence, thus implicating contemporary America's forgetting of slavery in the continued or perpetual "wound[ing]" of the African American community (Vint 245). The reluctance to commemorate slavery in public or official historical discourse here becomes a

⁷⁵ Like Sethe's attempts to repress her painful past, the broader disavowal of slavery by the contemporary black community may be seen as a characteristic response to trauma: in other words, an "unspeakable" history of collective pain and suffering necessitates "intentional forgetting [by] the victim" as a survival mechanism (Brogan 63). Conversely, even those progressive or radical political programs that seek to replace this discourse of victimization with the strident assertion of African-American agency (the Harlem Renaissance, the Black Panthers, the Nation of Islam, and so on) often downplay the significance of slavery as well (Mobley, "Different Remembering" 68). From their perspective, black emancipation is not attainable via an endlessly dwelling on histories of oppression and defeat, but rather through modes of cultural identity that replace these memories of *subjection* with an ideal, ahistorical *subject*. Variants of this subject include the transhistorical agent of a romanticized or quasi-mythological African past, and the posthistorical "New Negro," that "self-assertive and militant" figure that emerged during the Harlem Renaissance, a moment of historical "rupture, when 'newness' became a cultural dominant" for African Americans (N. Peterson, "Say Make Me" 205-07). On the dubious lure of an idealized Afrocentric past, see especially Gilroy's seminal critique in *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*.

way of unconsciously perpetuating entrenched social hierarchies.⁷⁶ If the violent subjection of transported Africans under the system of plantation slavery was itself inextricable from a concomitant process of “cultural erasure” (David Scott xii), the ongoing hegemony of mainstream white culture in the contemporary United States—and the resulting political, economic, and cultural marginalization of the African-American community—is, at least in part, secured by a comparable process of forgetting or dehistoricization. Thus, according to Kathleen Brogan, the American master narrative, in which whiteness simultaneously signifies economic privilege, political power, and cultural dominance, “continues to be predicated on a selective historical amnesia” about slavery and other injustices (90). By the same token, the traditional “facelessness” (Pérez-Torres 91) of black people in mainstream U.S. society results, at least in part, from their forebears’ enforced silence or marginalization within conventionally accepted historical discourses.⁷⁷

⁷⁶ Wall claims that “Despite the 250 years during which Africans and their descendants were enslaved in the United States, no monument of any kind commemorate[s] their lives or deaths” (*Worrying* 84). See also Kreyling, who compares the Holocaust and slavery as historical traumas in whose wake “no public, communal discourse was established” (113). Morrison complains of a similar lack of public memorialization: “There is no place you or I can go, to think about [slavery]” (Morrison and Richardson 4). A novel that depicts memorial spaces and gestures of various kinds—from grave-stones to “fixing ceremon[ies]” (Morrison, *Beloved* 86)—*Beloved* functions in the stead of these absent memorials, becoming “a testament, a monument to those who lived and died in slavery” (Matus 30). For a contrasting perspective on the visibility of slavery in national discourse in the Americas, see Halloran’s suggestion that there has recently been a marked proliferation of memorial and curatorial discourses that engage in the “public performance of cultural recall” centred on the historical legacies of enslavement (2). Indeed, as I write these words, a national museum of African-American history and culture, to be located in Washington D.C., is in the planning stages; it is projected to open in 2015 (see Kate Taylor). Nevertheless, one of the implications of my overall argument in this dissertation is that modes of memorialization (or archiving) should not necessarily or unquestioningly be privileged over and above acts of forgetting; the potential for “violence” inherent in every archival act must give us pause when we encounter uncritical or celebratory arguments about the work of historical recovery. For a good example of the kind of hesitancy I am talking about, see Hesse’s critique of what he calls the “curatorial” approach to remembering slavery (155).

⁷⁷ The epochal election of Barack Obama to the Presidency in November 2008 might seem to have mitigated this kind of social marginalization; from a certain (understandably) triumphalist perspective, Obama’s success has thus been interpreted as signaling America’s

Given the potentially dire consequences for the African-American community of the “forgetting” of elements of this history, an insistence on the importance of remembering consequently becomes a form of resistance to marginalization and, thus, a “political act” in itself (Rushdy, “Daughters” 567). As Morrison puts it, in the light of the “obfuscation and distortion and erasure” of African Americans’ historical suffering or achievements, the “reclamation of the history of black people in [the United States] is paramount in its importance.” In her interview with Christina Davis, and in accordance with this presupposition, Morrison has explicitly framed her own oeuvre as a form of historical “recovery” that begins with the naming of her ancestors: “You have to stake out and identify those who have preceded you—resummoning them, acknowledging them is just one step in the process of reclamation” (224-25). In Cheryl A. Wall’s terms, slavery’s profound rupturing of black Americans’ traditional cultural and familial bonds necessitates a “recollect[ing] of kin,” a “gathering together again and a call to [remember]” those who have been lost to conventional historical reckoning (*Worrying* 85). Indeed, if, on the one hand, the novel frequently figures slavery in terms of imagery of bodily or psychic fragmentation—Sethe dreads her runaway sons’ becoming the victims of lynching (“their parts in trees” [86]), while Paul D’s experience on a chain gang makes him feel as though he is “breaking into

accession to a kind of “postracial” maturity. At the same time, the proliferation of a series of largely media-created—and, crucially, *racially coded*—“controversies” centred on the President’s personal background and political policies (the buzz words here are “birthers,” “death panels,” and “socialism”) indicates the stubborn persistence of structural racism in certain sectors of America’s popular and political culture. Additionally, while I in no way wish to downplay either the moving symbolism or beneficial material effects of Obama’s victory (particularly for people of colour), I think it is, at the very least, important to remain cognizant that, in celebrating the *individual* as an agent of “hope” and “change,” we run the risk of misrecognizing the fundamentally systemic nature of power itself.

pieces” (106)—Morrison, on the other, also depicts the potential amelioration of or resistance to such trauma as a work of gathering. Sethe thus dreams of “refurbish[ing]” her sons’ bodies so as to “[keep] them whole in the world” (86), whereas Paul D ultimately looks to Sethe to “gather” his shattered ““pieces ... in all the right order”” (272-73).⁷⁸ As Darieck Scott elaborates, Morrison’s implication is that the “wholeness” of the black body depends on its being “recovered” and hence “revalued”: “This black body is a part of and a stand-in for the black self or subject. The dismembered parts of the black self torn apart in slavery must be healed and reintegrated by the self-love of unflinching memory” (149). The act of remembering the past in *Beloved* thus leads, ideally, to the *remembering* of a simultaneously individual and social body that has been brutally fragmented by the violence of slavery.

Recovering (from) the Past

When she learns for the first time about the terrible fate that befell her husband, Halle Suggs—a man so traumatized by witnessing his wife’s abuse at the hands of two white boys that he loses his mind and spends the rest of his time at Sweet Home ““sitting by the churn ... [with] butter all over his face”” (69)—Sethe decides that this event requires some form of memorialization. “[W]ords whispered in the keeping room [are] too little,” she thinks; the “butter-smear[ed] face of a man God made none sweeter than demand[s] more: an arch built or a

⁷⁸ The novel features various other images of bodily fragmentation and reconstitution. See for instance Baby Suggs’ sermon in the Clearing (88), *Beloved*’s fears of “exploding” (133), Sethe’s “collecting” together of her children to protect them from the slave-catchers (163-64), as well as her equation of slavery with the cutting up of her body (272).

robe sewn. Some fixing ceremony” (86). For Sethe, a hitherto unacknowledged pain calls for commemoration in the form of a monument or ceremony that also has the implicit function of somehow rectifying or mitigating—“fixing”—the original trauma. Sethe’s view of the importance of such commemorative gestures in the wake of trauma is shared by Morrison herself, who explicitly describes her fictional project as a means of memorializing the suffering that characterizes much of African-American history. In the absence of meaningful mainstream recognition of slavery’s effects, Morrison suggests, a novel like *Beloved* serves as an important corrective to the amnesia that structures what Ann Cvetkovich would call the national public sphere (278). Writing soon after the novel’s publication, Morrison lamented in an essay that

There is no place you or I can go, to think about or not think about, to summon the presences of, or recollect the absences of slaves; nothing that reminds us of the ones who made the journey and of those who did not make it. There is no suitable memorial or plaque or wreath or wall or park or skyscraper lobby. There’s no 300-foot tower. There’s no small bench by the road. There is not even a tree scored, an initial that I can visit, or you can visit ... And because such a place doesn’t exist (that I know of), the book had to. (Morrison and Richardson 4)

That Morrison sees *Beloved* as assuming a memorializing function is also suggested by the fact that the novel itself shares its title with the “seven letters” spelt out on Sethe’s baby daughter’s tombstone (Morrison, *Beloved* 5). According to Brogan, “Dedicated to the ‘Sixty Million and more’ Africans and African

Americans killed in the slave trade, *Beloved* attempts to perform a ritual burial of the forgotten, unnamed dead ... Morrison's writing functions as a tombstone carving that names and memorializes the dead" (65).⁷⁹ Moreover, as Erik Dussere helpfully suggests, if it is possible to read the inscribed grave-marker at the centre of the novel, in its "static" and "unchangeable" qualities, as a figure for a "historical document," then the act of grave-digging similarly functions as "a metaphor for the uncovering of untold or unspeakable stories" (38). In other words, the prevalence of graves and tombstones in the novel is suggestive of Morrison's broader project of historical reclamation, her "Unearthing [of] historical perspectives that have been hidden or buried within other dominant narratives" (Peach 102).

The considerable critical apparatus that has accrued around *Beloved* since its publication in the late 1980s is particularly invested in this kind of reading. While not all of the novel's critics focus on the metaphor of burial per se, many of them, in one way or another, do view the text as both representing *and* engaging in what we might call acts of historical "unearthing." Thus, the dominant strain in the novel's scholarly reception consists of what, following Linda Krumholz, I will refer to as the *mode of historical recovery*.⁸⁰ This critical orientation emphasizes to varying degrees the following basic claims: 1) *Beloved* depicts a mimetic world

⁷⁹ Several critics similarly discuss the significance of the novel's title being identical to the inscription on the baby's gravestone; see, for example, Henderson (85), Parrish (*Civil War* 131), and Weinstock (129-31). For a more detailed consideration of *Beloved* in relation to the funereal (and, in particular, as a response to the way in which slaves tended to be improperly buried), see Wardi, who usefully notes that "burial and burial metaphors abound in the text" (47).

⁸⁰ In her perceptive engagement with the novel, Krumholz argues that "Morrison constructs a parallel between the individual processes of psychological recovery" and "the recovery of history as both a national and personal necessity" (107, 108).

in which characters struggle to recall and thus understand their traumatic pasts, details of which have been repressed or lost in some way; 2) this effort at recollection is, in turn, designed to have a therapeutic effect, meaning that “recovery” must be read as a kind of pun signifying at once “to find again after having lost” and “to feel well again”; 3) in addition to representing its characters engaging in these activities, *Beloved* simultaneously enacts or performs a similar process in relation to its own readers and cultural milieu. From this point of view, concurrent with the actions of the very characters that populate its pages, the text *itself* recovers aspects of America’s past so as to effect (or, at least, pave the way for) a cure for the “pathological” effects of slavery’s historical legacy.⁸¹

Exemplary in this regard is Mae G. Henderson’s 1999 essay “Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*: Re-Membering the Body as Historical Text.” Henderson argues that the physical violence undergone by the novel’s formerly enslaved characters is exacerbated by the historical reverberations of that suffering. The ongoing pain caused by this past disrupts their ability to live normally in the present: “unable to contrive a meaningful or appropriate configuration for her memories [of being raped and beaten, and having her back scarred by whip-strokes], Sethe finds herself tyrannized by unconfigured and literally disfiguring images” (86). Recovery from these debilitating physical and psychological traumas is contingent upon Sethe’s ability to transform them into comprehensible objects of historical knowledge. If the scars on her back represent a sort of

⁸¹ On the idea that mainstream American culture’s treatment of dubious elements of its past is “pathological,” functioning as a kind of suturing that constitutes the “fantasy of nation,” see Redding (173-77).

inscription that has made this “illiterate female slave ... the written object of white male discourse,” then the urgent task Sethe faces is the reappropriation of the narrative of her own history: “Her challenge is to learn to read herself—that is, to configure the history of her body’s text ... Sethe must learn how to link these traces (marks of her passage through slavery) to the construction of a personal and historical discourse” (87). It is only by engaging in this work of historical renarrativization—by becoming a kind of “historian” who “reconstitute[s] the past through personal narrative” (90)—that Sethe can truly begin to recover from her deep emotional wounds: “Sethe must liberate her present from the ‘burden of the past’ constructed in *history*. She must learn to remap the past so that it becomes a blueprint for the future” (90).

Henderson, in turn, maps this process onto the novel’s own scenes of writing and reception. As her protagonist does on the level of personal experience, that is, Morrison herself “recovers” from oblivion certain hidden or underemphasized aspects of American history in order to mitigate their damaging echoes in the present. In the way that “her work is intended to *resurrect* stories *buried* and *express* stories *repressed*,” Morrison comes to function, from Henderson’s point of view, as an amalgam of “historian” and “analyst” (81). Both author and protagonist, then, produce redemptive “counter-narrative[s]”—the one in the public form of a best-selling novel, the other in the private space of an imagined psyche—that “subvert the master code of the master(’s) text” and replace it with a “story of liberation” that asserts the meaningfulness of “black women’s experiences” (98). For Henderson, Sethe thus embodies the broader

sense in which the novel “achieve[s] redemption by creating a cohesive psychoanalytic and historical narrative” (101). Henderson concludes by arguing that Morrison’s depiction of the overtly psychological (indeed, psychoanalytic) process of an individual’s gradual recovery from trauma via the confrontation with the traces of that past creates a similarly therapeutic effect on a macrocosmic scale: the central message of *Beloved* is that “our private memories [become], ultimately, the basis for a reconstructed public history” (102).⁸²

Not all critics agree with this rather upbeat assessment of the possibilities of historical recovery in—and by—*Beloved*. For example, in his provocative essay “What We Talk About When We Talk About *Beloved*,” Dean Franco trenchantly critiques what he calls the “ethically problematic and politically limited discourse of co-memory and co-mourning” that he sees as predominant in the criticism of Morrison’s text (109). While acknowledging the good intentions underlying much of this work, Franco nonetheless raises serious questions about its presumption of “some sort of ethical project” being the inevitable correlate of “a study of mourning and healing in literature” (110). In particular, he examines

⁸² Rushdy makes a similar argument concerning what he refers to as Morrison’s “revisionary project” in writing *Beloved* (“Daughters” 567). For Rushdy the key figure here is Denver, who must transition from a determined neglect of the past to a deeper understanding of its effects in order to mitigate its “immediate pain [in] her present life” and the “incipient danger [it poses] to her future.” “What Denver must do,” Rushdy elaborates, is “remember, and she must do so by revising her memory—her history and her mother’s history—in a collective anamnesis” (“Daughters” 579). Moreover, as in Henderson’s essay, a character’s historical recovery is superimposed onto the function of the text itself. If Denver thus “perform[s] a healing narrative,” so too does *Beloved*: “the greatest achievement of Morrison’s novel is that [it] gives the murdered victim of history *voice* ... In giving that ‘ghost’ a renewed voice and life, Morrison not only criticizes the institution responsible for Beloved’s death but also shows the healing knowledge that accrues to those attentive to the ghost’s presence” (Rushdy, “Daughters” 586, 592). As I have already pointed out, above, the kind of argument made by Henderson and Rushdy is characteristic of a dominant trend in the novel’s critical reception, whereby Morrison’s work is seen as centrally concerned with the reclamation of lost histories as a means of healing the present. See, for example, Brogan (91), Davis (4), Matus (1-4), Nancy Peterson (“Say Make Me” 215-16), and Weinstock (136).

one of the key tenets of this mode of criticism, namely that the performative power of Morrison's novel serves somehow to implicate or involve the reader in the process of cultural healing that is also depicted within the space of the text. From this perspective, "Sethe's haunting ... resonates so awfully because, as the highly applicable formula puts it, the reader is made to experience the presence of the past" (110).⁸³ However, Franco suggests that a key problem with much criticism of this style is that it begs the question of the very *nature* of this readerly "experience": "the claims that the criticism makes [in this regard] are far from self-evident, and the performative power ascribed to literature in such claims bears some scrutiny ... [this criticism] claims that novels *do* things, presumably in the world at large. What do novels do and how do we know they do them?" (110). In other words, otherwise quite sophisticated formalist, textually-based readings of the novel are often problematically over-extended in order to encompass the social or cultural realm in which the novel circulates, but, crucially, without the same complexity of analysis or self-reflexivity being afforded to the mechanics of this expansive gesture. For Franco, ultimately, this slippage points to a more general tension between psychologizing and materialist interpretive practices, that is, between "a criticism that psychoanalyzes literature and a criticism that drives towards material and political response to literary claims" (114). Coming down firmly on the side of the latter, Franco ends up arguing that since the injuries

⁸³ Various critics discuss the ways *Beloved* produces this effect of readerly engagement through particular textual or formal devices (such as narrative fragmentation, which compels the reader to reconstruct the story him- or herself). See, for example, Henderson (100), Angelyn Mitchell (89), Nancy Peterson ("Say Make Me" 216), Raynaud (44), Wall (*Worrying* 95), and Weinstock (145-46). On the connection between the novel's formal encouragement of audience participation and a specifically African-American tradition of orature, see Atkinson (12-15).

caused by slavery were as much political, social, and economic as they were psychological or emotional, then dealing seriously with the legacy of those injuries in the present necessarily involves moving beyond a “mourning through literature or other cathected cultural symbols” (121). Instead of such “facile fictions of narrative identification,” Franco advocates a reading practice that leads us in the direction of the supposedly more weighty and material concerns of “a discourse of reparation,” a mode of healing that somehow manages to combine the “psychical and spiritual” response to a trauma like slavery with the important “material and political” dimensions neglected by “our wish fulfilling dream-readings of *Beloved*” (121, 125).⁸⁴

But Franco might be guilty of protesting too much. If, on the one hand, he accuses the psychoanalytic current within *Beloved* criticism of being premised on an under-theorized connection between individual, psychic processes and the socio-political arena such a criticism also lays claim to, his own argument seems to replicate this sleight of hand. For instance, while he wants to link the novel to

⁸⁴ Along with Franco, other critics who discuss possible limits to the “recovery” model of interpreting *Beloved* include Budick, Davis, Gordon, Weinstock, and Hershini Young. See also Michaels, who attacks what he perceives as the widespread assumption, in both academic and popular culture, that “history involves the effort to make the past present, and [that] the ghosts of *Beloved* ... are the figures for this effort” (7). Michaels especially rejects “the transformation of history into memory” that the novel seems to endorse in its insistence on the motif of a transference haunting (7)—that is, Morrison’s figuring of the past’s relation to the present as ostensibly premised on the somewhat supernatural ability to experience memories that belong to others (3). In sum, Michaels objects to the tendency to collapse historical memory into (especially racial) identity. While I have found that the skepticism of critics such as Franco, Michaels, and others provides a useful counterbalance to more straightforward endorsements of *Beloved*’s work of historical recovery, I would qualify their arguments somewhat by suggesting that Morrison herself—if not every one of her critics—is well aware of these kinds of issues and, in fact, rather than practicing a somewhat glib “racialized ... mysticism” (Michaels 8), attempts to grapple self-consciously with complex questions relating to the historical representation of slavery. For a helpful critique of Michaels’ argument along these lines, see Parrish (*Civil War* 118-25). For a suggestion that *Beloved* itself (as opposed to instances of its critical reception) constitutes a kind of “wish fulfillment”—for instance, in having Sethe remain free where Garner was returned to slavery—see Morgenstern (116-17), and Christopher Peterson (156).

the possibility of material redress for the wronged descendents of African-American slaves, in the end—as in the maligned “psychological” mode of criticism—the actual *mechanisms* of this connection remain fundamentally opaque. Indeed, tellingly, in the very same sentence that Franco dismisses “our”—he means *their*—“wish fulfilling dream-readings” of the novel, he also casually admits to “avoiding a discussion of *the process* of such a program” of literary reparation that is meant to provide the ethico-material grounding so glaringly absent in the former methodology (125, my emphases). That is, while Franco takes other critics of Morrison to task for gesturing vaguely toward the redemptive potential of her work, he unwittingly replicates this very gesture by situating his own argument on the same level of generality.

Indeed, in a sense, Franco succumbs to what James A. Knapp has identified as the central pitfall of much recent cultural criticism: the turn to materiality as “an authorizing category” for the critique of discursively mediated “structures of power” (695, 697). As Knapp persuasively argues, the assumption that attending to “the ‘thingness’ of cultural forms” provides a less mediated form of access to “the actual conditions of existence”—and thus, implicitly, to a kind of resistant politics or ideology critique—in truth relies on a sublimated discursive or narrative gesture, just as, in Knapp’s subsequent discussion of *Othello*, the seemingly transparent “ocular proof” of Desdemona’s infidelity is ultimately a product not so much of the famous handkerchief’s physical existence as of the villainous Iago’s ability to construct an utterly obfuscating and self-serving back story to account for this material object’s supposed significance (697, 712). In

analyzing Shakespeare's text, Knapp makes the larger point that the archive—as the habitual site of this critical engagement with the material—is not a transparent “container of historical truth” but the product of an inevitably discursive operation; there is, indeed, no such thing as “the ‘archive itself’” and “to question the archive, one must engage with a representation of it” (704). What I want to consider in the following sections is the way in which *Beloved*, rather than unproblematically endorsing the notion of historical recovery privileged by many of its critics (as well as in “archival” discourse more generally), in fact undertakes a complex and self-conscious interrogation of this very process by, precisely, engaging with representations of the archive.

Lifting the Veil: Morrison's Historiographic Self-Consciousness

If, as Linden Peach puts it, in order to “acquire any sense of their ancestral line,” African Americans must “*piece together* the stories and memories ... of which they [have] been deprived” (118, my emphases), then that process of remembering and reconstitution has, in turn, been seen as dependent on the archive. According to David Scott, black memory in the Americas must involve “remembering against the grain of the history of New World black deracination, subjection, and exclusion” (vi). This “*counter-memory*” effects a “*re-*membering,” a “putting back together [of] aspects of ... [black people's] common life so as to make visible what has been obscured, what has been excluded, what has been forgotten” (vi). Significantly, for Scott, this “mode of remembering” in black culture ultimately “depend[s] on the assembly and re-assembly of the

sources that make memory possible, that keep alive the events and figures, the sensibilities and mentalities, the knowledges and rationalities, that have been part of shaping and reshaping the traditions of who we are” (vi). Given that the “sources” contained within the extant documentary record form “an implicit and constitutive part of the epistemic background of *any* knowledge” (vii), the critical “practice of recovery” is premised, Scott reiterates, “upon the construction of an archive, and the distinctive labor, therefore, of an archaeologist” (vi).

In strikingly similar terms, Morrison imagines that her work as a creative writer consists in just such an archival labour. In her reflective essay “The Site of Memory,” Morrison discusses how as a historical novelist she inevitably undertakes “a kind of *literary archeology*,” imaginatively sifting through the “remains” of the past in order “to reconstruct the world that these remains imply” (112, my emphases). In the case of the context surrounding the writing of *Beloved* itself, those remnants indeed consist of the textual or documentary record. *Beloved* retells the story of Margaret Garner, a fugitive slave who, like Morrison’s protagonist, killed her daughter in order to prevent her from being returned to bondage. Ultimately, despite being for a time a national “cause célèbre” (Wall, *Worrying* 97), Garner vanished, both materially and discursively; her return to the anonymity of enslavement also absented her from American historical consciousness for an extended period.⁸⁵ Morrison helped to rediscover Garner’s

⁸⁵ Like Morrison’s Sethe, Garner had sought refuge in Ohio after escaping a plantation in Kentucky, although, unlike Sethe, Garner was apparently returned to slavery following her discovery. Her case was taken up by prominent abolitionist lawyers as a sign of slavery’s brutality, and became the focus of numerous sentimental paintings and literary works (Wall, *Worrying* 97-98). It also received extensive coverage in the popular media, and by the late nineteenth century had become shorthand for the injustices of slavery (Rushdy, “Daughters” 572-74). Rushdy further notes that there are “conflicting reports” about where Garner ended up, and that even Morrison

forgotten story in the 1970s, after she came across an article in an 1856 issue of the *American Baptist* which, under the title “A Visit to the Slave Mother Who Killed Her Child,” provided the sympathetic account by a white abolitionist of the infanticide and its protracted aftermath (Peach 105). Profoundly affected by the article’s description of Garner’s inexplicable “serenity” in the wake of such a traumatic experience (Naylor and Morrison 28), Morrison chose first to include the document in *The Black Book* (1974), a scrapbook-like collection of primary sources (everything from slaves’ bills of sale, to transcribed speeches and songs, to family portraits, to recipes and advertisements) documenting three centuries of African experience in America, which Morrison was working on in her capacity as an editor at Random House (Wall, *Worrying* 88). Constructed around the “skeletal” framework of that same newspaper clipping (Brogan 62), *Beloved* thus originates in—and, to some extent, augments—a quite literal project of archivization, a “gathering of information ... designed to pass along African American collective memories that were in danger of being forgotten” (N. Peterson, *Amnesia* 57).⁸⁶ By rediscovering a neglected archive of “records,

herself “has said that she does not know what eventually happened to [her]” (“Daughters” 574). Similarly, Wall asserts that, “once slavery was abolished, Margaret Garner virtually vanished from the national imaginary” (*Worrying* 98). On the other hand, as Mobley shows, the Garner case remained controversial in both Ohio and Kentucky into the twenty-first century. Indeed, the debut of the opera *Margaret Garner* (for which Morrison composed the libretto) in Cincinnati in 2005 ignited a protracted debate in the local media concerning the ultimate motivation for Garner’s actions—a debate that, Mobley argues, reflected the “emotional residue” of a history “fraught with racial trouble” (“Scandal” 153). See Reyes for a general summary of the facts of the Garner case (79).

⁸⁶ Despite their obvious generic differences—*Beloved* is a novel, while *The Black Book* could broadly be said to belong to the “coffee-table” genre—there are underlying similarities that connect these texts in key ways. As Wall points out, both insist on an “interactive dynamic of storytelling” by resisting overt editorial or narrative commentary; there is thus a basic homology between the “historical method implicit in *The Black Book* and the narrative strategies operating in *Beloved*” (*Worrying* 95). On a more thematic level, *The Black Book* eschews the “great men” and

documents, and information” in the course of compiling both *The Black Book* and *Beloved*, Morrison attempts to testify to the “all-too-often invisible presence and value of African Americans in America” (N. Peterson, *Amnesia* 60). As Barbara Rigney attests, Morrison thereby seeks “to give a voice to the voiceless” (21)—particularly to black women, who have, both during and after slavery, been “silence[d]” within a hegemonic white patriarchy that positions them outside “history” itself (75).⁸⁷

In fact, Morrison has described her work as being more than merely a form of historical ventriloquism in which she speaks *for* the “disremembered”; it also enables a “revivification of the dead” (Brogan 64). As with the “archaeological” fantasy depicted in the novel *Gradiva* (1903), which, as Derrida notes, imagines “bringing [the dead] back to life,” ostensibly in their full self-presence (98), Morrison describes her own version of “archeology” as a “fantastic ... or magical” resurrection, in which the archival “remains” of the dead are brought to life in the crucible of the writerly “imagination” (“Site of Memory” 111-12). Morrison elaborates on this notion further in her conversation with the novelist Gloria Naylor, in which, after outlining the genesis of *Beloved* in “two or three

momentous events favoured by conventional historical discourse in its focus on “ordinary black people in America” (N. Peterson, *Against Amnesia* 58-59), while *Beloved* marginalizes “historically recognizable ‘encyclopedia’ events” (such as the U.S. Civil War) in order to focus on “ex-centric” history (Davis 4, 11). In both form and content, then, both novel and collection challenge the accepted conventions of “historical discourse” (Wall, “Toni Morrison” 143)

⁸⁷ See Henderson, who argues that *Beloved* critiques the racist and sexist “presumption ... that black women have no voice, no text, and consequently no history” (87). More generally, *Beloved* can thus be located within a broader movement that Byerman identifies as characteristic of post-1960s African-American writing, and which involves the desire adequately to “document” a marginalized black history (1-3). Byerman specifically suggests that a key genre of black postmodernist fiction is that of the historical reconstruction of lost or incomplete narratives (23). Moble also comments on this tendency toward historical revisionism in late twentieth-century African-American literature (“Scandal” 151).

little fragments” of the documentary record (27-28), she supposes that the dead are not only made “literate in art” (30), but are also given a kind of life. Morrison thus feels as though she is being spoken to by her own creations:

I ... have now very overt conversations with these people. Before I could sort of let it disguise itself as the artist’s monologue with herself but there’s no time for that foolishness now. Now I have to call them by their names and ask them to reappear and tell me something or leave me alone even ... There is a temptation to draw away from living people ... They’re in competition a great deal with this collection of imagined characters. (30)

Morrison’s description of her own haunting or possession here seems to suggest her belief in one of the seductive promises of the archive itself, that, in Helen Freshwater’s formulation, its conjuring power somehow enables “the past [to] live and suppressed voices [to] speak” (737). According to Steedman, from this perspective the archive is “that place where the past lives, where ink on parchment can be made to *speak*,” and thus to bring “to life those who do not for the main part exist” (69). As was noted in the introductory chapter, this is an alluring fantasy: the archive plays a central role in righting historical injustice through the reanimation of “those conventionally silenced in official discourses, the fabled voices of the ‘Other’” (Bradley 114). We do, however, need to be wary of the lure of what LaCapra calls “archivism,” the process whereby the “archive as fetish is a literal substitute for the ‘reality’ ... a stand-in for the past that brings the mystified experience of the thing itself” (*History & Criticism* 92n17). Instead, both here and

elsewhere, this dissertation advocates a more self-conscious hermeneutic process in which, rather than merely being mined for content that they somehow transparently “contain,” archives are treated as complex, mediated forms of discourse that need to be “read”—subjected to the work of subtle and self-conscious interpretation—rather than taken for granted as merely a medium or a source that can be directly mined for neglected historical information.

As was already briefly discussed earlier in this chapter, the “posthistorical” figure of Denver points to Morrison’s own similarly self-conscious orientation toward the idea of historical knowledge, particularly in terms of the young woman’s stubborn attitude regarding her mother’s halting reminiscences about the plantation past. The fact that Denver turns a literally “deaf” ear (105) to those family stories that do not feature her as the main protagonist generally implies that the legacy of the past in *Beloved* is a *problem* that remains to be worked through, not something that can be accepted at face value as what Derrida would call a “closed heritage” (*Archive* 33). In other words, throughout the novel, Morrison tends to stress the necessarily mediated forms through which traces of the past are able to appear in the present.⁸⁸ *Beloved*, after all, is in some ways not so much concerned with slavery itself as with its lingering effect long “after the War” (66)

⁸⁸ This caution is despite some of her explicit statements to the contrary elsewhere (as referred to above, for instance, Morrison seems to endorse the unmediated revivification of the dead). However, it is by no means necessary to accept every statement made by Morrison in interviews and other public forums as the gospel truth. This troubling degree of trust is evident, as Dussere points out, in quite a lot of the criticism of her work (4). Conversely, Dussere advocates treating Morrison’s more public or informal pronouncements as “texts deserving of critical attention,” rather than as sources of authoritative information that can then be used to foreclose any further interpretation (4-5). As he rightly complains, “This [last] approach often leads to readings of Morrison that are distinctly un-critical, that can only discover over and over again how brilliant and right she is. In the process[,] ... Morrison [is] presented in the least interesting way” (5).

that supposedly put a stop to it.⁸⁹ While at times it appears as though much of the novel takes place *during* slavery, its present moment is, of course, the post-emancipation 1870s, meaning that its depiction of the condition of enslavement is multiply mediated through characters' imperfect recollections and halting attempts to narrate such experiences. Morrison's novel is set during the period of Reconstruction even as it—like its characters—“reconstructs” an earlier historical moment.⁹⁰ As numerous critics have argued, then, with its self-conscious emphasis on writing and other modes of discourse,⁹¹ the novel can be considered

⁸⁹ Ferguson points out that, for Morrison, slavery is a “transhistorical” phenomenon, since “its enduring presence, and its impact on black people, persists far beyond the historical era of slavery” (133). *Beloved* undeniably resonates with a profound skepticism about the idea of absolute freedom, and the text repeatedly interrogates the notion that slavery ended, once and for all, with the Emancipation Proclamation. For instance, after the “nastiness” of a life spent under slavery, Baby Suggs’s belated freedom “[doesn’t] mean a thing” to her (23), while Paul D’s first taste of “freedom” is similarly dubious (the first thing he sees after being liberated is “twelve dead blacks,” four of whom are children) (268-69). The narrator, too, acknowledges the belated, continuing effects of the past in the description of the immediate post-bellum period: “The War had been over four or five years ... but nobody white or black seemed to know it” (52). Gordon discusses the way in which slavery resists being “over and done with” and thus casts a long shadow over “freedom” (168, 172). Likewise, Mobley argues that slavery “still shap[es] the current historical moment” over a century later (“Scandal” 151). According to Peach, meanwhile, *Beloved* is a novel that is as much about its own present moment (the late twentieth century) as a far-removed historical past (124). Morrison herself has claimed that the novel “is not about slavery” in the first place: “the *story* is not slavery. The story is these people ... who don’t know they’re in an era of historical interest. They just know they have to get through the day” (qtd. in Gordon 142).

⁹⁰ On the doubled or punning sense of “reconstruction” in the context of the novel’s historical orientation—that is, as both the proper name of a specific era in American history, and as the self-conscious process of reconstructing both the past and the individual subject in the present—see Ferguson (133-34), and Gordon (171).

⁹¹ As Durkin reminds us, for all the scholarly attention paid to the novel’s engagement with a specifically African-American tradition of orality, Morrison seems equally concerned with the notion of *textuality* (541). Indeed, although a majority of the novel’s characters are either functionally or entirely illiterate, *Beloved* returns repeatedly to scenes of writing and reading, features characters using a wide array of writing implements, substrates, and techniques, and, along with these more obvious or literal instances of writing, also suggests broad analogies between textual production and other modes of “inscription.” The novel in fact opens with a scene of such “writing,” in which Sethe recalls selling her body in order to purchase from a lascivious stone-carver “every word she heard the preacher say at the funeral ... engraved on her baby’s headstone” (5), and the subsequent pages feature, variously, notebooks (12), advertisements (48), “piece[s] of paper” scrawled with the addresses of safe-houses (52), hand-made ink (98), “book learning” and chalkboards (102), a “trail ... of paper scraps” that Denver follows to find food for

an exemplar of historiographic metafiction, insofar as it repeatedly draws attention to the process of representing or even “making” history even as it simultaneously purports to represent “the past” itself. According to Nancy J. Peterson, Morrison’s fictions “align themselves with current trends in the postmodern novel” by refusing to treat history as a simple, mimetic reality that can be recovered in “one clear picture”; instead, a novel such as *Beloved* “self-consciously re-presents the past in order to emphasize that historical understanding must be dynamic and constantly reworked if it is to be useful” (“Say Make Me” 215). In a similar vein, Brogan suggests that Morrison’s choice of a belated setting for her “highly self-reflexive” novel of slavery “underscores the issue of how the past is recovered or reconstructed in the present” (72), while Dussere surmises that *Beloved* is not so much concerned with “presenting alternative histories” themselves as with “interrogat[ing] the nature of historiography,” understood as the discursive mechanism that produces such narratives about the past in the first place (40).⁹²

As Hutcheon has suggested in her seminal discussion of the postmodernist genre of historiographic metafiction, one of the key ways in which such texts—to pick up on Dussere’s terms—“interrogate the nature of historiography” is by laying bare the very mechanisms of historical writing, those underlying structures

her family (248), the “letters” and “petitions” churned out by abolitionists (260), and, as will be examined in further detail later on in this chapter, the more nefarious forms of writing with which schoolteacher is continually associated (37, 70, 193).

⁹² Other critics who consider *Beloved* exemplary of postmodern fiction’s critical engagement with questions of historiographic representation include Ferguson (141), Parrish (*Civil War* 126), and Raynaud (46). For discussions of Morrison’s adoption of several of the conventions of the historical novel proper (e.g. the use of painstaking background research), see Keizer (47), Margaronis (140), Mobley (“Scandal” 156), Rigney (61), and Spaulding (64). On the ambivalent relation between postmodernism and the socio-political commitments of African-American writers, see Davis (2ff).

that are crucial to the production of historiographic discourse but (in conventional terms, anyway) must be concealed or sublimated to maintain the illusion of representational transparency. In particular, the more postmodern variants of historical discourse tend to draw attention to the presence, *within* the text, of the various documents and sources that have helped contribute to that text's creation. In conventional fictional and scholarly methodologies, Hutcheon argues, archival documents and other forms of "historical data" are meant to be invisible by the time we reach the end product of a published account; hence, whether in the form of historiography or historical fiction, such orthodox discourse "usually incorporates and assimilates these data in order to lend a feeling of verifiability (or an air of dense specificity and particularity) to the fictional world." The more radically questioning genre of historiographic metafiction, by contrast, "incorporates, but rarely assimilates such data. More often, the process of *attempting* to assimilate is what is foregrounded," and, "As readers, we see both the collecting and the attempts to make narrative order" (81-82). So, although in a certain sense *Beloved*, like any other historical text, makes extensive use of contextualizing data drawn from extant historical record on slavery, it also encourages our awareness of the artificial, *textualized* nature of that data by depicting its characters consulting the archive themselves— interpreting the significance of its documents while grappling with the meaning they uncover within them. Much of the novel may be grounded in "fragmentary but suggestive historical accounts" drawn from the documentary archive, but Morrison is not

necessarily “invested in [the] realist re-creation of slavery” that the use of such an archival framework might otherwise suggest (Keizer 17).

“Revelation at the Slaughter Yard”: Stamp Paid’s Clipping

I would now like to turn to a close analysis of a key moment of historiographic self-consciousness or self-reflexivity in *Beloved*: a moment when the text folds in on itself, as it were, and meditates subtly upon the grave implications of its own origins in, and dissemination of, the archive. If the germ of the novel itself, as Morrison has described on several occasions, lies in a forgotten newspaper clipping, in whose columns the facts of the Garner case are detailed, what are we to make of the scene occurring near the mid-point of the novel in which one character reveals a similar textual object—*another* newspaper clipping about an infanticide—to his fellow? More importantly, what is the significance of the novel’s palpable ambivalence concerning this act of archival recovery? What might Morrison be saying about her own novelistic practice, or, indeed, the very possibility—not to mention the ethics—of representing slavery or African-American experience in general, by presenting us here with a miniature allegory of the hazards of historiographic representation?

The scene features the novel’s two central male characters, Paul D, the ex-Sweet Home man, and Stamp Paid, an elderly veteran of the Underground Railroad turned self-appointed guardian of the black community of post-war Cincinnati. The two men meet one evening behind the local hog slaughterhouse where they both work, after a long, torturous day “breath[ing] the stench of offal

and stand[ing] up for twelve hours” (154). Stamp has something important he wants to tell Paul D, and the violent labour they both have just been engaged in—“poking, killing, cutting, skinning” the bodies of “crying pigs” (155)—provides an appropriately grisly backdrop for the terrible “secret” (169) that Stamp is about to reveal: years earlier, Sethe, whom Paul D’s has recently taken as a lover after years apart, brutally murdered her yet unnamed baby and attempted to kill the rest of her children, along with herself, in order to prevent the family from being returned to the plantation after they had been tracked down by relentless slave-catchers. Although Stamp wonders at first if he is providing his uninformed friend (“the only one in town who didn’t know”) with a necessary “revelation” or is merely reviving “unasked-for . . . gossip,” he ultimately decides that Paul D needs to be made aware of what “his woman” has done, for “the sake of truth and forewarning” if not to mitigate Stamp’s own simmering sense of guilt over his inability to prevent the murder in the first place (169-70).

Here, Stamp reprises one of his key roles from the days of resisting slavery. As well as ferrying “contraband humans” across the Ohio River to freedom, he also used to distribute the important information on which newly liberated African Americans’ survival depended (169). With an encyclopedic knowledge of the “secrets” of the southern Ohio landscape, Stamp’s job in the Railroad was to “sneak” that “secret information to public places,” often by writing letters for illiterate ex-slaves and “read[ing] to them the ones they received” (169-70). Slavery itself has long disappeared by the time of the novel’s present, but in this scene, too, Stamp functions as the source of a kind of “secret”

(169) and, crucially, *textual* knowledge that he disseminates to those around him. Wanting to set the record straight concerning what the narrator euphemistically refers to as Sethe's "rough response to the Fugitive Bill" (171),⁹³ Stamp shows Paul D a "piece of paper," an old newspaper clipping that he has kept hidden away in a "wooden box" for the past eighteen years (155, 170). Although the reader is never made directly privy to the contents of the clipping—unlike some other contemporary novels of slavery, *Beloved* does not interpolate a transcript of the text or a facsimile of its accompanying image (Dussere 42-43)—it is obvious that the fragment is taken from a contemporary news report outlining the basic facts of Sethe's actions all those years ago. Supplemented by a "picture drawing" of a face that appears to belong to Sethe, the essence of the account concerns how "a pretty little slavegirl had recognized a hat [belonging to schoolteacher], and split to the woodshed to kill her children" (155, 158). Because the illiterate Paul D finds "whatever it was those black scratches said" incomprehensible, Stamp himself "slowly read[s] out the words Paul D couldn't" (155, 158). Seeming not to trust his own ability as an eyewitness (perhaps because he was "looking the wrong way" when the slave-catchers arrived [157]) to provide this truth, Stamp in effect acts like a good historian and turns to the documentary archive to provide the "proof" (170) of his version of events.

What is most interesting about this scene is the way in which each character "reads" the newspaper clipping in a completely different way. Stamp

⁹³ The Fugitive Slave Law of 1850 enabled Southern slaveholders to recover their "property" even if a formerly enslaved person was resident in a nominally free Northern state. See Weisenburger for a more complete account (112).

views the document as an authoritative record of something that happened in the past; it is a reputable source of information that will consequently enable Paul D to understand that terrible event. For Stamp, the clipping contains the “truth” of what Sethe did (170), and he thus switches from narrating his own imperfect recollections to “read[ing] out” the words of the document verbatim when he begins to sense Paul D’s skepticism concerning what he is being told (158). Indeed, with its simultaneous evocation of indexicality and authority—a “stamp” can signify at once a direct, physical impression and an official mark or seal—Stamp’s chosen name⁹⁴ neatly encapsulates his overall attitude toward the document’s status. From his point of view, the clipping provides a more or less transparent window onto the reality of the past, enabling an authoritative (and thus utile) interpretation of history to be made. Convinced of the clipping’s discursive authority, Stamp treats it with reverence, “unfold[ing] the paper” with a “solemn air” and “strok[ing] its creases” with “tenderness” (154). In sum, then, Stamp sees the archive, materialized in the fragment of paper he takes out of his wooden box, as, in Freshwater’s words, “a symbol of truth, plausibility, and authenticity” (730): a transparent, authoritative medium through which past events and experiences may be known in the present in their entirety.

Conversely, Paul D regards the document with suspicion from the outset.

In marked contrast to Stamp’s tenderness in handling the text, Paul D is convinced

⁹⁴ Stamp Paid’s given name was actually Joshua (184), but he changed it in symbolic response to his suffering under slavery. After his desperate wife, fearing her husband would be killed, convinced him not to act violently in response to her being raped repeatedly by their master’s son, Stamp felt as though “he didn’t owe anybody anything”; his unique choice of name thus represents the fact that “Whatever his obligations were, that act [of supreme forbearance] paid them off” (185).

that the document poses some kind of threat to him since he assumes that “whatever [is] written on” the piece of paper is meant to “mess him up” or “shake him” (154). He also repeatedly rejects Stamp’s assertion that the accompanying engraving depicts Sethe’s likeness. While he acknowledges a certain resemblance, Paul D calls the image’s referentiality into question by stridently protesting that the real Sethe looks completely different: “That ain’t her mouth ... [‘]I know Sethe’s mouth and this ain’t it’ ... ‘This ain’t her mouth. I know her mouth and this ain’t it’” (154, 155, 156). In general, Paul D categorically refuses to cede to the accuracy of the document’s version of Sethe’s life: “The print meant nothing to him so he didn’t even glance at it. He simply looked at the face, shaking his head no. No. At the mouth, you see. And no at whatever it was those black scratches said, and no to whatever it was Stamp Paid wanted him to know” (155). Instead, Paul D is convinced that the article is a “mistake” and that his own direct memories of Sethe are the more accurate source of historical information (158). There is, then, a fundamental discrepancy here between the referential claims of discourse and Paul D’s apparent valorization of the directness of actual, albeit remembered, experience. The intimate familiarity that stems from his “knowing [Sethe for] a long time” (158) leads Paul D to question the very notion that a living, breathing individual could be encapsulated in print, no matter how lifelike the latter seems (“who was this woman with a mouth that was not Sethe’s, but whose eyes were almost as calm as hers?” [156]). As Kimberly Chabot Davis argues, “When Paul D is confronted by the newspaper account of Sethe’s deed, the reader is made aware that textual documents often—or always—fail to capture

life as it is experienced”; hence, Paul D’s “reaction to the picture of Sethe makes the reader aware of the difference between a real-live original and any simulation, either photographic or textual” (248).

The tension between personal experience and the order of textual representation is heightened when Paul D subsequently visits Sethe and attempts to confirm “the mix-up of her face put where some other coloredwoman’s ought to be” (161). Somewhat ironically, Paul D attempts to accomplish this by replicating Stamp’s actions in their earlier encounter and showing the newspaper clipping to his friend. Just as Stamp “didn’t say it all” but rather directed Paul D’s attention to the words and images on the page (158), here Paul D himself falls silent and makes the clipping pose “the question he [does] not [ask] outright” (161). In turn, Sethe assumes Paul D’s erstwhile role as naysayer, meaning that the two juxtaposed scenes structurally echo each other; on each occasion, one character invites another to peruse a fragment of text, which the other then rejects. In fact, the clipping is accessible to the minimally literate Sethe in a way it could never be for Paul D, since, although she can “recognize only seventy-five printed words,” half of these are to be found in the clipping (161). However, this marginal increase in comprehension does not cause Sethe to acquiesce to the clipping’s version of events in which she was directly involved. Instead, she views the article as *lacking* in relation to the subject matter it purports to depict. Thus, as we learn from Sethe’s perspective filtered through the narrator, the printed words do not have “any more power than she [has] to explain” her actions (161). Indeed, here Sethe implicitly views the clipping as diametrically opposed to a proper

explanation or full representation of her experiences. It is only because of Paul D's winning smile and "upfront love" that she feels "obliged to explain anything" in her own terms; otherwise, Sethe "would have said what the newspaper said she said and no more" (161). The underlying implication is that the clipping's abbreviated account of the killing suffices for those people who, whether out of mere indifference or a more deliberate racial prejudice, would never be able to understand or accept Sethe's perspective anyway.

In that sense, Paul D is right—regardless of whether the engraving is actually of Sethe's face or not—that it is, in a more profound way, *not* "her mouth." Sethe herself seems to confirm Paul D's earlier protestations when, prefatory to launching into her own narrative, she "Cover[s] the lower half of her face with her palms" (161). On the one hand, this gesture draws attention to the mouth from which a more truthful depiction is presumably about to issue; on the other hand, however, the image of a covered, symbolically silenced mouth also suggests that a full explanation of Sethe's act may ultimately be impossible, even if it comes from the key participant herself. In Jennifer Lee Jordan Heinert's estimation, because the "real explanation of her actions is not in the clipping," Sethe "is not sure even she can explain why she did what she did" (85-86). Indeed, Sethe's putative "explanation" turns out to be something far more complex and intractable than the mode of logical, cause-and-effect summation implied by that term. Sethe, who is physically "spinning" as she talks throughout this scene (159), begins to envelop the increasingly uneasy Paul D in a narrative "circle" that will inevitably "remain one," never quite resolving itself into a

straightforward linear account of why she killed her baby (163). Appropriately enough given the form of the telling, the content of the narrative similarly refuses to resolve into anything resembling a clear or logical delineation, notwithstanding Sethe's claims to its inherent "simplicity." Instead, the key moment at which Sethe attempts, finally, to account for *why* she rushed to kill her children—perhaps the very traumatic kernel of the novel itself—is rendered in the vivid obfuscations of Morrison's opaque, slightly nightmarish figurative language:

[Sethe] could never close in, pin it down for anybody who had to ask. If they didn't get it right off—she could never explain. Because the truth was simple, not a long-drawn-out record of flowered shifts, tree cages, selfishness, ankle ropes and wells. Simple: she was squatting in the garden and when she saw them coming and recognized schoolteacher's hat, she heard wings. Little hummingbirds stuck their needle beaks right through her headcloth into her hair and beat their wings. And if she thought anything, it was No. No. Nono. Nonono. Simple. She just flew. Collected every bit of life she had made, all the parts of her that were precious and fine and beautiful, and carried, pushed, dragged them through the veil, out, away, over there where no one could hurt them. (163)

Here, Sethe can only admit to the "truth" of her experience in the midst of a litany of out-of-context metonymic allusions ("flowered shifts"), abstractions ("selfishness"), typographic effects ("Nonono"), and ghostly metaphors ("through the veil ... over there"), all of which culminates in the ominous, hallucinatory

imagery of swarms of menacing, tiny birds picking viciously at her scalp. As the narrator's choice turn of phrase here suggests, such an unsettling "truth" cannot be conveyed by means of any "long-drawn-out record" to be found in the usual archives.

Trauma and the Archive

Sethe's inability to describe the murder of her daughter to Paul D points to a larger issue in the novel, one in which the relation between representation and reality is seen as profoundly problematic. According to Heffernan, when Sethe is confronted by her lover with the unsettling information contained in the clipping, she "realizes that it is not a question of filling in or countering this 'official version' with her own version"; instead, for Sethe, "language cannot contain the event" (558). Heffernan explains that the stricken reactions of the slave-catchers to the immediate aftermath of the scene in the woodshed of 124 Bluestone Road suggest that the sheer enormity of Sethe's violent behaviour (she cuts one baby's throat with a saw and tries to dash another's brains out against the wall) has somehow disrupted the onlookers' ability to process, in any meaningful way, what they have seen. Thus, the fact that the act "stops Schoolteacher, momentarily, 'in his tracks', " leaving him groping hopelessly for a means of comprehending its significance, indicates "that the violent event exceeds the explanations of the witnesses" (Heffernan 564). Indeed, *Beloved* is marked by a more general ambivalence about the capacity of language to represent violent or troubling events that are located at the limits of the human capacity to comprehend or even

endure. The novel is full of what the narrator calls “unspeakable thoughts, unspoken” (199): moments when words seem to fail in response to the experiences they are used to describe. For example, the stories of escaped slaves that one character tries to listen to are constituted as much by the “holes” between words (“the things the fugitives did not say”) as by comprehensible language itself (92). Similarly, at various points both Sethe and Paul D find themselves stopping in the midst of trying to narrate their own experiences when they discover that they can simply go no further; the very rhythm of their discourse seems to acknowledge that there are some places that language itself cannot go (62, 71). Finally, notwithstanding its dense, often beautiful language, *Beloved* itself has at its core a series of profound absences (most notably, the “Sixty million” lost in the Middle Passage) that it can never hope to fill with words. In this regard, Maria Margaronis argues that Morrison’s narrative continually evokes the “negative trace” of things that are no longer (or not yet) present (156). Thus, for example, by including oblique references early in the novel “to events the reader doesn’t yet know about (the scarring of Sethe’s back, the episode where white boys take her milk, making ink on the plantation) [Morrison] makes the past both real and unspeakable” (Margaronis 150). In a similar vein, meanwhile, Jill Matus contends that, in its “discontinuity and fragmentation,” the novel’s narrative form itself produces a “circling ... around the traumatic event” that echoes Sethe’s inability to find words adequate to her experience (111-12).

As is implied by Matus’s description of the act of infanticide as a “traumatic event,” trauma studies furnishes one of the most important theoretical

contexts for the analysis of *Beloved*.⁹⁵ Originally referring to “a blow to the tissues of the body,” trauma now more frequently denotes an injury “to the tissues of the mind” (Erikson 183). A traumatic event usually occurs when an individual has a “close personal encounter with violence and death,” one which is so extreme that the psychological and emotional defenses cannot cope (Bouson 7). In fact, in a certain sense the experience is so overwhelming that the “event” may not even be perceived as having occurred as such. As Caruth argues in her discussion of Freud’s famous story of the train accident (one of the originary scenarios of trauma studies), although the traumatized individual has survived the accident, a baffling lacuna remains in his or her perception of that experience: “What returns to haunt the victim ... is not only the reality of the violent event but also the reality of the way that its violence has not yet been fully known” (*Unclaimed* 6). Because trauma occurs when the usual bulwarks protecting the organism from sensory overload are unprepared for violent shock, the traumatic event “is experienced too soon, too unexpectedly, to be fully known and is therefore not available to consciousness until it imposes itself again, repeatedly, in the nightmares and repetitive actions of the survivor” (*Unclaimed* 4). Rather than being available to conscious reflection or cognition, the memory of trauma is dissociated: it bypasses “existing mental frameworks” and subsequently manifests itself, belatedly, in repetitious dreams, flashbacks, and physical gestures

⁹⁵ Numerous critics have attempted to apply the insights of trauma theory to *Beloved*, which, as Bouson states, is a “trauma-saturated work ... [that] bears witness to the horrors of slavery and rips the veil drawn over proceedings too terrible to relate” (162). Bouson devotes an entire monograph to readings of seven of Morrison’s novels that focus on the themes of trauma and shame. Other critics who draw explicitly on the discourse of trauma in their readings of *Beloved* include Flanagan, Keizer, Michaels, Morgenstern, Ramadanovic, Ramos, Spargo, and Weinstock.

that the individual has little or no conscious control over (Bouson 7). Despite, then, being as much a mental as a physical phenomenon, trauma remains intractably resistant to rational comprehension or articulation: “The attempt to explain [trauma] can only be an attempt to reduce it” (Michaels 10). As Laub usefully elaborates in his discussion of arguably the central “event” of trauma studies, the Holocaust, the survivor’s urge to tell about his or her experiences thus butts up against the inability to do so: “no amount of telling seems ever to do justice to this inner compulsion. There are never enough words or the right words ... to articulate the story that cannot be fully captured in *thought, memory, and speech.*” Since “words are not trustworthy or accurate” for the survivor, trauma thus leads to a fundamental “collapse of witnessing” (“Truth and Testimony” 63, 65).⁹⁶

Laub’s comments about the Holocaust remind us that the discourse of trauma has been usefully extended to thinking through violent or disturbing events on a collective, historical scale, as well as an individual one. While trauma might seem to be a uniquely interiorized or “solitary” experience (Bal, Introduction x), it can also have a “social dimension,” as Kai Erikson rightly points out (185). More

⁹⁶ In the discourse of trauma, slavery is often compared with the Holocaust as a kind of extreme limit-case of atrocity that beggars belief. See, for instance, Ramadanovic’s statement that, along with the Holocaust, “American slavery ... is the privileged example of American trauma studies” (181). See also Kreyling, who views the Middle Passage as an equivalent to the Shoah in a U.S. intellectual context, in that both phenomena raise comparable questions about “witnessing, testimony, experience, memory and history” (115). Morrison herself has described the centuries-long enslavement and degradation of Africans and African Americans as a trauma that lies at the heart of the experience of modernity itself: a “pathology” that fractured the psyches of individual slaves and slave masters, as well as, on a larger scale, “[breaking] the world in half”; in Morrison’s estimation, slavery thus essentially paved the way for the holocaustic catastrophes of the twentieth century (qtd. in Gilroy 221). For a detailed and sympathetic consideration of the complexities and potential pitfalls attendant on the comparative reading of traumas, as well as of the questions of cultural and identity politics that loom over any attempt to draw these connections between Jewish and African-American experience, see Gilroy (213-17).

particularly, in the wake of a recent American “history that includes capitalism and economic exploitation, war, colonialism and the genocide of native peoples,” the concept of trauma, with its emphasis on the sometimes insidious ways in which violent events linger beyond the bounds of their actual occurrence, becomes an important way of thinking about how, for example, “the traumatic history of slavery and African diaspora ... continues to have a legacy in the present,” despite the “equally powerful legacy of its forgetting” (Cvetkovich 36, 38). The idea of a “collapse of witnessing” that recurs in much trauma discourse thus also places in doubt—even as it makes more urgent—the possibility of historical knowledge itself, at least in terms of the notion of unproblematic referentiality (Caruth, *Unclaimed* 11).

In this regard, the fact that Morrison’s protagonists are somewhat leery about the efficacy of the newspaper clipping as a means of representing their experiences accurately (or justly) is suggestive of a wider problematic concerning the relation between trauma and the archive. Indeed, Morrison herself has admitted that the documentary sources she drew on in the writing of *Beloved* failed, on some level, to assist her in getting to the heart of her characters’ pain and suffering. In describing her encounter with a particular archival document that described “the bit,” a device forced into slaves’ mouths as a brutal means of both punishment and control, Morrison outlines the way in which such a document, as shocking and instructive as its explicit level of detail might appear to be, ultimately has something lacking at its core:

while I looked at the documents and felt *familiar* with slavery and overwhelmed by it, I wanted it to be truly *felt*. I wanted to translate the historical into the personal ... I realized that it was important to imagine the bit as an active instrument, rather than simply as a curio or an historical fact. And in the same way I wanted to show the reader [of *Beloved*] what slavery *felt* like, rather than how it looked.”

(Morrison, “Art of Fiction” 76)

Morrison does admit elsewhere that the impetus for her novel came from “being obsessed by two or three little fragments”—photographs and newspaper articles—found in the textual record (Naylor and Morrison 27). But while, in a certain sense, these archival documents were an intrinsic part of the composition of *Beloved*, at the same time Morrison recalls that what she was really looking for lay elsewhere, “sort of fall[en] off the page,” or “between the lines of history” (Morrison, “Art of Fiction” 77). In other words, in Morrison’s view, an adequate form of testimony to the trauma of enslavement—as opposed to mere information about *slavery*—is somehow obscured in or by the documents themselves.

The ambivalence Morrison expresses here, her simultaneous desire for and problematizing of the archive, has also been articulated by scholars and theorists seeking to interrogate the role of the archive in the preservation and transmission of traumatic histories such as those of the Middle Passage or the Shoah. As Elisabeth R. Friedman attests, “the status of the archive is implicitly at stake in contemporary debates of Holocaust representation” (112). On the one hand, the “historical specificity” offered by archival sources—their ostensible grounding in

materiality discussed in relation to Knapp's article, above—seems to enable the urgent assertion of sheer facticity as testament to injustice and suffering. As Friedman puts it, “Genres that seem to offer direct access to the reality of the event, such as archival materials ... have been accorded a high degree of evidentiary credibility” by commentators wishing to combat, say, the execrable exercise of Holocaust revisionism or denial (112). In these terms, the “authenticated facts” that are produced by a “referential” historiographic method premised on archival research (LaCapra, *Writing History* 1-2) have an important role to play in, for instance, enabling the dissemination of “knowledge of the full extent and horror of the genocide” (G. Hartman 253). By the same token, however, the possibility of “constituting an archive of the Holocaust”—or of slavery, for that matter—“remains at issue,” for a variety of reasons (Friedman 111). Along with the often quite literal attempt by the perpetrators to destroy records implicating them in crimes against humanity, or the loss of archival documents in the general conflagration of war, the nature of trauma itself presents a problem for the archival urge on a more fundamental, epistemological or conceptual level. As Friedman puts it, “the unprecedented nature of the event exceeds the limits of traditional frames of reference,” such that, as well as transmitting “the facts of the event, representations [of trauma] must situate themselves in relation to ‘the limits of representation,’ marking their own inadequacy and leaving a space for what remains unrepresentable” (112). However, in conventional historical representations, where “the archive serves its traditional function as a repository of documents and evidence,” the “affective

dimension” of traumatic experience is inarticulable since it “exceeds” the epistemological limits of such discourse (Friedman 113). Here, with Friedman’s rhetoric of excess, boundaries, and exclusion, we are squarely in the realm of Morrison’s desire to read “between the lines of history” for what has slipped “off the page.” For both critic and novelist, it would appear that trauma’s full enormity “cannot be found in the historical archive” (Friedman 113), even as the archive paradoxically remains an indispensable tool in the ongoing project of encouraging and preserving survivor testimony.⁹⁷

An important example of this problematic can be found in Laub’s essay “Bearing Witness or the Vicissitudes of Listening,” which meditates on the example of a particular survivor being interviewed on film (by Laub himself) for inclusion in the Video Archive for Holocaust Testimonies at Yale University. Laub begins by describing the scene of the woman giving her wrenching testimony about a doomed prisoner uprising at Auschwitz, a narrative in which the central climax is the destruction of four of the camp’s chimneys. Laub then notes that her words were the cause of some controversy at a subsequent conference on Holocaust pedagogy:

⁹⁷ Despite this theoretical problematizing of “the archive,” the irreducible and urgent *importance* of specific institutions that preserve the memory of atrocities such as the Holocaust and the Middle Passage, and which thus provide a publicly recognized forum for survivors’ attempts at testimony, is clearly evident in discussions by Friedman, Halloran, Hartman, and Laub (“Truth”). Kujundžić neatly articulates the basic tension between the abstractions of theory and the exigencies of cultural or public memory. Despite the “aporia” of the archive, he writes, “one can justly argue in a very empirical fashion: we do have existing archives, archives are made, bequeathed, opened and inaugurated every day, and archives do succeed in surviving” (167). A similarly common sense admonition is evident in LaCapra’s cautionary reading of Agamben, whose “all-or-nothing” mode of theorizing is seen as privileging a kind of hyperbolic sublimity that seemingly forecloses all possible forms of ethics, understanding, and political action (*Transit* 160).

A lively debate ensued. The testimony was not accurate, historians claimed. The number of chimneys was misrepresented. Historically, only one chimney was blown up, not all four. Since the memory of the testifying woman turned out to be, in this way, fallible, one could not accept ... her whole account of events. It was utterly important to remain accurate, least the revisionists in history discredit everything. (59-60)

The psychoanalytically trained Laub, however, is more attuned to the unique demands of testimony than the impatient historians. From his point of view, the factual accuracy of the woman's narrative is more or less insignificant since the "event itself was almost inconceivable" in its occurrence (60). In other words, the terrible "fact" of Auschwitz's sheer existence had already called into question the register of the "factual" itself. The point of testimony in the wake of trauma thus consists, tautologically, in the "very *happening*" of the testimony itself:

"Knowledge in the testimony is, in other words, not simply a factual given that is reproduced and replicated by the testifier, but a genuine advent, an event in its own right" (62). In these terms, although the woman's testimony is *literally* included in the (video) archive, there is something about it—perhaps its most crucial yet also inscrutable element—that is finally unarchivable in any obvious sense: "It is not merely her speech, but the very boundaries of silence which surround it, which attest, today as well as in the past, to [her] assertion of resistance" (62). For Laub, then, "trauma" (or, rather, its conversion into testimony) and "archive" are opposed terms. If trauma begins anarchivally, as it

were, in that it “precludes its registration ... [by the] recording mechanisms of the human mind,” it continues to remain radically outside, or at least irreducible to, the archive. As Laub puts it, “The listener to the narrative of extreme human pain, of massive psychic trauma, faces a unique situation. In spite of the presence of ample documents, of searing artifacts and of fragmentary memoirs of anguish, [the scholar] comes to look for something that is in fact nonexistent; a record that has yet to be made” (57).⁹⁸

In my estimation, the kind of perspective examined by Friedman and exemplified by Laub is ultimately premised on a *schism* between trauma and the archive. From this view, trauma, in its “unspeakability,” is situated beyond the borders of the archive, which as a result becomes a problematic concept in relation to the desire for testimony. Jonathan Elmer neatly summarizes this bifurcation: “Trauma theory proposes that there are inscriptions that befuddle any clear divide between past and present, records that have been neither selected or destroyed”; as a result, writes Elmer, a traumatic event produces “an epistemological sinkhole ... which threatens the very legibility of the archive” (5, 14). However, I want to open up a space, now, for a quite different way of conceiving of the relation between these two terms, one in which the archive and

⁹⁸ See also Agamben’s enigmatic *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive*, in which “testimony” as the response of a witness to trauma is situated fundamentally “In opposition to the archive” (145). Agamben reiterates this claim throughout his monograph, arguing, for instance, that testimony “guarantees not the factual truth of the statement safeguarded in the archive, but rather its unarchivability, its exteriority with respect to the archive,” or that “to bear witness is to place oneself ... outside both the archive and the *corpus* of what has already been said” (158, 161). Compare Diana Taylor’s suggestion that “Official documents, records, and figures” are unable to cope with the force of trauma, which “might just as well be delivered in a foreign tongue” (204), as well as Kujundžić’s claim that “the official document leaves no space for mourning” (184).

the traumatic event are interlinked, even mutually constitutive from the very outset. Momentarily, by way of concluding this chapter, I will return to *Beloved* itself, arguing that one implication of the text's engagement with the figure of the archive is that the latter's apparent opposition with trauma becomes untenable. Rather than seeing them in binary terms, Morrison's text suggests that trauma and the archive—especially within the “peculiar” context of slavery—are in fact comparable in their violent effects. Consequently, anyone who would seek to draw on the documentary record to represent slavery in the form of “historical” discourse should proceed with caution, in order to avoid being, however unwittingly, complicit with this archival violence.

Any absolute separation of archive and trauma begins to appear somewhat arbitrary when we admit that the former of the two terms, instead of referring to an entirely rational, knowable concept, is itself unstable. (Recall Derrida's insistence that “nothing is less clear today than the word ‘archive’” [*Archive* 90].) Indeed, just as “trauma” names an extreme event that assails the subject's psychic defenses and thus calls into question the very epistemological foundations of rational knowledge and representation, the “event” of the archive has also been described in terms of a similar destabilization of accepted intellectual categories. Thus embroiled in “the paradoxes and aporias of representation” (LaCapra, *Limits* 67), trauma finds an equivalent in a sort of inaugural impossibility of the archive. Dragan Kujundžić provides a pithy summation of this contradictory logic: “Remember: no memory or testimony is possible without the archive! Remember: memory and testimony are possible only without the archive! Any reflection on

testimony, memory, the archive and archivization has to disarm itself before such an impossible injunction” (166). Drawing on Derrida’s bifurcation of the “commemorative gesture into the two irreconcilable tasks” (commencement and commandment), Kujundžić argues that “memory ... is made impossible by the very imperative of archivization”—an imperative that is paradoxically premised on repression and which thus threatens “to erase any archival trace, even the trace of its own archivization” (166, 167). Herman Rapaport begins his review essay on *Archive Fever* by making a similar point. Rather than being defined in terms of its “mnemonic reliability,” Derrida’s contradictory version of the archive “occur[s] at that moment when there is a structural breakdown in memory” (69). As a result, instead of the “regularity and efficiency” (69) of a rational or instrumental system of archivization we get something that eludes our conceptual reach: “There is misunderstanding in the archive. It’s inevitable. And moreover, we have archives—we preserve archives—because there is something in them that *defies understanding but that we want to grasp*” (68, my emphases). Rapaport’s phrasing here clearly echoes Caruth’s description of the way trauma “simultaneously defies ... even as it claims, our understanding” (*Unclaimed* 5).

But beyond a phrasal echo that could potentially be explained away as merely an effect of, say, a widely disseminated poststructuralist rhetoric, there are more fundamental or structural points of connection between trauma and the archive as well, to the extent that it might ultimately be possible to conceive of something like an “archive trauma” (Rapaport 69) stemming from an “archival catastrophe” (Kujundžić 171). At any rate, such would be the implication of

Archive Fever itself. Containing at its core an interpretation of Freud's *Moses and Monotheism* (a text that considers "the possibility that *Jewish community is founded on the basis of a trauma* that relates to the murder of the father" [Rapaport 71]), Derrida's meditation on the archive also manifests, appropriately enough, a traumatic symptomology on the level of form. Marked by a variety of intertextual "phantom limb[s]"—implicit allusions to arguments made by Derrida in earlier texts (Rapaport 74)—*Archive Fever* is also structured in a peculiar way that evokes, at the level of the reader's experience, the belated and repetitious experience of trauma: with "chapters called 'Exergue,' 'Preamble,' 'Foreword,' 'Theses' and 'Postscript,'" the text comprises "an impossible archive which only begins, or comes too late, but never is *as such*" (Kujundžić 177).

Derrida uses this form to make a more general argument about the "traumatic" structure of the archive. On a certain level, *Moses and Monotheism* is simply a book *about* an admittedly speculative historical trauma. Moses, a dissident Egyptian nobleman freed the Jews from bondage and converted them to the monotheistic religion he practiced, only to be murdered by his followers when they grew restless under the stringency of his rule; however, while memories of both the man and his murder were repressed, the Jews ironically enabled the preservation of their former leader's traditions by merging his god with that of a Semitic tribe—the deity we know as Yahweh—whose high priest was *also* called Moses.⁹⁹ In an obvious sense, then, Freud's text is concerned with a series of quite literally traumatic events (enslavement, diaspora, and violent death), as well as

⁹⁹ Here, I draw on Kujundžić's excellent summary of the basic argument of Freud's text (169-70).

with the characteristic psycho-cultural responses that result from them (repression, dissociation, and unconscious reenactment). However, what is most interesting about Derrida's engagement with this text is the suggestion that, rather than simply being an instance of a historical discourse premised on archival research, *Moses and Monotheism* actually says something important about the way that "any archivization ... obeys the same logic" as the experience of trauma, a logic of belatedness, repression, repetition, and so forth (Kujundžić 171). Derrida's reading of Freud's argument turns on the paradoxical and simultaneous repression *and* preservation of a cultural tradition. According to Kujundžić, the Jews' "initial impulse to keep the memory of the one and only God, of the monotheistic tradition, accumulates its energy precisely from this initial anarchivic and archiviolithic trauma: the death of the primal father"; memory is "what, precisely, needs to be forgotten or rather repressed in order for the law, the Mosaic *nomos*, to be perpetuated throughout history" (170).

In a comparable fashion, Kujundžić argues, the archive originates in general in a moment of "trauma" whose instantaneous repression leaves behind a series of traces that produce the effect of archivization in the face of an apparent forgetting. It begins, that is, like the original Moses' monotheism, with a "jealous and self-preserving order ... an injunction to remember, to file and archive, only the one, the one and only" (167). This initial command simultaneously represses "the trace of its own archivization," meaning that "what makes the tracing and archivization possible also threatens the archive at the very origin" (167). Yet, at the same time, this occlusion is precisely what guarantees the continued existence

of the archive as such: at the moment of repression, that is, “the archival drive simultaneously impresses, makes an impression or suppression ... on the material substrate of the archive, on its *topos*, domicile, psyche or culture”; as a result, the “jealous” and self-obliterating inscription of the “One” leaves behind “traces or symptoms of [its] originary repression” (168). The Freudian “fiction” of Mosaic trauma thus becomes an allegory for the way in which archival memory, far from being threatened by a forgetting, is in fact *produced* by an originary repression.¹⁰⁰ The “archival logic of the historic event” means that that the “historian’s work” is by definition posttraumatic, “always that of deciphering the ashes left after the catastrophe of history” (173).

But one of the significant implications of this homeopathic logic of the “One” is that the archive can no longer be thought of simply as that which is capable either of surviving or being obliterated by trauma—a trauma that, implicitly, threatens the archive from some kind of outside. Rather, it “may be seen as the site of its own survival, existing in a mode of a delayed survival of *itself*” (Kujundžić 168, my emphases). The archive, then, is not the innocent “victim” of a violence imposed on it from without, but becomes, rather, *complicit* in its own traumatic preservation-in-obliteration. Rapaport makes a similar point

¹⁰⁰ A similar sense of the paradoxical imbrications of remembering and (catastrophic) forgetting is evident in Laub’s description of the descendants of Holocaust survivors, whose sense of the past is inextricably bound up with the “heavy black pall” of their forebears’ experiences. To some extent, startlingly, “genocide” becomes a kind of “memory”: “It is thus that the place of the greatest density of silence—the place of concentration where death took place—paradoxically becomes, for those children of survivors, the only place which can provide an access to the life that existed before their birth ... The impossibility of speaking and, in fact of listening, otherwise than through this silence, otherwise than through this black hole both of knowledge and of words, corresponds to the impossibility of remembering and of forgetting, otherwise than through the genocide, otherwise than through this ‘hole of memory’” (“Bearing Witness” 64-65)

when he observes that, although the burning of the famed Library of Alexandria in ancient times would appear to be “paradigmatic of archive trauma” as a catastrophic threat from the *outside*, in actual fact “what is worse than the destruction of the archive by those who want to liquidate culture is their desire to archive their evil, to painstakingly record the physical destruction of the very people they execrate in order that future generations may inherit the legacy of their evil *as evil*” (69). In any case, in the light of this formulation, we would need to rethink where “trauma” may be situated in relation to the archive. Trauma would be neither radically outside *nor* completely inside the archive, but would exist along a fault-line, an interstitial point where its “‘signifying cut’ ... creates a fracture within the archive itself” (Elmer 23).¹⁰¹

Of course, *Beloved* revolves around a series of “signifying cuts”, including the literal incision Sethe makes in the neck of her infant daughter in order—she thinks—to preserve her from the horrors of slavery. What I want to do now is to consider how the obvious trauma of such a visceral gesture points to a wider pattern of “archival” violence in the novel. If Sethe’s and Paul D’s shared wariness of the clipping results from the severe limitations of this discursive form for capturing their limit-case experiences adequately, the novel suggests that, in

¹⁰¹ The distinction between trauma being “inside” or “outside” the archive could be seen as corresponding to the two basic disciplinary orientations in trauma studies identified by Rapaport: “applied science and applied humanities.” The first orientation is assumed by “scientists, psychiatrists, and social workers,” and is premised on the more or less positivist notion that trauma is fundamentally knowable as a discrete object of study and susceptible to management by an instrumentalized medical discourse. The second position is advocated by “those who are strongly allied to theories of representation, narration, and memory,” and holds that, in its “inappropriability,” trauma raises “the problematic of representing the unrepresentable” (81n2). Further to the notion of the paradoxical “interiority” of archive trauma, see also the discussion in the Introduction to this dissertation of Heller-Roazen’s argument concerning the destruction of the Library of Alexandria.

addition to being merely inadequate in relation to such traumatic histories, the work of archiving could also be seen as traumatizing in and of itself. In general terms, that is, the forgoing discussion has raised the possibility that instead of being “other” to the traumatic event, the archive is in some way structurally analogous to—perhaps even *constitutive of*—its occurrence. Focusing on the depiction of the Sweet Home plantation’s later master, the final section of this chapter argues in particular that the archive in *Beloved* is not merely a belated form of discourse that fails to account for the experience of slavery; it functions, for Morrison, as the very technology of enslavement itself.

Taking Notes

Like trauma, when slavery itself is considered in relation to the archive the two phenomena initially seem to be opposed to one another. If, as I suggested earlier, the institution of slavery presents a multi-pronged challenge to the workings of cultural memory broadly considered, it seems more particularly to call into question the efficacy of the archive as one of the key sites for the production of that memory. In part, perhaps, because it “occurred to a people prevented ... from producing a written or otherwise transferable record of their experience” (Kreyling 116), slavery—both as a historical phenomenon and in Morrison’s novelistic rendition—has been viewed by many commentators as something with *anarchival* or archive-destroying effects. Patterson laments, for example, that “we know next to nothing about the individual personalities of slaves, or of the way they felt about one another,” mainly because the “data are

just not there” in the record (11). Heffernan, meanwhile, drawing on Lyotard’s description in *The Differend* of the Holocaust’s own amnesiac consequences, implies that slavery poses a similarly profound challenge to historical understanding due to the fact that the ““testimonies”” and ““documents”” from which we create the discourse of history have ““all ... been destroyed”” (571n12). Because it entailed, on the one hand, “an intentional destruction of the archive” of African cultural genealogy, and, on the other, led to a range of traumatic experiences that by definition “[could not] be recorded ... or quantified” in the usual ways, slavery seems to confront us with the paradoxical injunction to write “a history without documents” (Heffernan 560, 561).

Given that, for example, “there is little ... documentation of the histories of the Africans who were transported on slave ships” (Heffernan 560), it is undeniable that there are certain notable *absences* puncturing what historical records remain of the Middle Passage and its aftermath. Nonetheless, I would like to qualify this claim by suggesting that the institution of slavery itself was simultaneously inextricable from various techniques of inscription, knowledge production, and collection, which could be viewed as modes of archivization. When looked at from a slightly different perspective, that is, slavery comes into view as an occasion for the *proliferation* of archives, rather than their radical effacement. In fact, slavery left behind “a sizable written record” (Brogan 62) that attests to the nature and experience of both mastery and subjection. Although literacy—the means of creating such a record—was of course unavailable or denied to the vast majority of enslaved people, nonetheless some early black

Americans did “[leave] records” behind, primarily in the form of slave narratives (Hesse 146-47). Indeed, as Morrison has said of this remarkable sub-genre of autobiography, “no slave society in the history of the world wrote more ... about its own enslavement” (“Site of Memory” 110).¹⁰² Most often, however, the archive of slavery took the form of what Heffernan calls “the Master’s records” (560), those documents and accounts—whether strictly instrumental or more anthropological in focus—produced by (mainly) white men in the varied course of capturing, shipping, selling, overseeing, and legislating about the millions of Africans forcibly transported to America. As a kind of massive and entrenched quasi-bureaucratic formation, the peculiar “institution” thus necessitated a substantial textual or documentary substrate to function at all. Indeed, according to Hortense J. Spillers, slavery was heavily dependent on a range of representational modes and techniques: “as concretely material as the ‘institution’ was, as a natural historical sequence and as a scene of pulverization and murder, ‘slavery,’ for all that, remains one of the most textualized and discursive fields of practice that we could posit as a structure for attention” (28). For Spillers, slavery—while it has undeniably material effects—should thus be seen less as a “real ... ‘thing’” than as a “symbolic enterprise” (29), one that was “first and foremost, textual, or eminently constituted *in discourse*” (29, 32).¹⁰³

¹⁰² W.J.T. Mitchell similarly observes that a wealth of historical documentation was left in the wake of slavery, including an “archive of ... slave narratives [that] provides unprecedented access into one of the great atrocities of modern history” (200).

¹⁰³ The archive, broadly conceived, could thus be said to have been instrumental to the underpinnings of enslavement as practice, but I would also argue that a certain philosophical conception of “archivization” was central to the imagining of slavery in the first place. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. has persuasively shown that, in privileging literacy as the key technology (and indicator) of rational thought, certain Eurocentric discourses (his example is Enlightenment

Beloved most obviously emphasizes the constitutive discursivity of slavery in its depiction of schoolteacher, the otherwise unnamed man who, accompanied by his similarly anonymous “Sons or nephews” (36), assumes control of Sweet Home following the sudden death of the previous master, his brother-in-law Mr. Garner. From the moment of his arrival, at the widow Garner’s *written* behest, schoolteacher, with his “spectacles and a coach box full of paper” (197), is closely associated with the production of textuality. Indeed, in the manner of McCarthy’s judge, he seems obsessed with “book learning” (36) and thus spends most of his time scribbling in the ledger that he always has at hand. As Sethe later recalls, immediately after he first appeared, schoolteacher “commenced to carry round a notebook and write down what [the slaves] said” (37), and similar scenes of inscription—in which schoolteacher either observes and writes things down himself or oversees his protégés doing so—recur throughout the novel (98, 193, 220, 271).

On one level, this control of textuality is of a piece with a mandate to “put things in order” at a financially debilitated Sweet Home (9) (schoolteacher can calculate, “down to the cent,” the “worth of everything” [228]).¹⁰⁴ However,

philosophy) thus denied African peoples the status of historical—and, therefore, *human*—subjects. Gates describes the logic that structured this position in the following way: “Without writing, no *repeatable* sign of the workings of reason, of mind, could exist. Without memory or mind, no history could exist. Without history, no humanity, as defined consistently from Vico to Hegel, could exist” (11). Recalling Derrida’s claim that “*There is no archive ... without a technique of repetition*,” we might argue that the epistemological conditions for the historical emergence Euro-American slavery coincided with development of the modern conception of the archive as “mnemotechnical supplement” (*Archive* 11). Simply put, from a white supremacist perspective, African peoples were a priori enslavable because they were, in a sense, *incapable of archiving*.

¹⁰⁴ See Budick on the significance of numbers and counting in the novel. Like writing, an ability to manipulate figures is a source of discursive power in *Beloved*, enabling both economic and social mobility (130). Budick also suggests “accounting” as one of Morrison’s metaphors for the representation of history, especially in relation to the novel’s epigraph, in which the

schoolteacher also uses his notebook to institute a totalizing *epistemological* order by means of which his own position as “master” is secured. Just as Judge Holden gathers the objects and knowledges of various Native American cultures, schoolteacher functions as the “data collector, cataloger, classifier, and taxonomist” (Henderson 88) of his African-American slaves. Engaging in a dubious kind of “ethnographic research” (Gordon 184), he surreptitiously gathers and collates information about his slaves in the form of transcriptions of their statements and measurements of their bodily dimensions (Morrison, *Beloved* 37, 191). Ultimately, just as the judge’s control of the ledger-book gives him suzerainty over the cultures whose traces are entered therein, schoolteacher, as Dussere observes, uses his own “version of the ledger” to secure a position of symbolic dominance in relation to his objectified and thus dehumanized charges (27). In this regard, schoolteacher’s notebook, as the instantiation of his generalized “educational” and “scientific” methods, effects a “Manichean” racial hierarchy (Krumholz 112). African Americans are seen as passive objects of description (““It was a book about us but we didn’t know that”” [37]) whose own ways of knowing are entirely subordinate to a white perspective: “The information they offered [schoolteacher] called backtalk and developed a variety of corrections (which he recorded in his notebook) to reeducate them” (220). Conversely, schoolteacher’s ownership of the means of representation in effect enables him to produce a form of legitimated knowledge that equates to “truth” (Raynaud 46), such that control of the ledger extends, ultimately, to “the power to

incalculable “Sixty million and more”—Morrison’s estimate of terrible human toll of the Middle Passage—suggests a kind of sublime limit to historical knowledge (129-30).

... define reality and perception” (Lawrence 245n5).¹⁰⁵ If, in the terms of schoolteacher’s appropriative methodology, “definitions [belong] to the definers—not the defined,” then that power of definition in turn *constitutes* the socio-material reality of Sweet Home itself, within whose borders “a whiteman saying [something] make[s] it so” (Morrison, *Beloved* 190, 220).

Aside from his ubiquitous notebook, perhaps the most recognizable characteristic of schoolteacher is his—by Sweet Home’s standards, unprecedented—predilection for violence; his beating of Paul A. early after his arrival, for instance, is shocking not because it is especially “hard” or “long,” but because “it [is] the first time” anyone has struck any of them while they have lived on this particular plantation (197). Like Judge Holden’s “botanizing,” schoolteacher’s note-taking is not entirely unrelated to his exercise of brutality, though; if the former is, as I have claimed, the discursive means by which schoolteacher “put[s] things in order” in both a mundanely financial and more expansive epistemological sense, Morrison insists that we read *order*, in a triply punning way, as additionally signifying “force” or “power.” Schoolteacher’s creation of an archive of knowledge about the people under his control is thus consistently presented as indissociable from the acts of violence that maintain that control. As Sherry R. Truffin similarly argues, in that it enables “what Foucault calls ‘a means of control and a method of domination,’” this project of archivization—Truffin explicitly equates it with the “box full of paper” that

¹⁰⁵ Krumholz similarly emphasizes the material effects of the master’s discursive apparatus: “the social authority of the schoolteacher and the logical clarity of his methods give his words the power of ‘truth’” (113).

schoolteacher carries along with him—becomes, essentially, a form of “epistemic violence reified in discourse” (91).

Indeed, it is schoolteacher’s *archival* violence that arguably constitutes the central trauma of *Beloved*. According to Truffin, schoolteacher wields “the power of the word (discourse) as well as the whip” (96), meaning that each of Sethe’s harrowing experiences—including sexual abuse, torture, the disintegration of her family, and her later murder of Beloved—has its “roots in schoolteacher’s book” (99-100). Morrison herself seems to concur when she has Sethe admit that it was in fact the spectre of this terrible notebook (and, in particular, the threat of her children also being inscribed in it) that finally precipitated her desperate and risky flight across the Ohio: “no one, nobody on this earth, would list her daughter’s characteristics on the animal side of the paper. No. Oh no” (251).¹⁰⁶ Here, Sethe is recalling her own traumatic experience of learning that she was the subject of one of schoolteacher’s outdoor “lessons,” in which he liked to extemporize or read aloud while his avid “pupils” took notes (193). Sethe remembers hearing her name uttered as she was going about her chores, and thus pausing to “see what they was doing”:

Schoolteacher was standing over one of them with one hand behind his back. He licked a forefinger a couple of times and turned a few

¹⁰⁶ See also Gordon’s claim that Sethe tries to escape “when she learns how she will be read and written” by schoolteacher. Being “represented in a book” thus places Sethe at the “conjunction of power and epistemology” (147). Lawrence similarly argues that Sethe tends to view schoolteacher’s discursive violence as the worst kind of violation, the final straw that forces her to run (233). Contrast the sorely won conviction of the minor character Ella that the worst form of atrocity—what she calls “the lowest yet”—is, at its core, irreducibly *physical*: the years of imprisonment and physical and sexual abuse that she suffered at the hands of a white man and his son (Morrison, *Beloved* 256).

pages. Slow. I was about to turn around and keep on my way ... when I heard him say, “No, no. That’s not the way. I told you to put her human characteristics on the left; her animal ones on the right. And don’t forget to line them up.” I commenced to walk backward, didn’t even look behind me to find out where I was headed. (193)

Schoolteacher’s scientific nonsense is, of course, as banal as it is loathsome. What I find more compelling about this moment is the fact that it establishes a subtle but insistent symbolic circuit whereby the violation of black and gendered bodies under slavery is shown to be inextricable from their inclusion within the textual schema of the notebook.¹⁰⁷ In the course of three key scenes, Morrison figures the physical (and thus more immediately obvious) violence done to Sethe’s body as occurring in concert with, or even as being produced by, the processes of inscription that simultaneously constitute schoolteacher’s peculiar archive.

In addition to the passage featuring Sethe’s unwitting discovery of her “characteristics,” the other scenes at issue in my argument depict schoolteacher’s boys stealing milk from Sethe’s breasts, and Sethe subsequently being beaten. Due to the fractured form of *Beloved*, references to these moments are out of order, scattered throughout the novel (some are also referred to more than once,

¹⁰⁷ The idea of a “circuit” of violence also underlies Sethe’s desire to escape, since the thing she fears most is her children suffering as she has (Morrison, *Beloved* 251). The system of slavery was, of course, premised on the female slave’s ability to reproduce the necessary labour force (Goldman 2). In his reading of the novel’s “milking” scene, Lawrence argues that the novel connects the orders of discourse and materiality as modes of (re)production. Morrison thus conflates “‘reproduction and literary production’ in schoolteacher’s use of Sethe’s ink to record the taking of her milk by his nephews: his ‘gaze collapses Sethe’s milky maternal product into the inky literal one’” (245n4).

and from different perspectives). Nonetheless, they are closely connected, both on the level of plot and on that of theme. In causal terms, for example, the fact that schoolteacher's pedagogy encourages his pupils to view Sethe in horribly reductive, animalistic terms clearly anticipates her being treated like a "cow" or "goat" (200) when she is literally milked in the barn soon after. Similarly, her attempt to tell the ineffectual Mrs. Garner about this abuse leads to Sethe's being badly injured when she is whipped for speaking out of turn (16-17). More to the point, however, each of these scenes also centres on an experience of emotional or physical trauma that is accompanied by an act of inscription; that is, each occurs in the course of a scene of writing. First, Sethe is made aware of her so-called bestial features when she witnesses them being "line[d] ... up" on "a few pages" of paper (193). Then, as the two boys molest her, "one sucking on [her] breast the other holding [her] down," she is simultaneously conscious of a voyeuristic figure lurking off to the side, "their book-reading teacher watching and writing it up" (70). Further, while no one *literally* writes anything during the beating, this final episode is, nonetheless, figuratively caught up in the same logic of inscription that characterizes the other two. The fact that the oddly ornate, perpetually numb clump of scar tissue covering Sethe's back as a result of the whipping is twice likened to a chokecherry tree (17, 79) subtly recalls the description of the very thing that enables schoolteacher to write at all—the ink that Sethe herself concocts for her master out of "*cherry* gum and oak bark" (6, my emphasis).

I would argue that the upshot of this symbolic intersection is, in effect, that schoolteacher's beating of Sethe substitutes the latter's body—her *epidermis*, if

you will—for the blank surface of the notebook that, for once, he does not actually seem to have with him. Concerning Morrison’s patterning of imagery at this point, Anita Durkin argues incisively that the beating implicitly posits a “relationship between scarring and writing,” since, “if the marks on [Sethe’s] body function as linguistic signs, then the body here transforms into a site of writing, into the written object; it becomes, in other words, a *textual* body” (545). Alison Easton agrees with this argument, suggesting that writing in *Beloved* founds the symbolic order of a racist patriarchy, under whose terms “the pen . . . in [white] male hands” is used to inscribe “the suffering, mutilated black body as text” (55, 56). No longer merely written *about*, Sethe is violently written *upon*: in both a literal and symbolic sense, that is, “Sethe’s history is branded upon her body” (Redding 169).¹⁰⁸ If, in the chronologically earliest of these scenes, Sethe is reduced to the status of an objectified, animal body, by being symbolically cut in half by schoolteacher’s notebook tablature (“her human characteristics on the left; her animal ones on the right” [193]), by the final episode this discursive bisection has been reified, in that Sethe’s body—“split wide open” (79)—is itself forced

¹⁰⁸ Numerous critics have commented on Morrison’s correlation of corporeality and textuality/language. Wardi, for example, states that the novel equates “body and text, substituting the scarred body for the linguistic sign” (47). However, rather than reading this substitution as indicative of the master’s dominance, she argues that in locating “narrative authority” in the slaves’ very “flesh,” Morrison enables her characters to create “living narratives” instead of a “disembodied” form of historical discourse (47). In a similar way, Lawrence reads the novel as an articulation of modes of resistance predicated on an essentialized body writing or *écriture féminine* (235). Easton’s analysis of “writing the body” in the novel is more circumspect; valorized in certain forms of feminist discourses (derived mainly from the writings of Helene Cixous and Julia Kristeva), this vaguely essentialist notion is obviously complicated when the issue of *race* is introduced. In emphasizing the injuries done to the black body-as-text, Morrison “challenges Cixous’s Utopian notions of the female body and Kristevan notions of the semiotic as a means by which to ‘write the body’” (Easton 56). For further discussion of the problematic figure of the “written” body in *Beloved*, see Byerman (33), Goldman (6), Peach (121), Pérez-Torres (98), and Hershini Young (3ff).

to preserve the inscribed traces of schoolteacher's "cowhide" whip (17). As a result, "the slave body itself [becomes] an archive" (Kreyling 120). In this sense, to appropriate the terms of Derrida's analysis of Freud and circumcision in *Archive Fever*, Morrison effectively identifies the "archival economy" of slavery with "two places of *inscription*": one "an *external* substrate," the other "an *intimate* mark, *right on* the so-called body proper" (8). Thus, if schoolteacher—discontented, we might say, with the perceived *lack* of "civilization" of his slaves—first "mobiliz[es] a ponderous archiving machine" consisting of "a lot of ink and paper" (8), he does so finally in order to impress a "*graphic* mark" on another kind of substrate, by leaving "the trace of an incision *right on* the skin" of Sethe's back (20). In Derrida's formulation, this archival incision thus "gapes slightly, as the lips of a wound" (20); just so, Morrison imagines archivization as causing, precisely, a wounding or "tearing" of the abject African-American body.¹⁰⁹

History is What Hurts

Following her escape from schoolteacher's clutches, the heavily pregnant Sethe nearly dies before she reaches the banks of the Ohio. She is saved, quite unexpectedly, by a white girl named Amy Denver, who, briefly interrupting her

¹⁰⁹ See, for example, Sethe's claim that it was "them questions" that schoolteacher posed in order to fill up his notebook that "tore Sixo [another of the Sweet Home slaves] up" (37, my emphasis). Significantly, Sethe identifies another of schoolteacher's methods of data collection as having the same brutalizing, wounding effect. Preparatory to having Sethe's characteristics "lin[ed] ... up" in his pupils' notebooks, schoolteacher uses a line of "measuring string" to calculate the size of her "behind" (193, 191); subsequently, as she admits in her monologue to *Beloved*, Sethe conflates her urge to flee Sweet Home with a desire to prevent schoolteacher from "measur[ing] your behind before he *tore it up*" (203, my emphases).

quixotic quest for Boston velvet, somewhat blithely nurses Sethe back to a state resembling health. As she massages Sethe's badly swollen feet with her "magic," salving hands, Amy warns her: "It's gonna hurt now ... Anything dead coming back to life hurts" (35). Here, Amy identifies "hurt" as inseparable from the possibility of physical recovery. Analogously, for Morrison, *historical* recovery, or bringing the dead "back to life" via the medium of the archive, is an inevitably painful process as well. If the archive produced by schoolteacher—one of whose intellectual guises is that of a "historian" (Henderson 88)—is deliberately designed to do harm to the black body, *Beloved* suggests that even those archival projects that are meant to have beneficent effects (understanding, truth, healing, and so on) can unwittingly inflict injuries of their own.

While *Beloved* repeatedly returns to the black body in pain, Morrison seems especially concerned with representing violence done to a certain part of that body. What I want to argue in conclusion is that the image Morrison most often returns to as a way of signifying the trauma of archival recovery is that of the wounded *mouth*.¹¹⁰ The mouth clearly functions as a key corporeal site for the exercise of slavery's physical violence, as well as that perpetrated by a post-slavery culture of white supremacy. While other parts of the body (such as Sethe's grotesquely scarred back) are, of course, not exempt from this, Morrison draws particular attention to the occurrence and effects of what we might call an "oral"

¹¹⁰ Various critics have commented at length on the depiction of the body in *Beloved*. Focal points here include: the overt corporeality of *Beloved* as signifying the literal embodiment of the past (Brogan 81; Henderson 92); the relation between bodies and words, materiality and discourse (Lawrence 232; Rigney 25); and Morrison's emphasis on the violated or pained body (Ledbetter 39; Redding 169). However, to my knowledge, there has been no thorough analysis of Morrison's representation of the mouth.

violence. The most obvious example of this pattern is the “bit” that schoolteacher forced Paul D to wear. When he later describes his experience to a shocked Sethe, she thinks about “how offended the tongue is, held down by iron, how the need to spit is so deep you cry for it. Days after it was taken out, goose fat was rubbed on the corners of the mouth but nothing to soothe the tongue or take the wildness out of the eye” (71). The experience of the bit was so traumatizing for Paul D that he can barely bring himself to talk about it years later; it has left a permanent “tender place” in his psyche as well as a physical scar at “the corner of [his] mouth” (58). This is not the only mouth-related trauma he has undergone or witnessed while enslaved. When he is on a chain gang in Georgia, for instance, Paul D witnesses the white guards exercise an absolute power over their black prisoners by forcing them to kneel and perform fellatio at the point of an overtly phallic shotgun (Paul D is only spared this violation after he disgusts the guards by opening his own mouth and “vomiting up nothing at all”) (107-08). As Darieck Scott argues in his probing reading of this scene, Morrison figures this “sexual exploitation of black men by white men” as one signifier of a broader “system of total control which whites enjoyed over black bodies,” and which is also symbolized by the abolitionist Bodwin siblings’ racist figurine of a kneeling “blackboy” whose mouth is overflowing with buttons (132, 144).

Of course, as well as this kind of “emasculat[i]on,” a key trope in the discourse of slavery (and, indeed, of *anti*-slavery) is the “rape of black women” (Darieck Scott 131), and Morrison also tends to situate this similarly systemic misogynistic violence in relation to characters’ mouths. For example, in the course

of Sethe's recollection of the events connected to her abuse by schoolteacher's proteges, the narrator repeatedly draws attention to the mouths of the people involved. If one of the few details Sethe recalls about the rape itself is the mouth of one of the boys—"sucking at [her] breast" with its "mossy teeth" (70)—her subsequent beating causes her to wound her *own* mouth: "Bit a piece of my tongue off when they opened my back. It was hanging by a shred ... Clamped down on it, it come right off. I thought, Good God, I'm going to eat myself up" (202). Sethe's suffering here begins and ends with acts of consumption: the enforced drinking of her milk by the boy and her own self-cannibalization—and symbolic silencing—as an indirect consequence. *Beloved*, then, repeatedly depicts the legacy of enslavement as a deforming violence inflicted upon the African-American mouth, an equation that is further insisted upon late in the novel in the depiction of the "Saturday girls": traumatized young black women who, because of socio-economic marginalization, have to prostitute themselves to survive, and who, exactly like those slaves who were forced to wear the iron bit, now "smile when [they] didn't want to" (203).

Significantly, the warped-mouthed Saturday girls ply their trade in "the slaughterhouse yard" (203)—in close proximity, that is, to where Stamp and Paul D recover traces of Sethe's past in the form of the clipping. This propinquity suggests the confluence of the motif of "oral" violence and the novel's concern with the archival recovery of the past.¹¹¹ Indeed, Paul D's anxious, repeated

¹¹¹ Note that an unsettling aura of violence more generally pervades the scene in which Stamp Paid reveals the newspaper clipping to Paul D. This is most immediately evident in the fact that the scene takes place outside both men's place of work, the local slaughterhouse. The men's labour inflicts pain and suffering on other living bodies: "swine ... Sheep, cows, and fowl too

insistence that the picture in the clipping cannot be of Sethe because it is “not her mouth” (155) suggests that the document itself replicates on the level of discourse the more obvious material violence of the institution of slavery, which, again, is repeatedly targeted at the mouth. That is to say, just as white slave-masters and the inheritors of their racist legacy repeatedly violate or otherwise cause damage to the mouths of Morrison’s black characters, the white-authored archive—rendered synecdochically here by way of a fragment of newsprint kept in a wooden box—appears to have a comparable effect on the level of representation. The image it contains effectively “deforms” the appearance of Sethe’s mouth (as would biting off part of the tongue, say). While the other details of the portrait do at least approximate Sethe’s features (“forehead ... eyes ... neck” [154, 156]), the mouth itself resembles a sort of uncanny transplant, as if Sethe’s has been physically, perhaps violently removed (“who was this woman with a mouth that was not Sethe’s[?]” [156]).

Moreover, just as Sethe’s earlier sexual abuse leads to her literal silencing—as Anne E. Goldman notes, the resultant beating “forces her, literally, to ‘bite her tongue’” (323)—so too does the clipping effect a perhaps more fundamental muting of Sethe’s discursive “voice.” According to Davis, the

floated up and down that river, and all a Negro had to do was show up and there was work: poking, killing, cutting, skinning, case packing and saving offal” (154, 155). Stamp’s attempt to imbue the clipping’s unveiling with a degree of quiet gravitas, then, is simultaneously undercut by the accompaniment of brute sounds of terror and pain: “Pigs were crying in the chute” (154). Their work, moreover, entails a daily assault on their own dignity, due to their perpetual immersion in “stench” and “shit” (154). Paul D is thus made privy to the clipping while he has a “little pig shit” on his shoes (154), and this is just one of several points in the novel where Morrison links documentation with waste or putrefaction. See, for example, Sethe’s sense that “All *news* of [white people] was *rot*” (188, my emphasis), or the collection of bric-a-brac that Paul D finds in the cluttered back garden at 124 Bluestone Road, where there are, in close proximity, “cans jammed with the *rotting* stems of things” and “Faded *newspaper* pictures” which are “nailed to the *outhouse*” (170, my emphases).

clipping represents “a harsh official alternative to Sethe’s emotional interpretation of events” since it is “written from the perspective of the dominant [white] culture” that has a pre-determined sense of the worthlessness of a black woman’s point of view (246, 248). As a result, despite Stamp’s faith in its putative accuracy, the clipping actually colludes in perpetuating a skewed version of events that continues to render Sethe “silent” in a broader, more systemic sense, long after the actual wound to her tongue has healed: “circumscribed by the newspapers,” Sethe’s “actions and the significance of her discourse are misconstrued in the rush to turn her story into other stories that have, ultimately, nothing to do with Sethe and her family. As the telling is altered, the story told is no longer Sethe’s” (Pérez-Torres 101). As Dussere puts it, “Consulting the written account of Sethe’s, or Margaret Garner’s, history tells us little about the event itself,” since the clipping—and the 1880s media network more generally—“depend[s] upon an institutional principle of selection” that is premised on “the exclusion of blacks” (48). Morrison’s deliberate if oblique patterning of imagery in the otherwise separate depictions of Sethe’s rape and Stamp’s revelation further secures this interpretation of the clipping’s “violence.” If, on the one hand, Sethe’s wounded, incapacitated tongue is contrasted with the “*sucking*” lips and “mossy *teeth*” of her rapist, this opposition is echoed later on in the implicit contrast between the “few minutes of *teeth sucking*” of the original audience of the clipping—the prurient readers of the white media who are titillated by black misfortune—and Sethe’s silencing as her story is appropriated by others (70, 156, my emphases). *Beloved*, in other words, equates Sethe’s brutal physical violations

with her marginalization within the racialized media discourse of late nineteenth-century America.

By suturing together imagery of things that have, in their own ways, been *torn*—the corners of a slave’s mouth, offended by iron; a piece of paper cut out of a newspaper—Morrison expresses a sense of the complexities and dangers inherent in any attempt to articulate a critical or revisionist historical representation of slavery. While she does view “written records” as “crucial to the interrogation of the past,” Morrison is also painfully aware that “they can facilitate as well as describe racial violence” (Dussere 42). Given this realization, the central aim of *Beloved* cannot ultimately be, as some critics have claimed, to engage in a straightforward reclamation of “occluded or absent texts” as a means of correcting the admitted imbalances of the historical record (Peach 116). Rather, just as *Blood Meridian* finally subverts the kid’s desire to locate in the ledgers a site of originary, ontological stability from which to counter the judge’s ideology, Morrison’s novel refuses to seek “cognitive mastery” of the past by “filling in historical gaps ... [with] a coherent, singular, ‘truthful’ narrative of history” (Weinstock 142). Instead of figuring the traumatic past as “an organic body, sick or lost, but potentially sound, whole, and present,” then, *Beloved* identifies the work of “historical recovery” with an “interminable mourning” for unredeemable loss and unhealable wounds (Weinstock 142). In her influential book on the relation between enslavement, violence, and subject formation, Saidiya V. Hartman argues that representing the history of slavery must be seen as an endless, impossible, yet necessary task that takes place in relation to wounded,

incomplete bodies. According to her, the “recognition of loss is a crucial element in redressing the breach introduced by slaver[y]. This recognition entails a remembering of the pained body, not by way of a simulated wholeness [*re-membering*] but precisely through the recognition of the amputated body in its amputatedness” (74). If it is, in fact, “the ravished body that holds out the possibility of restitution, not the invocation of an illusory wholeness” (S. Hartman 74), then, from this perspective, the wounded archive of slavery is not *meant* to be healed either. Paradoxically, it is only through this recognition of the ongoing trauma of such a history—its “amputatedness”—that the dangers of false consolation or closure might be avoided.

Chapter Three

“A Violation of ... the Methods I Have Chosen”: Feminism and Subalternity

in Bharati Mukherjee’s *The Holder of the World*

Lost Objects

Following a brief, unpaginated prologue, the first scene of Bharati Mukherjee’s *The Holder of the World* (1993) occurs—not unlike the lecture on which *Archive Fever* was based—at a site that marks “the passage from one institution to another” (Derrida 3).¹¹² If Derrida’s extended meditation on the archive was, of course, originally delivered as a lecture at a London museum that was also the “last house” occupied by Freud before his death (3), Mukherjee opens this novel that is obsessed with various sorts of archives by depicting her protagonist, Beigh Masters, visiting “an old clapboard house, now museum, on an outcropping of cod-, lobster- and scallop-rich granite” in contemporary Massachusetts (8). As Beigh (“Looks like ‘Bee,’ sounds like ‘Bay-a’” [8]) attests, she is in her element here.¹¹³ After “steep[ing]” herself in the documentary archive

¹¹² Note, too, that *The Holder of the World*, like *Archive Fever*, refuses in a sense to “begin at the beginning” (Derrida 1). The first chapter that has any number is “2,” meaning that chapter 1 is both there and not there. It is fitting, then, that the brief opening section begins with the collapse of temporality: Beigh announces that she “live[s] in three time zones simultaneously ... the past, the present and the future” (3).

¹¹³ Of course, Beigh Masters shares her initials with Bharati Mukherjee, suggesting a certain analogy between narrator and author. Simon further notes a less obvious connection between their respective surnames: “Mukherjee means ‘master of liberation’” (423). This symbolic blurring of the ontological lines between author and character is thematized in the novel’s own collapsing of narrative perspective: amidst its “tangled chains of projection and identification,” Mukherjee is conflated with Beigh, who in turn gains access (via computer technology) to the interiority of one of the historical personages she is writing about (Simon 423). In a sense, then, *Holder* literalizes what LaCapra would call the “transferral” mode of historical representation, whereby the scholar *identifies* with his or her object of study (*Writing History* 35).

in the course of her academic training in the history of colonial New England, Beigh has subsequently pursued a successful career in what she rather euphemistically calls “assets research” (9, 8). In essence a kind of freelance researcher, Beigh hires herself out to wealthy individuals who are searching for lost historical objects: “People and their property often get separated. . . . Nothing is ever lost, but continents and centuries sometimes get in the way. Uniting people and possessions; it’s like matching orphaned socks through time” (3). As the novel opens, Beigh is nominally on the trail of something rather more valuable than socks, though: a “large gem” that, as one of her clients speculates, “is the most perfect diamond in the world” (3, 18). Known as the “Emperor’s Tear,” the diamond’s somewhat apocryphal provenance is seventeenth-century; it once belonged, supposedly, to Aurangzeb “*The World-Taker*” (6), the last ruler of Mughal India. Drawing on the resources of a rational scholar, as well as something more akin to the nebulous sixth sense of “shamans and psychics,” Beigh has been on the faint trail of the gemstone for over a decade and finally now seems about to “hit pay dirt” (18, 12).

But the Emperor’s Tear is not the only precious thing that she is after. Beigh’s professional assignment has gradually evolved into a personal obsession with a mysterious, less well-known contemporary of the great Aurangzeb’s named Hannah Easton, a Puritan woman also known as the “Salem Bibi” (“the white wife from Salem” [12]), whose unlikely journey from New England to the Mughal court half a world away hints at the “tangled lines” (9) of colonial history that unexpectedly connect America with India. Although locating the perfect

diamond for her client provides the immediate motivation for her quest, Beigh has become far more invested in finding out about the woman known in one of her many incarnations as “Precious-as-Pearl” (12) and in subsequently retelling the story of her extraordinary life: “For eleven years, I have been tracking the Salem Bibi ... I know her as well as any scholar has known her subject” (18). As Fakrul Alam puts it, Beigh thus spends much of the novel “assembling the facts that will enable her to reconstruct the trajectory of Hannah’s life and will satisfy her intense desire to know more about the intrepid seventeenth-century woman who appeared to have led such a fabulous life” (122).

When Beigh first arrives, however, the situation does not seem all that promising. The museum does not have the sought-after diamond after all (the precious stone Beigh had heard was there turns out to be a lesser ruby). The fact that it is the wrong gemstone lying on the “square of sun-faded green velvet under a dusty case” (5) suggests the frustrating impediments—the unavoidable wrong turns and mistaken identities—necessarily attendant on archival research, while the hovering presence of the brusque curator, Mr. Satterfield, with his continual refrain that the museum is “Closing” and that he needs to “pack ... up” (12, 14), functions as a reminder of the possessive or jealous guardianship of the archon. The “user-hostile” (12) Satterfield thus corresponds closely to the characteristic image of archivists in contemporary fiction, which tends to depict them as elderly, stuffy, socially awkward figures whose immersion in the archive has turned them into “relic[s]” (Schmuland 35). Mukherjee’s archivist indeed seems to be one with his exhibits: his “pink-domed” head, “bushy white brows,”

and “billowy earmuffs of white hair” give him the aspect of a historical “curiosity” dating “from the Old English” period (8). If Satterfield’s appearance evokes a sense of decrepitude, the museum itself has similarly seen better days: display cases are not only “dusty”; note cards are “yellowed” or “faded” (6), while the exhibits themselves have been damaged by water and eaten away by insects (13-14).¹¹⁴ This is a moribund, suffocating history: “Flies have perished inside the case[s]” (6).

But things quickly come to life in a scene of meaningful, if not miraculous archival discovery. Satterfield reluctantly leads Beigh to a mysterious “darkened room” at the back of the museum that contains two large crates that have been “Magic Markered” with the legend “Salem Bibi Stuffs [sic]” (12). Digging through the initial layers of detritus as if the crates were “archaeology pits,” the searchers eventually uncover a series of anonymous paintings, “five crudely framed miniatures” dating from the Mughal period (12, 13). Satterfield is characteristically indifferent, but Beigh is entranced. In glorious colours and exquisite detail, the miniatures deftly depict various episodes in the Salem Bibi’s life, from her frontier childhood in America, to her involvement in an epic battle between Aurangzeb and a Hindu lord who becomes the Bibi’s lover. In furnishing this visual-narrative record, the paintings seem to bring Beigh “imperceptibly closer” to the “secret” of this mysterious, globe-trotting woman’s life (18, 19). As a result, a breathless and prostrate Beigh experiences what O’Driscoll and Bishop

¹¹⁴ Schmuland further discusses the underlying “popular perception” that archives are “dirty and musty” spaces (44). For an extended discussion of the “dustiness” of the archive, particularly in relation to the materiality of archival objects, practices, and bodies, see Steedman’s *Dust: The Archive and Cultural History*.

call the “archival jolt” (2), that moment of almost visceral encounter between the archivist and a past suddenly made uncannily present: “There is surely one moment in every life when hope surprises us like grace, and when love, or at least its promise, landscapes the jungle into Eden. The paintings ... are small, the largest the size of a man’s face, the smallest no larger than a fist. They make me, who grew up in an atomized decade, feel connected to still-to-be-detected galaxies” (Mukherjee, *Holder* 13). Here, in a magical instant, the archive seemingly reveals its secrets and blesses Beigh—a self-described “searcher-after-origins” (8)—with an intimation of transcendence, a sense of cosmic oneness in which the anomie of the postmodern present dissolves in the fusion of the lost past with the future-to-come.

More importantly, however, Beigh’s discovery of the traces of Hannah’s existence—both in this opening scene and throughout the novel more generally—can also be seen as having a resonance in terms of the politics of identity. Beigh is, after all, a “well-trained feminist” (61) who consistently demonstrates a keen sense of the ways in which conventional historiographic methodologies and forms of representation, including the archive, function by means of ideologically conditioned (albeit often implicit) systems of exclusion. Satterfield’s obvious indifference to the material relating to Hannah’s life thus stands metonymically for the larger sense in which patriarchal historical discourse has consistently marginalized women’s experiences and silenced their voices. Given such a context, Beigh’s investigation of this “secret history” (60)—in which, as she eventually discovers, a poor, anonymous Puritan girl travels the world, marries a

prince, learns the ways of an alien culture, and ultimately changes the course of world history—becomes a reassertion of heretofore lost or diminished female agency. *Holder* thus depicts Beigh’s archival research as part of what is, in essence, a feminist “Reclamation Project” (171): a political intervention in which “restrictive” (181) societal prejudices concerning women’s intellectual and physical capabilities are demolished and replaced by the instructive, long “suppress[ed]” history of “a woman [who was] impatient to test herself” against the strictures of patriarchal hegemony (178).

This chapter begins, then, by considering further some of the key ways Mukherjee’s novel engages with important questions about the place of gender in the archive. Starting with a close analysis of the subtle power dynamics evident in the opening encounter between Beigh and Satterfield, I argue that Mukherjee perceives the archive as at once constituting a technology of ideological domination and, at least potentially, being a critical resource that enables resistance to the latter. In other words, if Hannah Easton is in a certain sense historically “invisible,” marginalized by the implicitly masculinist assumptions that structure traditional archival research, meaningful traces of her life can, nonetheless, be recovered or reconstructed by a committed feminist scholar, as long as she is willing to expand the definition of what “counts” as an archive to encompass the usually ignored sorts of records that women tend to leave behind. In “reconstruct[ing] a life” from unexpected “data” streams (287), Beigh is able to articulate a “corrective” (165) historical narrative that turns our assumptions about women’s roles “inside out” (164). Thus, as Beigh uncovers and retells an

unexpected story of “‘Boldness,’” “‘Dissent,’” and “‘Independence’” (55), Hannah progresses from relative obscurity to assuming a central (if previously unacknowledged) role in “the history of the United States” itself (58).

Chapter Three concludes, however, by complicating this account of *Holder* as an ostensibly redemptive feminist revision of American—and global—history. My critique centres on the novel’s crucial moment of climax, the scene late in the novel in which Beigh enters a kind of electronic “archive,” a virtual reality simulation that has been designed by her lover to replicate—bring to *life*, as it were—the inert historical information she has hitherto been collating. Here, via the mediation of an MIT supercomputer, Beigh attains a quasi-magical proximity to her object of study, interacting with Hannah herself in the virtual guise of the latter’s Indian servant and friend, Bhagmati. It is, on a certain level, unquestionably a profound moment of union and transcendence, one in which the divisive temporal, geographical, and ethnic differences that, as the novel repeatedly demonstrates, sever past and present, West and East, white and brown, finally seem to dissipate. *Holder* here indeed seems to militate for a vision of feminist resistance in the form of “universal sisterhood” (Iyer 37). As an extension of this moment of virtual solidarity, the novel subsequently entertains the utopian possibility of a cross-cultural “feminine community” (Alam 129) by having Hannah give birth to a biracial daughter—“the proof of *her* ‘Indian’ lover”—to whom she bequeaths her matriarchal legacy of “eccentric dissent” that has as its unexpected fruit the American Revolution itself (Mukherjee, *Holder* 293, 294). Ultimately, though, I close the chapter by suggesting that while Mukherjee

ostensibly equates the representational transparency of the technologized archive with the possibility of a transnational (and transhistorical) feminist critique, a closer analysis of this climactic scene reveals a highly ambivalent, destabilizing subtext. Generally speaking, as Cowart points out, Mukherjee's fiction frequently depicts the putatively emancipatory mutations of personal identity that result from various transnational dislocations as inextricable from a "sometimes literal violence" (*Trailing Clouds* 76). *Holder* likewise demonstrates that Hannah's (and, implicitly, Beigh's) status as the hybrid, transgressive, and agential female subject of revisionist history is necessarily produced in relation to the problematic treatment—indeed, the *violation*—of Bhagmati's virtual body, itself refigured as a kind of archival technology. Drawing on recent critical debates around the vexed politics of the recovery of subaltern subjects from colonial archives, I ultimately contend that Mukherjee's text self-consciously investigates the fraught ideological terrain of historical and political representation by imbricating its narrator's "radical" or "progressive" project of feminist historical recovery with an appropriative, "archival" violence exercised on the body of the non-Western or "Third-World" woman.

What Happens When a House Becomes a Museum?

Holder may be described as "archival" both in the sense that the text originates in Mukherjee's own extensive research (Mukherjee, "Naming" 61-62) and remains fixated on a diegetic level with the myriad places in which the traces of the past—"books, paintings, engravings, trade records, journals, archival

records” (Keen 228)—are secreted before being transmitted to the present. Much of *Holder*, particularly in terms of its contemporary plot, takes place in or around actual archives, or other, similar spaces of organized, more or less formal collection or storage, including museums, auction houses, graveyards, as well as digital environments (Luo 81).¹¹⁵ In particular, Beigh’s “subsidiary” (Alam 120) first-person narrative comprises a series of repeated “archival” encounters in which she meets and talks with an “archon” who then mediates in some way a meaningful—if at times teasing—encounter with the remnants of the past. In a sense, then, Beigh’s narrative is structured in terms of various iterations of the opening scene with Satterfield: she describes meeting her employer, a Hollywood mogul named Bugs Kilken, who invites her into his garrisoned private gallery and shows her a piece of Puritan embroidery that may or may not be Hannah’s work (45-47); traveling to India, she is shown around parts of Calcutta where the physical remains of colonial history may still be directly encountered, sometimes musealized under protective plastic, sometimes overgrown or disregarded (97-100); she remembers meeting a former boyfriend years earlier at a graduate school

¹¹⁵ Several of the novel’s critics have similarly pointed out that Mukherjee emphasizes “the one reconstructing the history” as much as “the reconstructed historical figure” itself (Simon 421). *Holder* is thus “a book about the process of history making” (Mukherjee, “Holders” 99). In this regard, Luo notes that Mukherjee “make[s] extensive use of archival materials from museum records to testimonials” and deploys those materials self-consciously to produce a “complex postmodernist historiography” (81, 94). Similarly, Alam takes note of Beigh’s “archival skills,” and further suggests that they are reflective of Mukherjee’s own practices: “It is not difficult for a reader ... to imagine Mukherjee doing research for her book like [her character] ... digging through the archives” (123, 130). The disciplinary training of Mukherjee’s protagonist in historiography is discussed by Iyer, who describes Beigh as an “accredited historian” seeking “historical accuracy” in the archives (35-36), and Buell, for whom Beigh is a “skilled historian conscious of her family’s New England antecedence” (82). Buell further argues that this points to the novel’s “metahistorical self-consciousness” (82). Finally, Moraru sees the novel’s fascination with the depiction of texts and documents as part of a more general, self-conscious concern with metafictional intertextuality that is characteristically postmodern; Moraru claims that the text’s musealization of the past reflects “our time’s unprecedented circulation and refashioning of cultural products, ideas, styles, symbols, and peoples” (“Purloining” 256).

archaeological dig, where he showed her his collection of “fragments” and talked about how best to reconstruct the past in order to establish “secret . . . continuities” with the present (31-32); while, in the novel’s climactic scene, she is led into a top secret room at MIT in which an exact simulation of the past is reconstructed using the latest technology, and where—as in the movie mogul’s gallery—a piece of Hannah’s artwork hangs on the wall, presiding over a project of computerized time-retrieval (288-89). Throughout *Holder*, then, Beigh persistently seeks out various kinds of archives in an attempt to recover a past that fascinates her, driven by an asset hunter’s somewhat quixotic conviction that “Nothing is ever lost” and that she must thus “continue digging long after economists and historians have stopped” (3, 165).

Given Beigh’s deeply-felt desire to reunite the temporarily lost past with the present, Keen is surely right to argue that *Holder* can be situated, at least in terms of certain key moments, within the tradition of the conventional “archival romance,” a genre in which the archive rewards the heroic researcher’s dogged persistence with an intimation of the “truth,” a glimpse which in turn “yields a precious sense of belonging” (228, 214).¹¹⁶ At times, Beigh indeed gains just such a sense of belonging by dint of delving into the past, a process that provides her with a determinate “place in the universe” (Mukherjee, *Holder* 23). Certainly,

¹¹⁶ Note, too, how Beigh’s archival activities are motivated by her lovers. To some degree, that is, this particular archival romance is also “romantic” in the more quotidian sense; fittingly, Beigh herself at one point describes her historiographic project as a kind of “love song” to Venn, her Indian boyfriend (59). *Holder* can also be classified as an archival romance in its focus on colonial-era India, an exotic, easily romanticized historical period that, as Keen points out, often provides the setting for fictional engagements with the archive, particularly by British and postcolonial or Commonwealth authors (218). Alam argues in more general terms that *Holder* is generically speaking a romance (125).

Beigh—if not Mukherjee herself—often seems enamored of the power of the archive to situate the individual in a meaningful way in relation to the larger, potentially alienating or impersonal forces and structures of history. As one character puts it in describing another archive, the act of collecting together the fragments of the past seems to entail the utopian hope of “redeem[ing]” something that has been lost (47).

What is most interesting about this series of archival encounters, however, is less this sense of the generalized “importance” of the archive for the transmission of some apparently transcendent or neutral historical meaning, than the more subtle point Mukherjee seems to be making about the irreducible *politics* of archiving, particularly in its gendered dimension. Significantly, each of the scenes that features Beigh entering the archive in order to search for the meaning of the past also involves an encounter between a woman and a man in which a gendered power dynamic is evident. While the novel’s main archival quester is a woman of “confidence and breeding” (8), its “archons”—the authority figures guarding the archive who ultimately decide whether or not to let Beigh in, how much information to reveal to her, and so on—are exclusively male, and include ex-boyfriends, her current lover, her employer, and her tour-guide; in other words, they are all figures who could be seen as exercising some kind of power over Beigh. Like Derrida, then, Mukherjee comprehends the fundamentally “patriarchic” dimension of archontic power (Derrida, *Archive* 3), and views the archive both as a set of real institutional practices and as a resonant cultural figure that is indissociable from the question of gendered power relations. If, at times,

the novel depicts those relations as relatively innocuous and thus not particularly “patriarchal” in their implications, nonetheless a consistent implication of Mukherjee’s text is that the archive is usually a place that has been created and is now overseen by men, and into which women can enter by male sufferance only.

In this regard, the early scene in the maritime museum is exemplary. At first glance, perhaps, the power dynamic between Beigh and Mr. Satterfield, the curator, does not appear to be particularly gendered. Indeed, if anything, it is more a sign of class conflict: Beigh’s uncharacteristically self-effacing demeanour—whereas she is naturally “steely,” here she goes to great lengths not to seem “disrespectful” in her overt interest in the museum’s exhibits, even getting down “on [her] knees” before the curator at one point in a symbolic gesture of prostration (13)—explicitly results from a self-consciousness about her marked status as “High Yuppie” (8), particularly within the confines of this rather drab and seemingly underfunded provincial museum. Nor is Satterfield’s crusty deportment necessarily or solely misogynistic: one suspects that his hostile “barks” (7) would be directed at any unwanted visitor, regardless of his or her gender. However, the undeniable tension between the two characters in this scene (Satterfield makes sure he can keep an eye on Beigh at all times during her visit [11], while she “play[s] stupid” to avoid raising suspicions of her real interests [13]) starts to look more pointedly gender-based when it is juxtaposed with a number of other key details. Indeed, a closer inspection of this scene reveals gender, particularly in the context of issues of power and hierarchy, to be a key concern in relation to its depiction of the archive.

First, Mukherjee suggests that the impulse to archive originates in a kind of masculinist desire to dominate a feminized other. Thus, for example, the maritime museum, which is full of colonial-era artefacts, has its roots in the historical practice of piracy.¹¹⁷ Noting that “from this house a certain William Maverick once guided sloops of plundering privateers,” Beigh reflects that the foundational archival gesture of consignment (and, more immediately, the foundation of the museum itself) is inextricable from violent acts of appropriation that are premised on and reproduce a discourse of hierarchized gender relations: “Each conqueror museums his victim, terms him decadent, celebrates his own austere fortitude and claims it ... as the [key] to victory” (8). Here, Mukherjee’s odd neologistic verb (“museuming”) draws attention to the act of collection or archiving as a violent *process*: the ostensibly triumphant culmination of a larger project of domination, it is identified primarily with the colonizing impulse of Europeans, whose history has left in its wake both a trail of destruction (Beigh admits that her own ancestors tended to “slash, burn, move on” [9] after they arrived in North America) and a series of phallic domiciles—Beigh refers to them tellingly as “erection[s]”—as “monument[s]” to their deeds (10). If this “pioneer virility” (43) is explicitly coded as masculine, then the archive in turn helps to secure its dominance by symbolically positioning the non-Western, colonized other as “feminine.” The exotic objects that were plundered by New England

¹¹⁷ *Holder* consistently links colonialism with the act of violently collecting the material objects of the other (122-23, 168, 186). Moreover, Mukherjee insists that this is not solely a European phenomenon. While obviously emphasizing (and critiquing) the violent excesses of European imperialism, the novel also makes it plain that such power relations are characteristic of other cultures. The Mughal emperor Aurangzeb, for instance, is described in similar terms that emphasize the link between archiving and colonial violence (he is “a conqueror and acquirer” [271]).

pirates thus display the supposedly “cosmetic masculinity” of orientalized men (11), who are seen as soft and weak and are characterized by stereotypically feminine traits such as excess, display, ornamentation, and luxury (6). Moreover, although Beigh at first claims that “In this Museum of Maritime Trade ... There is no order, no hierarchy of intrinsic value or aesthetic worth,” it quickly becomes clear that there is a gendered hierarchy at work, with an implicitly masculine “Puritan pragmatism”—embodied in exhibits of “crude and blackened objects” with workaday applications—set against the clearly feminized excess characteristic of “Mughal opulence” (10). Indeed, Beigh further perceives this subordination when she imagines what a group of privileged, presumably white “Cub Scouts and Brownies” would say if they were to visit the museum. Again, the emphasis is on a gendered and racialized hierarchy that is bound up with the nature of the material culture on display in the museum itself: “*We beat those Asians because our pots are heavy and black ... No paintings, no inlays of rubies and pearls. Our men wore animal skins or jerkins of crude muslin ... Those Indian guys [the Mughal rulers] wore earrings and dresses and necklaces. When they ran out of space on their bodies they punched holes in their wives’ ears ... to show off more junk*” (11). Here, the example of Beigh’s imagined audience of youthful museum-goers clearly points to the ideological stakes inherent in any project of archiving, particularly one founded on the “freeboot[ing]” (11) activities of a Eurocentric and patriarchal colonial project. Finally, then, it should come as no surprise that the museum was founded—beyond the initial context of the hypermasculine activities of piracy, colonization, and early capitalism—as an

exercise in the transmission of a patrimony. As Satterfield grumpily explains, the museum's exhibits come mainly from local family "heirlooms" that were kept in "grandfathers' chests" before being entrusted to the museum's care (12, my emphases). In this archive of Salem's seafaring history, then, the "feminine" is fundamentally the sign of an otherness that has been marginalized by a privileged patriarchal history.

In the gendered subtext of this scene, then, Mukherjee lays bare the discursive mechanisms by which the category of the "feminine" is yoked to a subordinated other against which a masculine, colonizing, sovereign subject defines itself as powerful and self-sufficient. Again, the archive is depicted as the key mechanism underlying such an ideology. The act of collecting or plundering that constitutes the maritime museum is simultaneously one of violent colonial expropriation, meaning that the "archive" names at once a seemingly dependent or contingent result of some prior process of expropriation and the fundamental means by which that process occurs in the first place. The ideological structures put in place by this process, meanwhile, are subsequently secured as unexamined "fact" by the exclusionary mechanisms of the museum/archive in its role as founding substrate of historiography, whose subtle hierarchizing reinforces the seemingly natural or innate inferiority of the feminized other (again, even Beigh seems momentarily to see the museum's obvious biases as a transparent *lack* of hierarchy [10]).

Given these important if somewhat implicit ideological effects, the underlying motivation for Beigh's visit to the museum becomes more significant.

Although she does not explicitly articulate any sense of recuperative mission at this point, Beigh clearly seeks to restore balance to the historical representation of seventeenth-century Salem (and colonial America more broadly) by suggesting that its past cannot be reduced, without some injustice, to a tale of virile and violent conquering and plundering; there is more to this story than all that, and Hannah Easton is in some ways the representative of this excess. One of the most obvious ways in which Beigh attempts to produce an “alternative history of empire” (Moraru, “Purloining” 255) is by shifting the focus of historical investigation from scenarios of masculine action to those suggestive of more feminine qualities. Indeed, unlike the freebooters of New England, or, for that matter, the “white-collar” collectors of her own time (Mukherjee, *Holder* 18), Beigh is not interested in material wealth at all: “I couldn’t care less about the Emperor’s Tear. I care only about the Salem Bibi,” she states unequivocally (18). Conversely, of course, Hannah is of no interest to the male curator. When Beigh uncovers the beautiful and fragile miniature paintings of Hannah, Satterfield responds gruffly and dismissively: ““We don’t keep pictures here”” (13). Hannah’s images provide traces of a history that has no place in this archive of male heroism and domination. (Satterfield is unsurprisingly more enamoured of the “frayed wool rug” featuring a “hunting motif” that has, significantly, been used to *conceal* the images of Hannah [13].) Instead the paintings document a history of the liberation of desire in which the female subject—in this case, Hannah herself—is central rather than peripheral. Unlike the thoroughly subordinated and confined Puritan goodwife, with her “*virtue ... guarded by*

bonnets and capes and full skirts” (11), Hannah—at least in terms of these visual representations—is strong, outgoing, and radically open to new experiences. Looking at one of the series of miniatures, for instance, Beigh describes Hannah’s likeness in terms that evoke a female capacity for movement, dynamism, action, adventure, sexuality: “Her hips are thrust forward, muscles readied to wade into deeper, indigo water ... her chest is taut with audacious yearnings. Her neck, sinewy as a crane’s, strains skyward ... her restlessness shapes itself into a rose-legged, scarlet-crested crane and takes flight” (15). The bird imagery here is picked up in another of the series, in an even more direct image of female liberation: “At [Hannah’s] henna-decorated, high-arched feet, a bird cage lies on its side, its microscopic door recently ripped off its hinges” (17). In a certain sense, then, Beigh’s act of archival recovery—her discovery of these lost images in this obscure museum—complements Hannah’s initial acts of rebellion and escape; Beigh effectively rescues Hannah from imprisonment in the “wooden crates” (11) that constitute the “patriarchive” and which symbolize the marginalization of women like Hannah by the structural biases of a male-dominated historiography. If in this scene Beigh literally uncovers and thus retrieves a series of historical documents that have been lost for centuries, she also clearly engages in a more figurative or symbolic work of recovery: that of the heretofore “secret life of a Puritan woman” (19) who defied the conventions of her time, but whose experiences have, until now, not been seen as having “real value, real meaning” (12), at least by the standards of conventional historical discourse.

The Lens of History

Despite her apparent confidence in the mechanisms of archival preservation, Mukherjee's protagonist is also well aware of the contingencies of historical transmission; as Dr. Venn Iyer (her researcher boyfriend) somewhat dismissively puts it, "Life is extremely wasteful of data" (220). Throughout *Holder*, Beigh frequently reflects on the various exigencies that threaten the past with erasure and that thus often make her chosen profession, at best, a quixotic exercise punctuated by rare moments of serendipitous discovery. Mukherjee's version of the archive is continually shadowed by the threat of destruction or dissolution. For example, the Mughal miniatures in which Hannah features seem themselves barely to have survived the seemingly unavoidable ravages of time's passage, figured here as the encroachment of a threatening natural world: "The corners are browned by seawater or monsoon stains. White ants have eaten through the courtiers' sycophantic faces and lovers' tangled legs" (13-14). Similarly, Beigh sees as miraculous her discovery in the "Brookfield town registries" of documentary traces of her own first American relative, given the unlikely odds of such material's preservation in the face of the "billions of births, the fires and floodings that separate" the seventeenth from the twentieth century (25). History here is imagined as an endless series of apocalyptic events that undermines the very possibility of cultural memory.¹¹⁸ Indeed, even as Beigh

¹¹⁸ More generally, *Holder* features a litany of catastrophic, destructive events: massacres, battles, sieges, riots, fires, typhoons, flash floods, and explosions. Hannah is, as Beigh intimates, continually surrounded by "chaos" (204). In a more general sense, Beigh realizes while contemplating the final battle in which Hannah played a central role that "human history" tends to be violently occluded when it is viewed from a cosmic scale in which "the human body is nothing very special" and "human lives" are worth "less than a grain of sand" (253, 254).

approaches the putative “origins” of the history she is reconstructing, following in Hannah’s footsteps all the way to India’s Coromandel Coast, any traces of the “faded glories” of the colonial past seem tenuously present. Reduced to meaningless “rubble,” this history has virtually been erased, just as the colonists’ gravestones have been “worn clean of inscriptions” in the intervening centuries (97-99).

If this erasure is in some sense part of an inevitable process of decay or entropy—nature eroding the deeds of a man’s life, in the terms of McCarthy’s Judge Holden—it can also result from human indifference or caprice: the past is continually re-purposed to suit the needs of a forgetful, careless present, as Beigh realizes when she sees that the murals on a pre-colonial Hindu fort have been “whitewashed” by the English (265), or that another locally famous landmark “has been rebuilt and broken and rebuilt ... and renamed over and over again” (222). Ironically, in fact, the Indian tour-guide whom Beigh hires to show her around the ruins of old Calcutta—in other words, to relay the city’s past to her—seems perfectly indifferent to his own history: “The ruins hold no fascination for Mr. Abraham ... Rubble is rubble to him” (98). Apparently somewhat put out by Beigh’s insistence on hearing about the region’s past—when not “foreclos[ing]” her questions entirely, he merely responds with a “shrugged yes” (98)—Mr. Abraham is a figure of deracinated cultural amnesia, someone for whom the past is irrelevant, except perhaps as a commodified source of income. An “up-to-date young man” whose technological know-how is signalled by his ever-present “transistor radio,” he provides a foil for Beigh’s obsession with “historical

antecedents”: “He lives for development, a South Indian Silicon Valley. He belongs to the future” (97-99). Mr. Abraham is yet another example of the novel’s archontic figures that enable and mediate Beigh’s forays into the archive (notice how one of the ruins he shows her is likened to “a sheaf of ill-stacked ledger papers,” or the archive’s traditional contents [98]). However, somewhat reminiscent of the kid in *Blood Meridian*, who, as we saw, has at once “divested” himself of his past (4) and yet managed to retain it in a series of figurative archives, Mr. Abraham’s almost total lack of interest in the history for which he serves as nominal guardian indicates Mukherjee’s underlying anxieties about the archive’s potential for safeguarding a seemingly rapidly receding past.

In *Holder*, that is, the link between the vanished past and the present that is provided by the archive is consistently revealed as extremely fragile. To make matters more difficult, Beigh’s comprehension of her object of study—the life of Hannah Easton—is also frequently frustrated by a fundamental epistemological slipperiness that causes the lineaments of Hannah’s experience to be especially difficult to trace. Despite the scholar’s dogged and voluminous research, Hannah’s life, to some extent, remains a “secret,” something Beigh finally has no “way of explaining” (Mukherjee, *Holder* 19, 226). Throughout the novel, Mukherjee thus emphasizes the ways in which Hannah resists finally being *known*, an intellectual impediment Beigh imagines, ironically enough given her encounter with Satterfield, by means of a hunting metaphor: “Hannah . . . still eludes my net. Time has made her free from me” (90). Hannah, as quarry, eludes Beigh’s discursive trap partly because she represents an historical aporia. A

“person undreamed of in Puritan society” because of her unconventional worldview (60), she is difficult to position in relation to her cultural context; there is a “wildness” about her that is the source of her allure but that also makes her seem “larger than any system” Beigh might use to account for her (62, 59).

Significantly, the elusiveness that both piques and frustrates Beigh’s historiographic desire is represented by Mukherjee as being a product of Hannah’s ambiguous, trace-like presence (perhaps “absence” would be a better term) in the archive. First, Hannah is depicted as a “lack” (Moraru, “Purloining” 257); there are simply not that many documentary sources left that tell us anything about her life. Whereas people in Beigh’s society, surrounded by an unprecedented proliferation of information technologies, are almost obsessively recorded (“observed, adored, commented upon, celebrated” [Mukherjee, *Holder* 90]), most individuals in earlier periods remain largely unknown due to the paucity of available data; in Hannah’s case, for example, a nearly decade-long period in her life has, to Beigh’s chagrin, left behind “only one record” (55). Moreover, many of the records that *do* survive are incomplete or somehow tangential to Beigh’s interests. Evidence of Hannah’s miraculous surgical skill, for example, is “chronicled obliquely” across a range of heterogeneous, unconnected sources (diaries, oral history, medical treatises), meaning that it is difficult to reconstruct as a meaningful totality (49-50). The evidence testifying to Hannah’s life has been fragmented into “a million scraps of information” that are now “scattered in a thousand libraries” (164). Even those few documents or artifacts that were directly produced by Hannah contribute to the overall sense of ambiguity that has accrued

around her life. Hannah's own memoirs, for instance, provide only "cryptic" evidence of its author's thoughts and feelings (235), and a comparable note of indirection is struck by other examples of her writings that, as Beigh recognizes centuries later, work to "protect" Hannah's self from being revealed, rather than immediately laying that self bare to scholarly investigation (131). A similarly elusive effect is produced by the vibrant embroidery in which Hannah once gave flight to her creative imagination. A particular piece—"one of the great colonial [American] samplers," Beigh tells us, it incongruously depicts the Taj Mahal—is characterized by a stylistic "extravagance and ambiguity" that has left its origins and authorship mysterious (44-45). Hannah's handiwork, with its inexplicable blending of American and Indian subject matter, confounds the archivist's characteristic desire to establish a firm foundation in provenance. Another sampler (this one produced by Hannah in India, but featuring a New England landscape) likewise leads to "consternation" amongst the writers of the Sotheby's auction catalogue, who try futilely to "explain the origin of such transcontinental adumbration" (238). While Beigh seems to have gone one better than her fellow scholars in that she has at least discovered Hannah's true identity (13, 57), she remains similarly unable to establish a final "interpretation" of her subject's life, since it "can be read as a sermon on any topic" (29). Indeed, if Hannah is "everywhere" in the documentary record of the late seventeenth century (60), her hands seemingly on "everything" (78), she is also, ultimately, *nowhere*—a ghostly presence akin to the restless spirits that Hannah herself believed haunted her museum-like house on the southeastern coast of India (127).

However, this elusive “spectrality” is not merely an effect, on the one hand, of external, natural threats to the archive’s actual existence, or, on the other, of the fact that the record of Hannah’s unaccountable behaviour and opinions has been filtered through unconventional or aporetic modes of documentation. Rather, Mukherjee suggests that a more pertinent explanation for Hannah’s flickering, insubstantial presence in the annals of colonial history resides in the ideological underpinnings of the archive itself. The novel frequently presents the past—or, at least, our *view* of it—as a subjective, artificial construct, something Mukherjee usually figures in terms of optical metaphors: in *Holder*, the past is often presented as something that has been “framed” (13) or is seen through a “prism” (11) or “lens” (60), and which thus has the potential to assume the refracted form of “different realit[ies]” (5).¹¹⁹ In thus emphasizing the prismatic effects of archival mediation, Mukherjee recognizes in turn, to borrow from Carole

¹¹⁹ Mukherjee’s emphasis on historical representation as an irreducibly *selective* process is compatible with the postmodern archivist Harris’s concept of the “archival sliver.” Writing in the context of post-apartheid South Africa, in which the political project of the recovery of the “truth” about a shameful or traumatic past assumed a particular urgency, Harris cautions against the desire for completeness, claiming every archive is necessarily partial: “the documentary record provides just a sliver of a window into the event. Even if archivists . . . were to preserve every record generated throughout the land, they would still have only a sliver of a window into that country’s experience” (64-65). In one sense, the archive’s failure to capture the totality of the historical event or subject stems from the inevitable schism between representation and reality: on a fundamental level, “even if there is ‘a reality,’ ultimately it is unknowable. The event, the process, the origin, in its *uniqueness*, is irrecoverable” (65). However, Harris also points to the multiple ways in which the archival “sliver” is produced through contingent, thoroughly *ideological* acts of selection and exclusion: “in practice, this [ideal] record universum is substantially reduced through deliberate and inadvertent destruction by records creators and managers” (65). In other words, the archive is not merely constituted by exclusions as a “natural” fact of its imperfect existence; rather, those blind spots often reflect—and, indeed, help to reinforce or even produce—the assumptions of the dominant social groups who control archival production and access in the first place. Harris categorically states, for example, that “apartheid’s memory institutions [such as the South African State Archives Service] legitimised apartheid rule” (69), by marginalizing non-white South Africans both as potential users of the archive and as subjects for archival preservation in the first instance (71, 73). For Harris, then, as for Mukherjee, archivists’ selective *construction* of the reality they often purport merely to “reflect” (65) is as much the result of socio-political concerns as it is of the inevitable losses attendant on the passing of time.

Gerson's broader assertion, that "the archival institution reflects social constructions of cultural value" (12). In particular, *Holder* emphasizes the ways in which gender ideology conditions the processes whereby some things get preserved in the archive and some get excluded. That is to say, somewhat like the eponymous figure of the Rani of Sirmur in Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's "Essay on Reading the Archives," Hannah "surfaces briefly, as an individual, in the archives," before disappearing again (Spivak, "Rani" 266). Like that of Spivak's nameless Indian noblewoman,¹²⁰ Hannah's oscillation between archival presence and absence is a product of her gendered marginalization by a dominant archival discourse that is coded in terms of masculine priorities. In the essay, Spivak argues that the Rani (a minor figure of indigenous royalty in nineteenth-century British-ruled India who is briefly mentioned in colonial documents) "surfaces" solely in relation to patriarchal assumptions about what is worth recording: she is only mentioned in official documents "because she is a king's wife," meaning that she is defined as a historical *subject*—in both senses of the word—in terms of her "instrumentality" in relation to male power and desire (266, 267).

Likewise, in the novel, Mukherjee suggests that Hannah's marginal presence in the archives is often merely the result of the afterthoughts of the powerful or important men who surround her, and who tend to view her, to borrow Spivak's terms, as an "instrumental" object of possession or exchange. We

¹²⁰ As with the historical figure of the Rani, scholars "are not sure of [Hannah's] name" (Spivak, "Rani" 266). "The Rani of Sirmur: An Essay in Reading the Archives" (1985) marks the earliest articulation of Spivak's ambivalent engagement with the question of retrieving silenced, subaltern subjects from the archives of hegemonic discourse, whether it is indigenous patriarchy or European colonialism. A more in-depth discussion of *Holder* in relation to Spivak's complex theories of subaltern non-agency and Western intellectual production, especially as articulated in the more famous essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (1988), is taken up later in this chapter.

see this characteristic instrumentality in evidence, for example, in the correspondence between Hannah's adoptive father and the family representatives of a hopeful suitor named Solomon Pynchon.¹²¹ The letters are included by Mukherjee in the form of "modernized" transcripts, and are, at least within the novel's fictionalized academic milieu, well-known examples of early Colonial marriage custom that are "frequently annotated" by Americanist scholars "for the evidence [they provide] of close attention paid to finances and practicalities ... in a Puritan context" (56, 57).¹²² What these scholars do not pay enough attention to, Beigh complains, is *Hannah's* perspective on the events of her own life. The correspondence is a back-and-forth between two men in which the ownership of a woman's reproductive capabilities is negotiated, without a thought being given to

¹²¹ Of course, Mukherjee's choice of character name here points to her emphasis throughout on intertextuality. Beigh in fact wonders whether Solomon is an ancestor of Thomas Pynchon, which then leads her to imagine Hannah as a version of the similarly mysterious female protagonist of Pynchon's *V.* (60). Some of the other pre-texts that *Holder* refers to in its self-conscious intertextuality include the Bible (43), Puritan captivity narratives, such as Mary Rowlandson's 1682 work *The Sovereignty and Goodness of God: Being a Narrative of the Captivity and Restoration of Mrs. Mary Rowlandson* (51-52, 180), Dryden's play *Aureng-Zebe* (165), Keats' "Ode on a Grecian Urn" (from which the novel takes the epigraphs to its four main parts), the traditional Hindu legend of Hanuman and Sita (176-83), and, of course, Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*, of which *Holder* can be seen as a revisionist retelling (294). For detailed discussions of Mukherjee's appropriation of Hawthorne in particular, see Buell and Sen. Mukherjee's generally intertextual aesthetics are discussed by Moraru, and Luo.

¹²² The "transcribed" letters, along with the titles of the anthologies or monographs in which they are published (such as *Puritans Come A-Courting: Romantic Love in an Age of Severity*) provide a convincing parody of the conventions of academic discourse. At moments such as this, Mukherjee creates the illusion of non-fictionality via recourse to the conventions of the scholarly paratext. As Hutcheon argues, in earlier forms of historical discourse (including the traditional historical novel) this apparatus was deployed in order to assert the supposed "factuality and historicity" of the text; conversely, the use of the paratext in historiographic metafiction is designed to be "deliberately awkward, ... a means of directing our attention to the very processes by which we understand and interpret the past through its textual representations—be it in history or in fiction" (*Politics* 80). Hutcheon's general comments here about the conventions of historiographic metafiction clearly apply to Mukherjee's novel: "the paratextual insertion of ... historical documents" in self-conscious novels like *Holder* produces not an effect of the real but an "alienation effect": "the historical documents dropped into [such] fictions have the potential effect of interrupting any illusion, of making the reader into an aware collaborator, not a passive consumer" (*Politics* 84-85).

her own desires; as Beigh laments, “These are letters written not by her nor to her, but about her,” meaning that, consequently, “no record of her feelings exists” (55, 61). Later, in a similarly reductive context, Hannah also “surfaces briefly” as an object of another man’s discourse, in a letter written by a fellow passenger on the ship to India. Described by the authoritative male correspondent (a schoolmaster) in the paternalistic terms of an idealized femininity—he is struck by her “comeliness and delicacy” and worries about her ability to survive amidst the purported “filth” of the colonies (92)—Hannah’s point of view is once more subordinated to the requirements of a patriarchal system in which female bodies service male needs and desires. Hannah, along with the few other women on board the *Fortune* on this voyage, is important and therefore worthy of mention in the archives only insofar as she provides the East India Company’s employees with salutary female “companionship” that, because it guarantees domestic stability, provides a necessary bulwark against the “abhorred miscegenation” that is a constant danger amidst the “filth” of the supposedly hyper-sexualized tropical latitudes (92).

Hannah is, in fact, already married to the roguish Irish privateer Gabriel Legge, whose position with the Company necessitated her journey to the subcontinent in the first place. However, Gabriel’s often unconventional conduct and relatively forward-thinking attitudes belie the way he, like these other men, marginalizes Hannah in the documentary record that he is required to produce as a Company factor. Gabriel, as do many other characters in the novel, engages in an “obsessive chronicling” of his experiences, to the extent that his eyesight begins to

fail from the strain (145). Yet, although he “retire[s] early” every night to make “scrupulous entries” in his ledgers, he leaves Hannah out of this official account of events, just as she is physically excluded by her husband’s shuttered “bedroom doors.” Consequently, as much as Beigh “pore[s] over Gabriel’s accounts for mention of Hannah, ‘my goode wyffe,’” she finds evidence of “only [a] paltry recognition of the woman sewing just a few feet away” (144-45). Gabriel’s diary is thus pertinent to Beigh’s scholarly interests less for what it explicitly states than for what it “unintentionally discloses” (142) about Hannah’s relative insignificance in relation to the overtly masculine world of the colonial factory.

Even when Hannah herself manages to author an archival document, she remains circumscribed within the patriarchal discourse that more overtly excludes her in the former examples. If Hannah remains a nameless, generic figure in her husband’s archive—a “‘goode wyffe,’” someone defined solely in relation to her husband’s constraining expectations of moral probity—she is also strangely silent or invisible within her *own* discourse. Hannah’s 1695 journal, for example, in its persistent focus on linear chronology, social niceties, and the financial dealings of the Company, is, according to Beigh, a “cautiously impersonal” (125) document that reflects nothing of the obviously vibrant personality to which the novel has elsewhere made us privy. Instead, Hannah’s diary implicitly defers to—indeed, *replicates*—the broader structure of the patriarchal-colonial hierarchy from which her husband’s authority is derived (Rajan 300-301). Thus, the journal is “modeled on the diary kept by Gabriel in his capacity as a factor instructed by his superior ... to reform the book-keeping irregularities in the factory” (Mukherjee, *Holder*

125, my emphases). In sum, Hannah eludes Beigh's discursive "net" not merely as a result of the obfuscating passage of time. Rather, Mukherjee consistently gestures toward the often subtle ways in which her protagonist's marginality stems from the complex ideological webbing that connects her society's unexamined assumptions—here, concerning the relative unimportance of women and their interests in a dominant patriarchal-colonial system—with the documentary archive that subsequently furnishes the lens through which people in a later historical moment will reconstitute their own "sliver" of that society's reality.

Feminist Critique and Historical "Experience"

In this emphasis on what David Greetham would refer to as "the cultural poetics of archival exclusion" (1), *Holder* reflects the intellectual climate of the late twentieth-century moment in which it was produced, an era when the archive began to come under increasing critical scrutiny as part of a wider reexamination of the issue of historiographic representation. According to the recent claims of many radical scholars and critics (including but not limited to feminists, gender theorists, poststructuralists, and revisionist historians), the archive's seeming neutrality as the source of the factual bedrock underlying an "objective" historiography dissimulates the ways in which historical documents actively shape or even produce the reality they purport to reveal. More particularly, that powerful and often unacknowledged "shaping" has tended, until relatively recently, to lead to the exclusion of female experience (as well as issues relating to gender in a

more general sense) from consideration *as* history, thus further contributing to women's overall subordination within patriarchal society. If, as was argued in Chapter Two, the concept of the archive is a problematic one in the context of an African-American culture haunted by the spectre of slavery, the relationship between women and the archive is, as Burton points out, similarly vexed (*Dwelling* 4).

First, on an obvious level, female subjects have simply been left out of many archival collections: the events of their lives, along with their affective or intellectual responses to those events, have often gone unrecorded, particularly, say, in social contexts in which women have been denied access to literacy. As a result, as one feminist critic has it, women's history is necessarily written in relation to an originary absence: "what isn't there [in the archive], what can't be found, what's been lost" (qtd. in Burton, *Dwelling* 23). But even when texts or artifacts testifying to those experiences *are* present in the archive, they also tend nonetheless, as is also evidenced by Beigh's scholarly impediments, to be practically difficult or even impossible to locate. According to Gerson, for instance, the fundamental concepts of archival organization have themselves contributed to women's historical disappearance. In particular, Gerson argues that the privileged notion of the *fonds*—essentially, the organization of a collection of documents and other materials based on the identity of the person who founded the archive—tends to make works by women hard to locate since archival creators have been overwhelmingly male (14); in other words, the symbolic subordination of women to men in (and by) the archive is, in part, produced by the very practical

marginalization of their papers in male-oriented collections.¹²³ This argument reminds us that a recognition of the gendered “politics of knowledge” inscribed within the archive entails our attending to the latter’s “form”—that is, to naturalized concepts such as the *fond*—as much as its content (Stoler, “Colonial Archives” 88, 90).

Women have further been rendered historically illegible due to the very epistemological presuppositions that underlie such concepts as *Respect de fonds*, and that have guaranteed the considerable authority assumed by the archive in Western culture beginning with its origins in nineteenth-century positivism. According to Burton, the discourse of historiography as we know it emerged in the Victorian era in relation to a process of “archival rationalization” whereby archives assume the function of a “truth-apparatus” (*Dwelling* 20-22). In other words, the “empiricist” tradition of historiography derived from nineteenth-century Europe has come to be seen as a means of producing authoritative descriptions of past reality because of its foundation in “archival raw data” that seems to have a “transparently” direct relation to that reality (Munslow 10). However, the notion of what counts as an archive in this context—that is, what functions as legitimate source material for an accurate representation of reality—is the result of an ideological process of differentiation whereby the privileged sphere of archival history is gendered masculine, while other, less obviously empirical (and therefore less authoritative) forms of cultural memory or social

¹²³ Bastian makes a similar point in relation to the history of colonialism in the Caribbean, the records of which are usually arranged in relation to the European slave-holders who created them in the first instance. Such a focus on the creator of the record as the primary organizing principle for contemporary archives causes difficulties, Bastian argues, for anyone attempting to write this history from the perspectives of the enslaved (77).

description are relegated to the level of a subordinate femininity. As Burton explains, while “men claimed the more ‘objective’ task of writing truth-telling ‘History’,” women were conventionally associated with what seem to be more ephemeral discourses, such as literature, memory, and orality; these modes of remembrance were in turn viewed by a dominant patriarchal culture as “dependent and mendacious (fictional, fickle) and therefore of dubious authority and reliability” as forms of historical explanation (*Dwelling* 20-22).¹²⁴ From this perspective, deep-seated philosophical preconceptions about what discursive forms are able to function as a foundation for historical knowledge tend to exclude women’s discourse almost by definition.

At the core of the dominant archival epistemology of Western culture, in other words, is the exclusionary and hierarchizing notion that women are the “unhistorical other of History” (qtd. in Burton, *Dwelling* 21). Although archival historiography purports simply to (re)present the story of “the” past, it has really functioned as a metanarrative of the development of a privileged subject. As Foucault claims in *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, “Continuous history is the indispensable correlative of the founding function of the subject.” Here, in other words, a unified, centred, rational “human consciousness” is posited (for Foucault, erroneously) as the “original subject of all historical development and all action” (13). What Foucault does not mention here—but which the English translation of

¹²⁴ If women’s modes or genres of remembering were seen as exterior to the archive, so too were the subjects those memories were about. Burton also argues that women’s texts have been positioned as supplementary to the official historical record because they often necessarily dealt with ostensibly ahistorical topics related to the domestic sphere (*Dwelling* 8). Burton’s overall argument is that a critical historiography attendant to issues of gender and representation needs to “take seriously” the possibility that domestic space itself could be read as “archival” (*Dwelling* 27).

his text unwittingly reveals—is the gendered identity of this unquestionably (if implicitly) *male* subject.¹²⁵ In a comparable fashion, perhaps, to film theorist Laura Mulvey, who has famously argued that a spectator in the cinema is always “male” by virtue of the ideological structuring of the cinematic gaze, regardless of the actual gender of any one individual (11), feminist theory contends that the “subject” of history has, unconsciously perhaps, been figured as a masculine one. On a surface level, this has manifested itself in men’s ideas and actions tending to be viewed as more important than those of women and, consequently, more worthy of being recorded as history; there is thus a certain homology or chiasmus between male dominance of the public sphere and historiography’s traditional focus on subjects such as politics, war, economics, and so forth. More fundamentally, though, the idea of “history” itself—encompassing historiography and the archive on which it is based, and the events of the past that those discourses represent—has, until relatively recent challenges at least, presupposed an ideal subject defined in terms of “male” characteristics.¹²⁶ “History,” it can

¹²⁵ Foucault, at least in translation, relentlessly uses masculine nouns and pronouns to refer to this notion of the historical subject: “men ... him ... him ... him ... his ... his” (13). At the same time, though, he does not comment on the way that this seems to suggest a specifically gendered subject. Ironically, Foucault here perhaps falls foul of the mistake he accuses others of making, by seeming to betray a “particular repugnance to conceiving of difference ... As if [he] were afraid to conceive of the *Other* in the time of [his] own thought” (13).

¹²⁶ Even the ostensibly self-evident notion of historical temporalization has been critiqued as unconsciously privileging a masculine subject. While history seem to divide itself quite naturally into manageable chunks of time—the Renaissance, the modern age, and so on—the conceptual significance thus granted these periods often reflects male priorities and activities, rather than any “natural” or universal temporal ordering. In other words, institutional forms such as university course offerings and syllabi might look quite different if, as Raddeker argues, historical periods were arranged according to explicitly gynocentric concerns, such as the development of safe and effective contraception (120). Indeed, for Raddeker, the very gesture of periodization is itself suspect from a feminist standpoint: “Carving up the world’s past into ‘ages’ and ‘stages’ ... makes sense only in terms of master narratives ... that are intrinsically ... androcentric” (120). As a result, conversely, some scholars and theorists have argued that a truly feminist critique of history and historiography necessitates a reconceptualization of (linear)

thus be argued, is simply a name we have given to the narrative of this subject's thoughts and actions and agency across time, which is echoed in the subsequent positioning of the male scholar as the powerful, subject of knowledge of rational historiography. This conceptual model effectively undermines women's ability both to act *in* and to *know* history; as Burton concisely puts it, patriarchal discourse simultaneously places under erasure both women's status as "rightful historical subjects" and their "capacity ... to write History" (*Dwelling* 20).

In response to this pervasive marginalization, scholars concerned with the politics of gender have recently attempted to shift the focus of historical discourse from the mainstream to the unacknowledged periphery. As Joan W. Scott puts it, in order to write the "the history ... of the designation of the 'other,'" feminists—along with others concerned with "difference"—have sought to "[document] the lives of those omitted or overlooked in accounts of the past" (773, 776).¹²⁷ In order to represent the "history of difference" (773), Scott elaborates, radical historians have sought out new forms of evidence that point to "alternative values and practices whose existence gives the lie to hegemonic constructions of social

temporality itself to encompass such alternative modalities as Kristevan "women's time" (qtd. in Raddeker 119).

¹²⁷ As well as being a cornerstone of much recent critical-theoretical discourse, giving voice to the marginalized by revising hegemonic assumptions is a key concern of much contemporary historical fiction (Widdowson 491-507). See Onega, who locates *Holder* both in relation to New Historicism (459), and within a tradition of "Bakhtinian" historical fiction that "allow[s] for the utterance of difference voices struggling for cultural preeminence" (439-43). Describing *Holder* (or Mukherjee's work overall) as "revisionism"—in other words, a "setting straight of the record of [historical] misrepresentation" (Banerjee 192)—is common in the criticism: see, for example, Buell (82), Gabriel (n.pag.), Keen (227-29), Sen (47), and Simon (424). Mukherjee herself has discussed in interview her revisionist orientation toward Eurocentric historical representation in writing *Holder* ("Naming" 64), as well as the importance of "voice" as an aesthetic or narrative concern ("Holders" 79-83). For a general discussion of the dominant "Counter discursive" mode of the postcolonial novel, see Lane (18).

worlds” (776). The “challenge to normative history” thus consists of an “enlargement of the picture” (776) of what counts as both historical agency and archival documentation; in other words, the consideration of a broader range of representational forms as, at least potentially, “archival” helps to produce a wider historical vision in general. As well as critiquing the basic assumptions that have helped to establish women as history’s “other,” feminist scholars have suggested that women as historical subjects might also be present in *other kinds* of archives, ones not usually recognized by a historical establishment tied to “white, male, and middle-class hegemony” (Burton, *Dwelling* 23). Burton, in particular, argues that we should start taking seriously seemingly non-rigorous or quasi-empirical sources *as* archives. As she argues in *Dwelling in the Archive*, we need “to expand [the archive’s] terrain” to include “unconventional” sources such as domestic spaces (143), fiction and figurative language (20, 27), and even “gossip” and other forms of “ephemera” (22, 23).¹²⁸ Such a move, for Burton, “democratize[s] what counts as an archive” and thus assists in the broader critical project of “writ[ing] women’s experiences (back) into history” (25, 23).

“Experience” is, indeed, the key term here. Scott argues that a defining trait of many recent attempts to write the “history of difference” is an emphasis on

¹²⁸ See also Cvetkovich’s emphasis in *An Archive of Feelings* on the importance of ephemera—seemingly vulnerable and therefore meaningless or overly “personal” objects—to the project of constituting queer archives and public cultures (7-8). In a similar vein, Burton argues that a “democratized” archival practice that refuses to neglect such unconventional documents enables the preservation of ephemeral states of being, such as “desire” (4). In a slightly different vein, for Alam, Mukherjee’s novel suggests the limitations of a dry, historical archive that should be supplemented by a life-giving, creative “novelistic imagination” (131). This attitude would seem to be confirmed by Mukherjee herself, who contrasts the “passive retrieval of past data” with the supposedly more vital “experience [of] history” provided by imaginative forms of discourse such as fiction (“Naming” 64).

the *experiential*—often considered in concrete or material terms—as a ground for both the critique of dominant discourse and the assertion of alternative, dissident forms of subjectivity. According to Scott, oppositional historians concerned with “documenting the lives of those omitted or overlooked in [conventional] accounts of the past” (776) have sought to privilege the “actual” experiences of those marginalized subjects as key to the recovery of their histories. As Scott elaborates, this “challenge to normative history has been described ... as an enlargement of the picture, a correction to oversights resulting from inaccurate or incomplete vision” that bases its “claim to legitimacy on the authority of experience” (776). If women’s perspectives have tended to be disregarded by conventional or masculinist historians as untrustworthy and unreliable, their concrete, specific experiences seem to give the lie to such exclusion by means of a seemingly incontestable claim to “referentiality”: “what could be truer, after all, than a subject’s own account of what he or she has lived through” (777). More than just a testament to the “truth” of an event, though, experience also provides a means of contesting the dominant ideology that marginalized it in the first place, in that, as an epistemological category, it appears to be located “outside ... discursive construction” (777). The approach also seems to involve providing a formerly passive or victimized subject with a kind of renewed “agency,” since the idea of “experience” itself is equated with the possibility of acting, rather than merely being acted upon (777). As Craig Ireland explains, in its status as an apparently concrete or relatively unmediated state of being, experience exists in an ambiguous relation to the discursive arena of ideological production: “the

immediacy of experience is opposed to the mediacy of ideology” (12). The realm of the experiential thus provides “the ‘evidence,’ from which agency and a politics of identity can be mustered and deployed” and “microstrategies of resistance” can be formulated (Ireland 6).

Scott further contends that the privileging of experience in the writing of histories of otherness does not just modify the *kinds* of evidence that scholars deal with. As well providing a change of focus in historical content, such a focus also contributes to a shift in methodological approach. In other words, the “experience” in question here does not belong solely to the historical subject, but is also internalized by the scholar: the experiential subject is simultaneously “the person one studies in the present or the past” and “the investigator him- or herself—the historian who produces knowledge of the past based on ‘experience’ in the archives” (782). The historian’s *own* experience—whether in terms of her more generally gendered experience as a woman or her specific experience of entering the archive¹²⁹—functions as a “reliable source of knowledge” that subsequently authorizes the account she offers of the other’s life-story. This experience also “grounds the identity of the researcher as an historian” (784). According to Scott, finally, the experiential mode of oppositional historiography frequently deploys a rhetoric that appeals to motifs of visibility or transparency, despite the fact that this discourse is also influenced, to some extent, by the

¹²⁹ Scott’s point here corresponds to the tendency in much contemporary archival discourse to emphasize the “phenomenology” of research: the “actual” experience of the researcher in the archives sometimes becomes as much a focus of study as the archive’s contents. Paradigmatic of this focus would be Steedman’s discussion of the “Archive Fever Proper” (9), or the occupational hazards that threaten the researcher’s physical health, but see also similar discussions in Burton (“Archive Stories”), A. Kaplan, Keen, and Knapp.

tradition of the critique of empiricism (780). In this form of historical representation, a “domain of ‘sensuous experience’ (a prediscursive reality directly felt, seen, and known)” is in turn communicated by the historian by means of a “transparent” mode of representation that directly ties “thought” and “experience,” discourse and materiality (786). As Knapp reminds us, it is, precisely, the archive that is the site at which this resistant “materiality” is ostensibly accessed, the fount from which the quiddity of the seemingly lost experiential world of the past is recovered and revived: it is the “thingness” of the “material things left behind by the cultures of the past” in the archive that testifies to the “actual conditions of existence” that produced them (697).

“We Are Talking About the Capturing of Past Reality”

We can clearly see a version of the processes described in these critical accounts at work in Mukherjee’s novel as well. *Holder* depicts the feminist “democratization” of the archive as enabling the uncovering of traces (or perhaps even the *essence*) of previously marginalized female experiences. Beigh attempts to circumvent the limitations placed on her research project by the ideologically conditioned exclusions of the masculine archive by consistently challenging conventions that have tended to determine just what counts *as* an archive. In addition to the more traditional objects of study consonant with her training in academic historiography, then, Beigh also consults a range of source materials that, despite seeming less obviously archival, also carry traces of Hannah’s identity: built space, material objects, and archaeological sites; literary and visual

artworks; oral history and traditional myth and legend; products of a commodified popular culture, such as tourist guidebooks and racy pot-boiler novels; contemporary media, including cable news television shows and computer software; such seemingly untrustworthy forms of remembrance as “gossip” and “hunches” (235, 18); and even putatively unwarranted speculation or fantasy.¹³⁰ In so broadening the definition of the archive to include sources that might otherwise be defined as fictive, untrustworthy, or “apocryphal” (107), Beigh challenges the ostensibly inevitable equation of the “documentary” with an ideal of eyewitness or empirical truth that has grounded patriarchal historiography’s authoritative claims to refer to the “real.” Beigh thus frequently goes “beyond the facts” in her use of “imaginative license” to “fill in the gap[s]” in the historical record (Alam 131-32).

Somewhat paradoxically, however, Beigh’s opening up of the archive to a heterogeneity of documentary forms enables her, in several instances, successfully to locate evidence of what she refers to as Hannah’s “voice,” even if she often has to “read carefully between the lines” in order to hear its “unique” cadences (77).¹³¹ One of Hannah’s embroidered samplers—glossed as “‘*The Utmost Parts*’ (Anonymous, Salem c. 1680)” (44)—exemplifies the kind of double consciousness that allows Beigh both to acknowledge the archive’s reinforcement

¹³⁰ For instance, Beigh attempts to imagine what Hannah *might* have done in a particular situation, thus raising the possibility of archiving something that didn’t happen (111). See Petersson on the possibility of archiving “potentialities,” or “events that can happen—regardless of whether or not they ever will or actually ever did happen” (39). See also Oberdeck’s comparable discussion of archives of the “unbuilt environment” (252). Oberdeck analyzes the documents produced during the planning phases of architectural projects that never saw completion.

¹³¹ Of course, the question of “voice” has been key to feminist debates about the marginalization and reassertion of the female subject in patriarchal society (Rajan 290).

of hegemonic ideology, and to perceive it as an assertion of a subversive politics amidst superficial “articulations of manifest destiny” (Simon 424).¹³² On the one hand, in its transcription of a verse from Scripture, the embroidery obviously works on the surface to perpetuate an orthodox Puritan worldview, one that here also seems entirely consonant with colonialist ethnocentrism: “*Desire of me, and I shall give thee the heathen for thine inheritance; and the utmost parts of the earth for thy possession*” (Mukherjee, *Holder* 43). However, subjecting this archive to a kind of hermeneutic decoding, a reading against what Ann Laura Stoler has called the archival “grain” (*Along* 47), Beigh discovers the ambivalence of Hannah’s engagement with Puritanism’s underlying ideology of “religious fanaticism and patriarchal totalitarianism” (Onega 443). Hannah embroiders the text from Psalms 2:8, not the more strictly puritanical *Bay Psalm Book* favoured by her ideologically rigid, resentfully “aborigiphobic” (Mukherjee, *Holder* 38) foster-brother, who also happens, rather unfortunately, to be Hannah’s teacher. Hannah’s choice of text entails a subtle change of both words and emphasis: “*Desire of me*” instead of “*Aske thou of me*”; “*heathen for thine inheritance*” for “*Heathen for thy lot*” (43). Reading the document centuries later, Beigh interprets Hannah’s selection as an implicit critique of the will to power she sees as the characteristic product of the dangerous confluence of an intolerant Puritanism, patriarchy, and ethnocentrism: “Ask or desire—what’s the difference, anyway? Except. Except that ‘ask’ suggests aggression and self-righteousness. It seems like a clash of the

¹³² If Hannah’s embroidery is perhaps not an archival document in the strict sense of the term, the embroidery does include written text and is, of course, kept in Bugs Kilken’s “museum-quality” storage facility (45).

sexes, a triumph of pioneer virility ... Did [the Native Americans] ... suffer as they went from being 'inheritance' to 'lot' in Puritan vocabulary?" (43-44). Inscribed with multicoloured threads that are decidedly un-Puritan in aspect, this choice of textual content effects a kind of critical *rewriting* that counters repression and intolerance with the subversive free play of desire (Moraru, "Purloining" 262, 265). Here, Beigh's skills as a close reader—again, her capacity to read between the lines—enable her similarly to transform a superficially conventional or limiting archival text into a source of what Ireland would call "the possibility of resistance to dominant ideological or cultural formations" (4).¹³³

In the context of his discussion of contemporary identity politics, Ireland argues here that the specificities of "concrete experience" assume a particularly privileged position as the site of resistance to such hegemonic formations (4). In *Holder*, too, Beigh's construction of a "counterhistor[y] of the voiceless" (to borrow Ireland's phrase) is premised on the retrieval from historical oblivion of Hannah's "experience"—an umbrella term that covers such related yet heterogeneous concepts as affect, desire, interiority, and corporeality. Throughout the novel, that is, Beigh deliberately seeks out what we might call the archive of

¹³³ Hannah's needlework thus functions somewhat like the novel itself, which, as Moraru argues, effects a "writing otherwise," a "re-narrativization" that challenges the powerful "cultural authority" of a canonical pre-text (254-56). The embroidery is also just one of a number of aesthetic modes that Mukherjee includes within her text, and which seem to be symbolic in some way of the novel's aesthetic; as Iyer suggests, Beigh, Venn, and Hannah can all be seen as author surrogates (35-36). Thus, just as Hannah's ambivalently Puritan embroidery echoes the novel's critical reinscription of canonical American literature, Venn's computer science transforms the past into "imaginative reality" (34) like a work of historical fiction, while the art of Mughal miniature painting, in its attempt to represent a bounded totality, self-consciously resembles Beigh's attempt to capture the "whole picture" of the past (Banerjee 158). Mukherjee herself has acknowledged in interviews the influence exerted over the writing of *Holder* by a Mughal-derived aesthetic ("Interview" 74-75; "Holders" 77-79). Mukherjee also tends to express a progressive or even utopian view of the productive possibilities offered aesthetic expression by developments in information technology ("Holders" 96-97)

Hannah's feelings, despite (or perhaps because of) the fact that, in any conventional sense, "no record of ... [them] exists" (Mukherjee, *Holder* 61). For instance, as indicated by her decision to inscribe with her needle a slightly different version of a particular verse from Scripture, Hannah's embroidery is seen as giving voice to—and thus providing a record of—an assertion of "desire" in the face of its stifling opposite, "Puritan repression" (Onega 462). Hannah's embroidering both results from and gives further expression to her transgressive, bodily desires. Driven by taboo yearnings that she half-guiltily suspects she has inherited from her sinful, miscegenous mother, Rebecca, the "sensuous" Hannah develops an excessive, "overflow[ing] ... fascination with—or failing for—finer things" (Mukherjee, *Holder* 41). Although this free-floating desire attaches to everything from fine clothes to sweet foods to the eroticized bodies of "sweaty laborers," it finds its most direct expression in Hannah's embroidery, which, in its "fecund and voluptuous" subject matter and the "tropical" threads with which it is woven, seems to Beigh to be the very "embodiment of desire" (42, 44)

In a similar vein, Beigh looks for signs of Hannah's sexual desire in such varied sources as the brief mentions of "passion" in her memoirs (77) and the visual clues provided by Mughal paintings concerning the sexual practices she might have encountered during her time among Indian nobility (235). Hannah's repeated indulgence in various forms of bodily experience is inextricable from a sort of corporeal critique of the various patriarchal ideologies that would repress or deny those experiences in the first place. Throughout the novel, Mukherjee articulates an ethical opposition between the feminine as a realm of liberated

bodily desire and masculinity as representative of spiritual or intellectual restriction. Just as Hannah's mother's "voluptuous" voice "softens the sternest spiritual phrases" of the Puritan hymnal (26), her transgressive desire for a Native American man challenges the rigid racial divisions of colonial American society. Even though Hannah's initial response to her mother's transgression is somewhat ambivalent, she eventually engages in a similar critique of life-denying patriarchal ideology when she uses "love" (262) to divert her own illicit "Indian" lover from waging an apocalyptic war with his Muslim overlords; Hannah's body here represents the promise of "life" (267)—by this point she is literally carrying the Raja Jadav Singh's daughter—in opposition to the destructive, and, in their own way, equally *puritanical* ideologies of Euro-American and South-Asian masculinity.¹³⁴ Hannah thus embodies the "power of femininity" to resist "the masculine need to dismiss the play of difference" (Dascălu 86).

According to Alam, as Beigh researches Hannah's life she experiences an "increasing identification" with her chosen subject, and attempts "to see what Hannah saw, to think and feel what she thought and felt" (123). Beigh's concern

¹³⁴ As Alam notes, *Holder* is constructed around the conflict between the stifling "ascetic[ism]" of Puritan ideology and Hannah's desire for individual liberty and self-expression (125). Similarly, Buell reads the novel's "corrective" of *The Scarlet Letter* as consisting in the spatial contrast between the "confinement" of the Puritan worldview and the "wider, livelier world" of Hannah's imagination (83, 82). But Mukherjee refuses to limit her critique to the Puritans as such. The novel also establishes clear parallels between their ideological rigidity and that of Mughal society; both groups are, for instance, described as "gloomy" (17, 23) in their moribund desire to control the fecund world that surrounds them. *Holder* frequently suggests an "analogy between the colonial situation[s] in America and in India" (Dascălu 84) by, for instance, playing on the double sense of "Indian" in the wake of Columbus's error (Sen 51). More explicitly, Onega suggests that the novel depicts the non-Western cultures of the subcontinent as just as "defective" as Puritanism in their "patriarchal fundamentalism" and "imperial zest for power" (463-64). However, Rajan interprets Mukherjee's culturally relativistic linking of geographically disparate "Indian" identities as itself an imperialistic gesture. Mukherjee would thus be guilty of herself appropriating exoticized "Indian" subjectivities in order to tell the story of her Euro-American protagonist (303).

with the “retrieval” (Mukherjee, *Holder* 31) of Hannah’s occluded perspective—her desire to know “what it must have *felt* like” to be a restless, independent woman in the seventeenth century (128, my emphasis)—is thus inseparable from her desire to represent (or, more profoundly, to *know* or even *feel*) the bodily sensations and affective responses that Hannah would have had during her life. And, just as Hannah’s experiences once posed a challenge to a life-denying patriarchy, the *recovery* of those experiences enables that critique to be reactivated in the form of a “tactical incursion into the dominant discourse” in the present (Dascălu 89).

Thus, the history of oppositional, anti-puritanical difference that Hannah’s life embodies is accessed via a mode of historical representation that itself leans toward the “experiential.” Mukherjee repeatedly posits an analogy between Beigh’s interest in Hannah’s material or bodily experience and the affective or corporeal nature of the archival research through which that experience is represented. Rather than being the product of dry academic grafting or a solely intellectual exercise in antiquarian navel-gazing, Beigh’s research is clearly the expression or manifestation of bodily desire, a kind of archive fever or “passion” (Mukherjee, *Holder* 9) in which the senses are engaged as much as the intellect.¹³⁵ Beigh’s characteristic response to the discovery of significant archival material is profoundly corporeal, rather than soberly rational. Her bodily sensations, for instance, are prominent at the moment she uncovers the Mughal paintings of Hannah: while her eyes “feast” on the images, Beigh becomes acutely aware of

¹³⁵ Of course, the equation of the archive with desire (particularly sexual desire) has been noted. On the erotics of the archive, see Freshwater (735-36).

her other body parts, as she “take[s] a breath, palms outstretched” (17). If the archive makes Beigh aware of the lineaments of her body, it also connects with her emotions: she is “thrill[ed]” by one discovery, and feels she has developed a “psychic bond” with the subjects of her investigation (22, 24). Indeed, in a sense, the history Beigh is investigating begins to seem, more and more, like “an intimate letter from home” (22), or, at another moment, akin to “a kind of love song” to her own boyfriend (60). Thus, as Beigh admits, her quest to recover the true identity of the Salem Bibi is also a highly personal search for her *self*: “I . . . have studied Hannah’s life nearly as closely as I have studied my own” (30). If Hannah’s life is a “quest for self-fulfillment,” Beigh’s reconstruction of that narrative enables her to make sense of her own existence (Alam 127, 123).

In *Holder*, Beigh’s project reflects the ambivalence of contemporary critical discourse concerning the “ontology” of the archive, and its relationship with the “reality” toward which it seems to gesture. On the one hand, as previously noted, Beigh is obviously aware of the mediating (even obfuscating) force of the archive as an ideologically saturated mode of discourse. Hannah is, in this sense, inaccessible as an object of knowledge because the few traces that she has left behind are simultaneously produced or at least conditioned by patriarchal ideology; to that extent, the archive is necessarily the problematic site of Hannah’s “disappearance.” On the other hand, however, Beigh also stubbornly persists in the conviction that the archive can simultaneously contain experiential or bodily traces that potentially transcend the limiting strictures of these mediating discourses. The allure of the archive remains strong for Beigh, particularly in

terms of what Knapp describes as “the notion that historical study might yield—or at least approximate—a glimpse of the past *as it was*” (703). In that its plot moves toward the resolution of the mystery concerning the location of the Emperor’s Tear and the Salem Bibi’s true identity, *Holder* equates Beigh’s approach toward epistemological clarity with her increasing proximity to Hannah’s material belongings. As we shall also see with DeLillo’s Nicholas Branch, whose investigation of the Kennedy assassination in *Libra* ultimately progresses “beyond” the documentary register, Beigh’s research career begins with textual records (“land transfers, sea logs, and records” [9]) but moves steadily toward the supposedly more concrete and artifactual. Thus, Beigh acquires various material objects that would have been in Hannah’s orbit (such as a carnelian ring featuring the likeness of her Indian lover [236]) and visits many of the places Hannah once lived in, “stroll[ing]” in her footsteps and taking away as souvenirs things she might have actually touched (98). Just as Hannah herself treasures the gifts sent to her by the Raja when he is away fighting because she can “[feel] his presence in the tokens he sent” (236), centuries later Beigh attempts to comprehend and empathize with Hannah via the material objects she left behind.

In several scenes in the novel Beigh becomes an actual tourist, replete with guidebook and sensible shoes (265). However, it is in her depiction of Beigh as a very different kind of tourist—a “time-traveler” (4)—that Mukherjee most profoundly engages with questions of the im-mediacy of the archive and the recovery of historical reality. Along with Beigh, the key figure in the elaboration of this motif is her boyfriend Venn, a diasporic academic from India who now

holds a position at MIT. Beigh meets Venn after they both attend a public lecture on assets recovery, when Venn claims somewhat cryptically that the retrieval of assets is ““a little like”” what he does for a living (34). It turns out that the modest ““data processor”” (34) is actually a “brilliant[t]” (286) computer scientist currently engaged in a far more complex undertaking. Venn, along with a team of scientists, is in the midst of creating a huge database by way of the “mass ingestion” of all the data produced in the world on an “arbitrarily” chosen day, October 29, 1989 (4). From this “overload” of “a billion separate information bytes,” drawn from “all the world’s newspapers, weather patterns, [and] telephone directories” (4-5), the X-2989 computer program will be used to construct an absolutely verisimilar, “real time” representation of a single moment in the past, “on a scale of 1:1” (142). An individual “interpose[d]” (4) on the simulation’s data grid by means of a special interface will experience a completely convincing—and apparently *physical*—version of another individual’s reality. As we see when she is first allowed to enter the program as a trial subject, Beigh finds herself “physically reacting to virtual space,” interacting variously with a crowd on a Boston street, a student at UCLA, and a real-estate agent in the Midwest: “I was with them; they responded to me. Those crowds ... parted to let me pass. I reached out and touched a faucet, touched the sleeve of a student beside me, and felt them both. When I walked up the stairs I got winded” (286). If the initial uses of the technology appear modest enough at first—a sort of “harmless virtual tourism” (Keen 227) in which the past becomes a hyperreal theme-park—Beigh soon realizes that Venn’s invention has “infinite applications,” as, indeed, MIT’s

jealous attitude toward what it evidently regards as valuable intellectual property suggests (Mukherjee, *Holder* 287, 286).

However, the main use Mukherjee suggests for X-2989 is what Beigh calls “computer-assisted time reconstruction” (142), a kind of updated or quasi-futuristic version of historiography. In essence, Venn, who, we are told, is a “thorough researcher” (289), draws on the documentary archive in order to produce meaningful and supremely accurate digital representations of the past. As he puts it (via Beigh’s recollection), “the interesting problem [is] constructing an interactive model of historical or imaginative reality. Historical reality to begin with, since there [is] a data trail, indisputable facts to program in” (34). As in historiography, this recapturing of a lost time through the “animat[ion]” (3) of the textual traces left behind imputes an underlying order to a chaotic past. X-2989 thus transmogrifies the apparent “randomness of life” into the “Nirvana ... [of] perfect design” (5, 93). Ultimately, Venn and his team hope, by “put[ting] everything into archives” (Banerjee 158), to fulfill the historian’s age-old fantasy of the total recovery of the past. As Beigh muses, the technology is premised on the idea that “anything that has ever happened can be reproduced ... we are talking about the recapturing of past reality, not just the retrieval of information” (288). Despite the superficial differences that prompt her to set her “hunches” against Venn’s “data bases” (18), Beigh’s historical project bears a clear resemblance to Venn’s in that they both draw on “raw data” in order to effect the detailed “reconstruct[ion]” of a vanished moment (287). In the process, both similarly involve consignation, or the gathering together of signs: while Beigh

describes her historical narrative as being “pull[ed] ... together from a hundred sources,” Venn’s program involves the “stitching together” of fragments of information into a larger whole (90).

Eventually, given these metaphorical connections, it is perhaps not surprising that the two efforts at recovering the past intersect in a more literal sense; Venn’s digital technology of “Time-retrieval” (34) is soon applied to solving Beigh’s abiding question concerning whether or not Hannah herself is “still retrievable” as a historical subject (214). After vowing at the beginning of the novel to “write a program to help” Beigh (3), Venn makes good on this promise by first creating a “one-second-long video model” of Beigh’s notes on Hannah’s voyage to India (92-3), before finally “sucking” the remainder of Beigh’s historical data into a “perfected X-2989 program” (220). Instead of airline manifest and credit-card statements—the data pool of “a kind of late-stage capitalism” (103)—Venn’s supercomputer becomes an archive of a rather earlier moment in the history of Western modernity. After collating the “daily meteorologic observations,” “sales receipts,” “record[s] of official exports,” and “punishment records” that were vital to the day-to-day functioning of the Fort Sebastian factory where Hannah lived while she was in India (141-42), Venn fashions a digital simulation of life on the colonial frontier, circa 1695. The two lovers surreptitiously break into the fortress-like compound at MIT one night, and, after slipping on “the helmet, the goggles, [and] the special gloves,” Beigh finally gets to experience the past as a physical “reality” (289), rather than simply as an idea or image. Instead of being in the textualized form of “manuscript[s] ...

documents ... travelogues ... records ... or chronicles” (288), Hannah’s world becomes a convincing, all-enveloping environment that is at once sensuous, tactile, and dangerous. The narrative voice shifts to a dynamic present tense as Beigh, in the form of Hannah’s servant-cum-companion Bhagmati, experiences the “ultimate merging of researcher and historical subject” (Keen 228). Suddenly immersed in a history she could once only read about, Beigh is plunged into the midst of the final climactic battle between Hannah’s lover, the Raja, and the tyrannical Mughal emperor, Aurangzeb the World-Taker:

“Hannah!” I scream against the cannons and flying bullets. I can barely breath from the sulfur clouds, my eyes burn, and I reach out to hold her, my hand closes on her shoulder ... She is a beautiful woman ... with crinkly golden hair ... Now we are running along the parapet ... we are flying down the deep stone stairs ... I am fast and strong, I have never run like this, breathless now, pulling Hannah behind me, and we are out into the field in the middle of a firefight, fair game for either side.

I scream with agony from the hot white flaming explosion in my shoulder that has spun me around and dropped me to the cool, wet soil. (288-89)

While in one sense, of course, we could still be said to be within the realm of representation, Beigh nonetheless experiences history on the level of the body here. As a mortally wounded, “virtual” Bhagmati, she in fact comes close to death in real time, and a worried Venn pulls her out of the program in response to

physiological symptoms—“tears ... adrenaline ... heart rate and endorphins”—that point to a very real “mortal trauma,” and that continue to have residual, phantom effects long after experience itself is over (291, 292).

However, the pain and danger is finally worth it, since entering this simulacral world has enabled Beigh to solve one of the underlying puzzles of Hannah’s life: “‘I know where the diamond is’ ... the world’s most perfect diamond lies in the remains of Bhagmati, ... just under the feet of Mr. Abraham, under the hooves of goats and cows” (292). While the diamond itself remains unattainable, this virtual experience has brought Beigh closer to her “Pearl” (293); she thus ends the novel satisfied that, as “the facts grow surer,” the “real story” of Hannah’s extraordinary life and times can now be told in its entirety (292). By the end of the novel, then, the Emperor’s Tear is perhaps less significant in itself than in its role as symbol of both Hannah’s selfhood (Iyer 33) and the attainment of historical knowledge (Luo 94).

More than merely representing an uncovering of supposed historical “truth,”¹³⁶ however, this virtual climax also secures the novel’s key theme of

¹³⁶ While Beigh really does have a “physical” experience within the program, how historically veracious that experience actually *is* is debatable. Thus, Dascălu goes so far as to claim that “Beigh’s methodology is not interested in the truth” (89), while Keen argues that the truth is “accessible,” albeit after a process of “imaginative discovery” (228, 229). The text itself is ambiguous on the issue of veracity. During the “virtual” battle, for example, Aurangzeb, the Mughal emperor, appears to meet his end (290); elsewhere, however, Beigh implies that, in actual fact, he dies much later (and less spectacularly) (285). In general terms, although its basic lineaments are, of course, premised on solid archival data, the X-2989 is also a kind of fantasy, a product of subjective desire. “The program will give you what you most care about,” admits Beigh. As a result, Venn’s experience of the same data-world is very different: “all he got was a post-card view of modern Madras” (289). This variation in experience is consistent with the basic principles behind Venn’s technology. Because at least part of the virtual construct results from information taken from the test-subject’s “personality genome,” the experience is always individually unique: “Every time-traveler will create a different reality” (4-5). If X-2989 is a metaphor for historical representation, that is, it seems to signify a historiography that is “postmodern” in its emphasis on the determining effects of the situated subject of knowledge, the

female resistance to patriarchal domination. Earlier, during an audience with Aurangzeb in which the pacifist Hannah attempts to convince him to “end the war” (267), we learn that the famous diamond is a “stark symbol” of the totalizing power craved by the titular “holder of the world.” Set at the apex of a “mobile fit for an emperor who had seized all other empires contained in the universe” (the gaudy ornament features “a globe of gold cupped in the cradle of a perfect golden replica of Aurangzeb’s hands”), the Emperor’s Tear is a literal result of its owner’s activities as “a conqueror and acquirer” (271). But, just as the mobile “merge[s] the metaphoric with the literal” (271), the diamond can be seen as at once an actual piece of booty and as an emblem of a perceived “duty” to submit the universe to the judgment of “all-merciful Allah” (278), and thus as symbolic of Aurangzeb’s will to power. But if the emperor refuses to hear Hannah’s critique of his warmonger’s “lust for vengeance” and ignores her plea to attend instead to the “weakest and the poorest and the most innocent” (277, 278), his obsession with the diamond is subsequently shown to be “self-destructive” (270). In virtual reality, at the moment Aurangzeb “hold[s] the diamond aloft” over his vanquished enemy in seemingly absolute triumph, Hannah apparently fatally assaults him and makes off with the precious stone. In her hands, the significance of the Emperor’s Tear fundamentally shifts. The erstwhile symbol of the totalitarian desire for “unlimited plunder and mass conversion” becomes, as it passes from Hannah’s to Bhagmati’s hands, a figure of female solidarity and

discursive construction of past “reality,” and the final inaccessibility of historical “truth.” At the same time, as I will shortly argue, the program also holds out the possibility of a visceral—and ultimately violent—experience of the past as such.

connection. Moreover, the women's final gesture of concealing the gem forever in Bhagmati's anonymous grave represents a renunciation of the desire to "master time," which Beigh implicitly links with the impulse toward "mastering [of] space" (287) that characterizes the militarism of all forms of masculinist colonialism, whether European in origin or not. Bhagmati's burial, along with the diamond, would thus be a "symbolic burial of patriarchy" (Onega 465). Indeed, if Bhagmati's body becomes a corporeal archive—a "carrying case"—for the Emperor's Tear (Mukherjee, *Holder* 292), it is one that seems designed more to lose than to preserve its contents. Whereas Aurangzeb's "Puritan[ical]" desire for the "perfect" replication of reality (271) has its contemporary analogue in a "pure belief in the *perfectibility* of knowledge retrieval" (31, my emphases), then Mukherjee finally seems to suggest that a feminist ethic that accepts frailty and imperfection and is open to difference is also inextricable from a willingness to allow the past to dissipate.

"She Does Not Exist": Theorizing the Subaltern

There is, nonetheless, a profound and destabilizing tension at work here, both in Mukherjee's depiction of Beigh's "Reclamation Project," and in the feminist critique of historiography in whose purview I have sought to situate the novel as a whole. On one level, in that it centres on an investigation of the dispersed, textualized "traces" of Hannah's life, Beigh's work is of a piece with a post-representational, poststructuralist influenced vein of feminist theory, which, broadly speaking, acknowledges the discursive constitution or preemption of

social reality and thus emphasizes the ideological partiality—the *sliver effect*, as it were—of any archive, including a “feminist” one that otherwise aims to create a more inclusive historical view. From this perspective, the archive is necessarily imbricated in the oppressive ideological structures that are the target of historical revisionism in the first place; consequently, this work of critique is inevitably immanent or compromised—and thus relatively self-reflexive—in nature. On another level, of course, Beigh unapologetically seeks out the residue of Hannah’s historical “experience,” attempting to recover her authentic “voice” by handling material objects that she has been in contact with and by attempting to relive her physical and affective states in the present. *Holder* thus echoes another key tendency of much contemporary feminist revisionism by privileging women’s “concrete experiences” in its effort to furnish radical historical discourse with a “ground” that simultaneously signifies experiential authenticity and political resistance. In contrast to the first viewpoint, here the archive is assumed to be more or less “mimetic” or even naively realist: it functions as a transparent container of the meaning of women’s experiences that can then be “recovered” and disseminated by the politically committed scholar.

This constitutive tension between two very different modulations of the archive—as mediating “sliver” and as supposedly transparent “window”—indicates a further, related theoretical problematic in which Mukherjee’s text is enmeshed, one that has perhaps been most famously elaborated in Spivak’s analysis in “Can the Subaltern Speak?” of the “unnamed Subject” that has also become the privileged object of Western or First World intellectual “desire”

(274). Originally drawn from Marxist terminology, “subaltern” in very general terms refers to a subject position that is characterized by such extreme marginalization that the category of “the subject” itself is radically called into question.¹³⁷ Spivak thus names as potential placeholders for this position such underprivileged social groupings as “the illiterate peasantry” and “the lowest strata of the urban subproletariat” (283), although the specific focal point of her argument in this essay ultimately becomes the non-Western or “Third World” woman in colonial societies (particularly British-ruled India), whose agency was—and, in the subsequent context of what Spivak calls the “international division of labor” of multinational capitalism (280), *continues* to be—evacuated by a “heterogeneous project to constitute the colonial subject as Other” (280-81). This process involved the construction of the subaltern woman as a passive object of knowledge in various colonialist and/or patriarchal modes of representation, paradigmatic of which was the “violent shuttling” of this figure between the equally objectifying discourses of “tradition” (for instance, the practice of widow sacrifice or *sati* as codified by ancient Sanskrit texts) and “modernization” (the colonial British legal system that paternalistically sought to inscribe *sati* as a barbaric crime) (306). In concert with her highly involved close readings of an archive comprising both indigenous scriptures and colonial legal documents,

¹³⁷ As a theoretical concept, “subaltern” has quite specific historical and disciplinary origins. According to Young, the term was used by Gramsci in the 1930s to refer to “subordinate” class formations; it was later taken up in the 1960s by radical historians in India, who used it to differentiate the underrepresented masses from the “dominant groups whether foreign or indigenous who have hitherto monopolized the historiography of Indian nationalism” (159, 160). However, as Sabin discusses, in recent years use of the term has broadened considerably, such that “‘subalterns’ now include women, ethnic and racial minorities, immigrants, homosexuals, and other groups who, by race, class, gender, or other markers can be regarded as the dominant society’s Other” (179).

Spivak argues that any sense of female subjectivity or agency at the nexus of traditional patriarchy and European colonialism is necessarily eclipsed by a “violent aporia”: “There is no space from which the sexed subaltern subject can speak” from within these discourses (306, 307).

In response to this pervasive silencing, many Western or “First World” intellectuals and scholars have sought, in the service of a generally oppositional or leftist politics, to recover the “voice” of the subaltern in order to recuperate her agential subjectivity—her ability to know and act for “herself”—and, as a result, to contest dominant constructions of knowledge and forms of power both in the context of colonial history and in that of contemporary knowledge production. As Robert J. C. Young explains, the basic goal of such an “interventionist practice” is to “make the place of the subaltern subject visible” where previously it was absent (159). Subaltern studies as a mode of historical discourse thus seeks to contest the marginalization of colonized Others by “Charting and retrieving” their productive, central involvement in the shaping of the nation’s (in this case, India’s) history, and their concomitant attempts to resist the smooth functioning of imperial power (160). Young further argues that the work of recovering “historical instances of insurgency” in this manner is meant to translate into a contemporary revolutionary politics, such that the historian “aligns him- or herself with the subaltern”; “subaltern history” thus becomes itself “a kind of insurgency with respect to conventional academic forms of history” (160). Finally, the process of “charting” subaltern subjectivity that Young outlines here inevitably occurs in relation to the archive, primarily in terms of the tremendous amount of historical documentation

produced by imperial bureaucracy. Thus, in the course of her analysis of the practice of *sati*, for example, Spivak researches everything from “nineteenth-century British Missionary Registers” to “the police reports included in the records of the East India Company” (“Subaltern” 297). As Margery Sabin notes, since “British India was famously obsessed with the keeping of written records from the earliest days of the East India Company,” contemporary “interventionist” historical research tends to involve “re-reading of this official archive” in the search for hitherto hidden traces of subaltern identity and agency (184).

In much subaltern discourse, that is, the archive represents a means of effecting what Rosalind O’Hanlon calls “the restoration of subjectivity.” In the predominant recuperative “conceit,” the archive functions a “textual space ... in which subaltern groups may speak for themselves and present their hidden past in their own distinctive voices, whose authenticity in turn acts as the guarantee of the texts themselves” (210). For Spivak, however, the apparent *transparency* of the archive as a container of the “authentic” historical experience of the subaltern is a highly problematic idea. For one thing, this approach is seen as simply downplaying or ignoring altogether the irreducibly ideological, *mediating* force of the archive in the elaboration of colonial power itself, and thus avoiding the fact that it is at best a quixotic enterprise to look for signs of resistant, self-sufficient subjectivity within a dominating mode of discourse that produced that subject *as* “object” in the first instance. Given the fact of the archive’s colonial instrumentality, then, Spivak admits that the “task of recovering a (sexually)

subaltern subject is lost in an institutional textuality at the archaic origin” (“Subaltern” 303).

Just as important to Spivak, however, is the fact that the “transparency” of the archive—that is, its supposed enabling of a direct relation to the subaltern—has as an implicit and worrying correlate in the putative invisibility or non-positionality of the intellectual who makes *use* of the archive. In the early sections of “Can the Subaltern Speak?” Spivak thus extends the specific critique of subaltern studies to encompass the work of radical Western intellectuals in general, particularly Foucault and Deleuze, whose vaunted theoretical sophistication and self-reflexivity in deconstructing the sovereign subject, Spivak contends, oddly dissipates when they seek to enable marginalized, “subaltern” groups, such as the working classes of Western Europe, to “speak for themselves” (276). Spivak argues that radical theorization of this ilk collapses two very different mode of “representation” onto each other: political representation [*vertreten*], whereby an actual “proxy” speaks for someone else, and representation [*darstellen*] in the discursive, linguistic, or aesthetic sense (276). In other words, theoretical *discourse* about the subaltern tends to be unproblematically equated with the subaltern’s own political *thought* and *action*. Spivak attacks the Western intellectual’s desire for such representational “transparency,” since, not only is its “essentialist, utopian politics” inconsistent with the sophisticated premises of the poststructural critique of representation (276), it is also politically *dangerous* because of its sublimation of the workings of ideology within the act of representation itself. Spivak ultimately sees

“representation” as always potentially an appropriative, even violent gesture by which the privileged intellectual surreptitiously (if usually unwittingly) exploits the subaltern for his or her own ends—for instance, reinforcing his or her authority *as* subject of knowledge—all while seeming to engage in an entirely beneficent and self-effacing exercise in political solidarity. Moreover, the transparent form of representation by which the intellectual conveniently seems to “disappear” as the situated producer of knowledge while the now triumphant subaltern speaks for itself paradoxically and insidiously *conceals* the fundamental power imbalances of contemporary neocolonialist globalization, which, while structuring the contemporary knowledge economy in which the intellectual works, also secretly continues the pattern of the West’s domination of the former imperial periphery. As Spivak argues witheringly, “Neither Deleuze nor Foucault seems aware that the intellectual within socialized capital, brandishing concrete experience, can help consolidate the international division of labor” (275). Hence, in Gareth Williams’s terms, although radical Western ideology critique may have the laudable notion of “cultural liberation [as] an explicit goal,” in actual fact “the contemporary constitution of the subaltern as an object of knowledge masks the repression of an underlying mode of discursive agency that inherent conflicts with ... the specific goal of the project of solidarity formation” (229).

Ultimately, then, rather than trying to give voice to historically silenced subjects (an impossible task anyway) via a supposedly non-mediating archive, the goal of a properly self-critical subaltern historical discourse would essentially be to interrogate its own mode of production. The key question for Spivak, here, is

thus not so much the nominal one—“Can the subaltern speak?” (294)—as one concerning the unavoidable, albeit often implicit political subtext of radical criticism: “the question of how the third-world subject is represented within Western discourse” when that discourse conceals the complicity of “Western intellectual production” with “Western international economic interests” (271). In this regard, a supposedly transparent historical discourse premised on an archival methodology of “positivist empiricism”—that is, figuring out “what actually happens,” what the subaltern’s “concrete experience” was like, and so on, with a view to making those events and experiences apparent—is less than useful for, if not prohibitive of, the specific end of “counterhegemonic ideological production” (275). The “subaltern critic” must instead supplement an analysis of “the practices of imperialism” by remaining “constantly vigilant with respect to the hidden ways in which nominally radical, or oppositional historians can often unknowingly, or even knowingly, perpetuate the structures and presuppositions of the very systems which they oppose” (R. Young 161-62). Otherwise, despite their being placed in the service of resistance to the legacy of colonialism, the methods of the Western academy would actually *rehearse* the relations of power they otherwise abjure, reinstalling them via certain unquestioned methodological assumptions. In the wake of Spivak’s analysis, that is, we would need to recognize that otherwise radical intellectual projects—such as, say, the feminist analysis of colonialist patriarchy, or the attempt to grant historical agency to previously marginalized actors—should be viewed as existing at once “inside *and* outside the circuit of the epistemic violence of imperialist law” (Spivak, “Subaltern” 283).

Perverse Enjoyment

In concluding this chapter, I wish to propose a reading of *Holder* as Mukherjee's fictionalized but deliberate engagement with the general question of the politics of knowledge production in a globalized, postcolonial world, and with the position of the subaltern in relation to those forms of knowledge, in particular. There are several underlying reasons for reading the novel in these terms. On an obvious level, "India" has been a key site for the articulation of subaltern discourse: it provided the initial geographical focus of Subaltern Studies, and is also the country of origin of many of the postcolonial intellectuals who subsequently took part in the subaltern debate. Thus, it is perhaps not insignificant that *Holder* is largely about Indian history, and that Mukherjee is herself a diasporic Indian intellectual, like Spivak, with a tenured position at a prominent U.S. university. On a diegetic level, meanwhile, the novel clearly picks up on many of the key motifs articulated in subaltern discourse. For instance, a prominent concern in "Can the Subaltern Speak?" is the ritual of *sati* or widow self-immolation, which Spivak reads as symptomatic of the structural denial of gendered subaltern subjectivity by both Indian and colonial patriarchy. Bhagmati's desire to kill herself when the great battle ends in the Raja's defeat (252), along with her generally marginalized and silenced status as a despised

“bibi”—a usually indigenous mistress—clearly positions her as a variant of the “subaltern” in the theoretical sense.¹³⁸

Despite Mukherjee’s expressions of more or less overt ambivalence concerning Spivak’s work and postcolonial theory in general (“Holders” 79-85; “Usable Past” 107), *Holder*’s archival drama, in my view, marks an attempt at least to acknowledge the complexities of the “First World” (feminist) scholar’s desire to represent—to locate the *voice* of—the “Third World” woman. In particular, the final, “virtual” scene of the novel provides a kind of allegory of the Western intellectual’s problematic longing for representational transparency in relation to the subaltern. In this scenario, Beigh Masters, the privileged (“yuppie”) feminist scholar from the First World, enters the technologized archive (Venn’s computer program) and subsequently “disappears” into the subjectivity of Bhagmati the subaltern, whose “voice” can thus be heard (during her VR experience, for instance, Beigh inexplicably finds herself able to speak Bhagmati’s language [291]). On one level, Mukherjee, I think, genuinely sees this as a triumphant moment of transhistorical, transnational solidarity and political possibility. Thus, Beigh’s merging with a “brown” (289) woman encapsulates the novel’s more general endorsement of cultural relativism, in opposition to various forms of Puritanism that seek to deny difference in a destructive fashion; this at times didactic message is reinforced finally by the fact that Hannah gives birth to

¹³⁸ For much of *Holder*, Bhagmati, like the subaltern, *cannot speak* (“She seemed to understand English, but did not speak it” [136]; “The girl said nothing” [156]). Similarly, just as Spivak’s subaltern “disappears” within colonial discourse and is then made “invisible” by First World intellectuals (“Subaltern” 306, 294), Bhagmati is described by Beigh as “invisible,” someone who perpetually “disappear[s]” from view (133, 153). Several critics have touched on the relevance of subaltern theory for a consideration of Mukherjee’s work in general; see in particular Banerjee, Dascălu, Knippling, and Rajan.

a part-Indian daughter, Pearl Singh, who in turn embodies a revisionist conception of America itself, a nation whose historical origins are now shown to reside in the originary dispersion of multicultural immigration, instead of a determinate heritage of Eurocentric “purity.” *Holder*, like much of Mukherjee’s fiction, thus endorses the relatively optimistic vision of a dynamic America that has always been “made over in ... immigrants’ likeness” (Cowart, *Trailing Clouds* 73).¹³⁹ However, my sense is that, in this particular text, Mukherjee tempers her wonted assertion of these “new and different alloys of national identity” (Cowart, *Trailing Clouds* 73) by resituating them in the context of a problematic *transnational* space. That is, the fact that Mukherjee juxtaposes the novel’s redemptive conclusion with the callously violent dissolution of Bhagmati’s subaltern body suggests a certain anxiety on her part, that, to borrow from Chandra Mohanty’s seminal argument about the complex relations between First and Third World feminisms, “feminist writings ... [might] discursively colonize the material and historical heterogeneities of the lives of women in the third world” (334-35).

Holder thus deploys the figure of the archive in order to critique what Williams calls the “fantasy of cultural exchange,” in which the “metropolitan

¹³⁹ The novel ends by suggesting that the story of Hannah and Pearl provides the historical germ of Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter*, that ur-text of canonical American literature. Mukherjee’s point seems to be that American literature (as well as American history) was always already transnational and multicultural; “difference” is inscribed at—or even prior too—its very origins. One of the goals of *Holder*, then, is to expand the accepted canon of American literature: to eke out a place for a writer such as Mukherjee herself as “American” by arguing that a foundational text like Hawthorne’s was also (at least *symbolically*) the first “Indian-American” novel. As numerous critics have discussed, Mukherjee thus at once claims to be an “American” writer while she simultaneously seeks to extend or transform just what that label signifies; see, for instance, Alam (119), Cowart (*Trailing Clouds* 71), Iyer (32), and Sen (46). For an example of Mukherjee’s firm assertion of her “Americanness,” see her conversation with Fred Bonnie in which she states that she considers herself primarily “an American writer who happens to be from South Asia” (75).

restitutor” (that is, the well-intentioned Western intellectual) “embarks upon a transatlantic journey of self-restitution to ‘America,’ and to the uncanny ‘strangeness’ of her American identity,” but only by violently appropriating the subaltern as object of this “restitution.” (230). The action of *Holder* corresponds closely to the appropriative paradigm usefully outlined in Williams’s critique. The novel, of course, depicts a series of journeys—a kind of *shuttling*—away from and back to America, in the wake of which the white protagonist’s sense of self is destabilized in an uncanny fashion, and it also concludes with a moment of virtual “fantasy” in which, in Williams’ terms, the intellectual engages in the “perverse enjoyment” of the subaltern’s “obligatory silence” (230).¹⁴⁰ Ultimately, then, although *Holder* certainly seems on one level to inhabit what Williams calls the “constitutive fantasy space” of the West’s neocolonialist modes of knowledge production, my sense is that it also critiques this positionality by self-consciously demonstrating the way in which the ostensible coalitional politics underlying the First World intellectual’s “liberating gesture . . . toward the subaltern subject depends for its very existence and completion upon an internal discursive breakdown heterogeneous to the ideological field that it establishes” (Williams 230).

A rather unexpected aspect of the final section of *Holder* is the fact that Beigh’s revelatory virtual experience involves a consciousness *other* than Hannah’s (Simon 423). As has been stated, Venn’s program draws on the

¹⁴⁰ “Perverse enjoyment” would certainly seem to provide one way of accounting for Beigh’s somewhat bizarre reaction to Bhagmati’s suffering, not to mention the way Mukherjee’s writing lingers in a rather voyeuristic way over the latter’s abject body: see Beigh’s/Bhagmati’s “satisfaction” at a bullet “puncturing the fleshy portion of [her] calf,” or the “satisfaction” with which she “watch[es] . . . the blood bubble from [her] beautiful brown flesh” (291).

subject's unconscious desires to tailor its simulations to suit individual predilections. But if Beigh, as she herself has already admitted, "care[s] only about the Salem Bibi" (18), why does the computer seem, precisely, to fail in giving her "what [she] most care[s] about" (289)? To be sure, Beigh does catch a glimpse of the individual whom she has been trying to understand or to get inside of, imaginatively speaking, for years, but it is merely a fleeting external view; Hannah's interiority—her *experience*—remains, meanwhile, inaccessible. Instead, Beigh experiences the final moments of the life of Bhagmati, an exiled Indian noblewoman who, as Hannah's servant and, later, "guide" (176), has abetted her mistress's transgressive tendencies by encouraging her to "immerse herself in the life of the subcontinent" (Alam 127). After the two women steal the Emperor's Tear, their attempt to escape the climactic battle is foiled when Bhagmati is mortally wounded by gunfire. Recognizing that she cannot escape, Bhagmati tells her friend to flee while she remains behind to hide the diamond. Beigh then eviscerates (or perhaps rather, *witnesses* the evisceration of) the dying body of her virtual "avatar." The passage is worth quoting in full:

"Mukta!" [Bhagmati's name for Hannah] I scream, the pain blacking me out, and now a second bullet fired down on me from the parapet rakes my leg, puncturing the fleshy portion of my calf, and I think almost with satisfaction, Well, that settles it, no more running for me.

"Go, I command you," but I can't raise my head, and my voice is like a metal file rasping through my shoulder, astonishing pain, my words are pain, my breathing is pain, but I am like a dreamer aware of

her dream even as she can't escape it. I feel in the folds of my sari for the knife I know I have, and it is there for me.

Hannah, my Pearl, is no longer visible. Light is spreading but it is not the light of dawn; it is the light of extinguishment.... I plunge the knife deep in my belly, watch with satisfaction, and now with the mastery of my pain, the blood bubble from my beautiful brown flesh. More, I think, and plunge the knife deeper, ... and make a burrow inside me. I feel the organs, feel the flesh, the bowels of history, and with my dying breath I plunge the diamond into the deepest part of me. (291)

Having survived this trauma, Beigh draws on her virtual yet “fleshy” experience of history to speculate on Bhagmati’s fate: she was not cremated as per Hindu tradition, but rather interred in order for the diamond’s final resting place—her insides—to remain a secret (292).

While many critics of the novel make some mention of Beigh’s experience in “postmodern cyberspace” (Rajan 291), most of them downplay its significance. For instance, while admitting that the meaning of the scene is open to interpretation, Alam finally claims that the episode “doesn’t matter” all that much (124), while Keen rather reductively describes Beigh’s “wired research quest” as nothing more than a “harmless” dalliance (227).¹⁴¹ Both critics thus ignore

¹⁴¹ Admittedly, Keen’s treatment of the novel is deliberately brief, and is limited by its inclusion in a concluding chapter on postcolonial archival romances, rather than as part of the monograph’s main line of argument. Some critics do take a more ambivalent stance toward Mukherjee’s depiction of virtual reality, although this often seems to be more in terms of a perceived aesthetic deficiency rather than a political problematic. Sen, for instance, is unhappy that the novel concludes on such a “flimsy” note (56), while Iyer, too, is perturbed by what she sees as Mukherjee’s glib “use of virtual reality as a narrative method” (43). For more in-depth

entirely what I see as an especially noteworthy aspect of this scene: the moment of violence that Beigh at once witnesses in and experiences *through* Bhagmati's body. It is not so much that this violence is aberrant or particularly shocking; after all, with its catalogue of "scalpings, ... brandings, ... [and] blown away faces," *Holder* has repeatedly shown itself to be, as Beigh says of one of her own sources, a "book of casual cruelties" (205, 266).¹⁴² Rather, what is most interesting here is the fact that Mukherjee effectively sutures this "casual" (I would venture, too, voyeuristic and objectifying) violence to history and to the archive—that is, to the preservation, transmission, and representation of the past. In essence, this is a scene of spectacular "archival" violence. On one level, it takes place within, and is enabled by, Venn's modified computer program, which is of course a product of data gleaned from historical documents. The "experience" of the violence done to Bhagmati's body thus only exists at all because of Beigh's archival labour—not to mention her "archive fever," that overriding passion to know and experience the past. Considered in such a light, this scene is an overwrought extension of those other moments in the text when Beigh feels the archival "jolt." Just as she gains a sense of the meaning of, and connection with, the past after uncovering information about her ancestors in the archive, here Beigh receives a physically

considerations of the motif of virtual reality in the novel, see Rajan, who connects the "dematerializ[ing]" effect of the virtual to violence done to female bodies (292-93), and Simon, who argues that the virtual reality scene is "crucial" to the novel's emphasis on hybridized subjectivities (423).

¹⁴² Several critics have pointed out the prominence of violence as a theme in Mukherjee's fiction. For instance, Alessandrini (274), Bose (53-55), Cowart (*Trailing Clouds* 76, 79), Dascălu (77), and Iyer (37) all see violence as a key aspect of Mukherjee's ambivalent view of the way in which the subject constitutes itself in relation to cultural norms. In addition, Mukherjee herself has commented that her view of violence as a potentially productive force stems from Hindu cosmology ("Holders" 95-96).

palpable intimation of great historical significance, as is implied by the persistent rhetoric of epiphany or discovery—of “spreading” light and the plumbing of “deepest part[s]”—at the moment of Bhagmati’s immolation. In other words, given the fact that such overwhelming, affective moments have previously tended to occur precisely when the novel takes us into the archive, it follows that the intensity of Beigh’s experience at this moment is similarly “archival” in nature.

Crucially, violence and the archive come together here in the instrumentalizing of Bhagmati’s “beautiful brown flesh” (291). In this scene her body quite literally (if such a term can be used to describe an occurrence in virtual reality) becomes an archive, a site or receptacle for preserving traces of the past. Bhagmati mutilates her own body, that is, in order to store the Emperor’s Tear amidst her “organs,” which are thus described as comprising the very “bowels of history” (291)—the fundamental bodily ground for an “experiential” knowledge of history. Further, this inaugural gesture of corporeal archivization is reiterated in the wake of Bhagmati’s painful demise, this time by Hannah herself. Desirous, for a reason that remains finally unclear, of keeping the diamond hidden, Hannah presides over Bhagmati’s burial rites “in order to preserve her body as a carrying case” for its precious cargo (292). As a result, the very gesture that archives (again) the Emperor’s Tear while simultaneously concealing it also subjects Bhagmati’s identity to a similarly paradoxical double movement of storage and destruction. While her remains are, in one sense, “preserve[d]” (292), since they do not suffer the more immediate dissolution attendant upon cremation, Bhagmati’s *self* disappears when the determinants of its individual and cultural

identity are placed under erasure by a series of renamings. Bhagmati can function as a “carrying case” only insofar as her proper name disappears from history. Like DeLillo’s Lee Oswald, she is thus buried under a pseudonym (“Hester Hedges”) that effectively subordinates the memory of Bhagmati’s life to the commemoration of one of Hannah’s childhood friends—Hester Manning, who, like Bhagmati, dies violently at her own hands (67)—and Bhagmati’s long dead English lover, Henry Hedges. Meanwhile, Bhagmati’s religious identity is also overwritten when she, a seemingly quite devout Hindu, is off-handedly “given a Christian burial” at Hannah’s behest (Beigh speculates that Hannah’s motivation in this regard was her “respect [for] the wishes of Henry Hedges”) (292).

Beigh does not seem to view Hannah’s reification of her beloved friend’s body—transformed now into a sort of human jewelry box—as problematic, consumed as she is by having found the solution to her historical mystery (it all “makes perfectly good sense” now, she claims [292]). But she does unwittingly suggest a fundamental correlation between Hannah’s archival gesture and the broader and more obviously violent and oppressive processes of colonialism represented in the novel. Following the various funeral ceremonies that take place in the aftermath of the catastrophic battle at Fort Devgad, the indigenous Hindus are subordinated to successive colonizers whose power consists precisely in their ability to erase and then reinscribe the locals’ cultural and religious identities: “the new Mughal administrator moved into the [Raja’s] palace, *cleansed it* of what he called idolatry, and ruled it *in the name of* the Great Badshah for about thirty years” (292, my emphases). Soon after, the region falls “into British hands” (292)

that are similarly adept at this symbolic overwriting, as Beigh learns when, centuries later, she visits the fort herself: “Victorian Englishmen whitewashed the [palace’s] murals, then plastered them over” (265). Although Mukherjee has consistently opposed Hannah to just these forces of patriarchal colonialism throughout the novel, the final scene undermines the force of her resistance by implicitly equating it with a Eurocentric worldview in which the non-Western subject figures as less than human. Despite her supposedly beneficent intentions, Hannah—at least, as Beigh understands her—thinks nothing of reducing a once beloved and supposedly “respect[ed]” (292) companion to the abject, instrumentalized status of a handy treasure chest.

A Primal Scene

Earlier in the novel there is a brief but significant scene that anticipates the memorable virtual finale, in that it similarly situates an act of racialized violence in relation to archival imagery, thus suturing the overt colonialism of Hannah’s world to the more subtle appropriations and violations of Beigh’s scholarship. When Hannah and her husband first arrive in India, they immediately become embroiled in a heated dispute over some lost possessions that Gabriel presumes to have been stolen by one of the shiftless indigenes crowding around the beach-front landing site. Ill at ease in this alien new land (“a different plane of existence, a moon, an undersea world” [116]), his authority challenged by the recalcitrance of the local merchants who spy an opportunity to gain a tactical advantage, the volatile ex-buccaneer responds with an act of brutality meant to reassert his

unquestioned position on the colonial pecking order: he brutally and humiliatingly “assault[s]” an innocent, “randomly chosen” bystander simply because he is part of the “titter[ing]” mass of insolent brown people who have gathered to watch the spectacle unfold (118). The gambit seems to work, and Gabriel’s “misplaced” goods are instantly returned to him (119). Centuries later Beigh is able to read an account of the “incident” because it was archived, “chronicled in [Hannah’s] *Memoirs*” (118). However, somewhat to the dismay of this particular contemporary reader, the description of the event says nothing in the way of outright condemnation concerning an act that Beigh, as an enlightened late twentieth-century woman, perceives as beyond the pale: “I detect Hannah’s irony, but ... had hoped to find censure,” Beigh laments on reading the journal (118).

Although Beigh is somewhat loath to admit it—she “invent[s] secretive excuses” so as to provide some explanation for her beloved protagonist’s refusal to condemn her husband (117)—Mukherjee thereby indicates, both here and in a more general sense, Hannah’s fundamental complicity in the violence of colonialism (Moraru, “Purloining” 263).¹⁴³ Significantly, though, even as Beigh implicitly attempts to distance her own, seemingly more tolerant outlook from that of her object of study, the imagery of the scene on the beach symbolically connects her project of historical recuperation with the “unnatural vanishing of justice” (118) that it is ostensibly designed to oppose. First, the fact that the initial

¹⁴³ Hannah’s heterogeneous ideological position here as both colonized and colonizer (Dascălu 79) reminds us that European women existed in a highly ambivalent relation to the power structures of colonialism, and were at once subordinate because of their gender and relatively powerful in their whiteness (Luo 84). For an interesting discussion of *Holder’s* “alternative racial hierarchy,” in which whiteness signifies a lapse that is at once aesthetic and moral, see Maxey (532-33).

dispute is over a “missing chest” (117) clearly calls to mind the pirates’ chests in the maritime museum where Beigh initially finds evidence of Hannah’s history, while, more generally, the fact that the incident on the beach is centred on an “object” that is “missing” (119) intimates that the scene as a whole could be read as an allegory of the process of historical recovery that Beigh is engaged in throughout the novel (recall her description of assets recovery as the work of “Uniting people and possessions” [3]). Furthermore, it is surely no accident that an “umbrella bearer’s face” is the target of Gabriel’s fury (117). The figure of the victim of violence, then, inarguably echoes the contemporary Indian guide, Mr. Abraham, who protects *Beigh’s* “melanoma-prone” face from harm with a “threadbare black *umbrella*,” and who, in doing so, in a sense facilitates Beigh’s access to the material traces left in the wake of “the faded glories of his subcontinent” (97, my emphasis). Ironically, while Beigh’s feminist reclamation project has focused, in large part, on trying to reclaim Hannah’s supposedly authentic “voice” from its muted state within patriarchal historical discourse, it may be this moment of relative silence—an aporia caused by a “reticent” Hannah’s refusal to say anything meaningfully condemnatory about her husband’s act of violence (117)—that provides the most compelling commentary on the oppositional historian’s understandable but fundamentally misplaced desire to locate familiar images of resistance or critique everywhere she looks. If Hannah did indeed perceive Gabriel’s colonialist act as signaling the emergence of “an unspeakable new face of violence” (118) as Beigh half hopes, Mukherjee finally

suggests that Beigh herself fails to recognize that this moment constitutes, at the same time, the point of origin for her own violent desire to recover the past.

Chapter Four

“There’s Something Else That’s Generating This Event”: Fatalities of the Archive in Don DeLillo’s *Libra*¹⁴⁴

On the Sixth Floor

Chapter Three began with an analysis of an early scene in Bharati Mukherjee’s *The Holder of the World* in which Beigh Masters—freelance researcher, archival sleuth, and sometime feminist scholar—tours a small, seemingly insignificant maritime museum in Massachusetts. I want to begin this chapter with a brief consideration of another museum, one with more obvious historical significance in an American setting. There are some key differences from the institution with which Mukherjee opens her novel. For one thing, her maritime museum is fictional, whereas this other museum is not. In addition, the latter does not actually *appear* as such in the novel under scrutiny in this chapter (in fact, the building in which the museum is housed is present within the text, but the novel is mainly set before its conversion into a museal institution). However, just as Beigh’s early encounter with the tiny Mughal paintings encapsulates (in miniature, as it were) certain key aspect of Mukherjee’s thinking about the archive, the Sixth Floor Museum in Dallas, Texas provides a suggestive point of departure for my discussion of the significance of the archive in Don DeLillo’s *Libra* (1988).

¹⁴⁴ A version of this chapter has been submitted for publication to the journal *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*.

The site from which Lee Harvey Oswald's shot at President John F. Kennedy, the (in)famous Texas School Book Depository is now an archive and museum devoted to the study and memorialization of that signal event of contemporary American history. According to its website (www.jfk.org), the Sixth Floor Museum provides its many visitors (six million and counting) with "information and understanding about the assassination" in particular, and, more generally, seeks "to empower students, teachers, and other audiences to understand how and why the past is still relevant." The museum's centre-piece is "John F. Kennedy and the Memory of a Nation," a permanent exhibit—installed on the very floor from which Oswald fired on the President on November 22, 1963—that makes use of "nearly 400 photographs, 45 minutes of documentary films[,] and artifacts" to recreate "the social and political context of the early 1960s," as well as to chronicle the events of the assassination itself and its lasting cultural impact. Along with offering simulacra of the historical event—visitors are able to stand before an "accurate re-creation of [the] 'sniper's perch'" in the room's corner window, replete with stacks of book cartons, spent cartridges, and trash (Oswald having eternally just fired off three shots and fled)—the museum houses an impressive archive:

A diverse, actively growing collection of approximately 35,000 items, The Sixth Floor Museum Collection is one of the world's largest and most important sources of visual, audio, documentary and artifactual documentation of the assassination and legacy of President John F. Kennedy. Included in the Museum's holdings are three-dimensional

artifacts, manuscripts and documents, photographic materials, historic film, video and audio, newspapers and magazines, and oral histories. Much of this material has been digitized and is thus available online, including, for instance, Abraham Zapruder's iconic, shaky footage of the precise moment of Kennedy's death (accompanied, naturally, by a caution to "young children and sensitive viewers"). The museum's website also invites the web-surfer to offer up his or her individual reminiscences of the assassination to its interactive "Memory Book," promising that "Your reflections will be preserved with those of others—more than 100,000 pages of memories—gathered during the last two decades to help historians interpret the impact of that event on our nation and world." As well as making this modest contribution to history, the browser can also take away a souvenir; the requisite online store offers, along with JFK t-shirts and "decorative spoons," authentic reprints of historical documents, including copies of the *Fort Worth Press* from the days and weeks following the assassination ("Nation in Shock"; "Ruby Plea: Insanity").

The Sixth Floor Museum would appear to be akin to any other populist museum in this age of the proliferation and (supposed) democratization of historical knowledge. Unlike Mr. Satterfield's anachronistically "user-hostile" museum (Mukherjee, *Holder* 12), this space tends to invite users in by making the important events and personages of the past approachable and interactive, thus affirming the museum visitor's role as modest but active participant in the great sweep of American history, even as it transforms bits of that history into

facsimiles ready for purchase.¹⁴⁵ However, rather than being a banal sign of history's commodification, the "facsimile" is, I would argue, crucial to the meaning of the assassination, as well as that of DeLillo's novel. What I would like to draw attention to here is precisely what we might call the *repetitious* nature of this particular archival institution, the uncanny "doubling" that is the product of the ambivalent—and ultimately, in my argument, violent—relation between the museum (or the archive in general) and the historical event it is designed to preserve and commemorate. That is to say, there is a curiously recursive quality to the Texas School Book Depository, whose sixth floor once furnished, as the museum's website outlines, "significant evidence" in the immediate aftermath of the assassination (the trash and spent shells dropped by Oswald) and which now, in the early twenty-first century, provides a space for the controlled, ordered collection and display of much of that same material in "Two key evidentiary areas" recreated in the museum's space. Indeed, as the banality or functionality of its original name suggests, the Depository was *already* an archival space long before this overt musealization: it housed a private company that "stocked and distributed textbooks for public schools in north Texas and parts of Oklahoma." Although the Depository was never an "archive" in the strict sense of the term, in its workaday function as a site for the collection and dissemination of texts circulating within the broader context of one of the state's key knowledge

¹⁴⁵ On the recent challenge to more elitist conceptions of historiography and archives, see Burton, who argues that there has been an "archival proliferation ... in the wake of the new information technology"; one of the key effects of this dispersal of the capacity both to construct and access archives is that "we are, effectively, all archivists now" (139). For a balanced discussion of both the benefits and potential disadvantages of the contemporary "boom" in the construction and patronage of museums, see Huyssen.

producing institutions, the school system, it nonetheless could be seen as eerily anticipating its subsequent transformation into a space of collection with a marked pedagogical focus.¹⁴⁶ The Sixth Floor Museum, in other words, does not merely house a historical archive in the usual sense—a collection of primary and related materials connected to a particular event in the past—but, rather can be read as an *archive of an archive*: a collection of texts and objects arranged at a site that was itself dedicated to the collection and dissemination of many of those same texts and objects.

Given that it is, as its title suggests, filled with endless doubles, echoes, and reiterations,¹⁴⁷ *Libra* perhaps unsurprisingly draws our attention to the uncannily “archival” aspects of the Depository from which, indeed, the text’s working title—“Texas School Book” (Foertsch 286n6)—was derived. Late on in the novel, we witness a shiftless Lee Oswald take on one more low-paying job, this time as an “order-filler” (369) at the Depository, as he moves inexorably toward his astrologically determined role as one of the President’s assassins (in what appears to be a startling coincidence, Kennedy’s itinerary has his motorcade passing directly under Oswald’s window). DeLillo underscores, in his description of Oswald’s workplace, the sheer physical presence of so much stored paper: “All these books. Books stacked ten cartons high. Cartons stamped Books. Stamped Ten Rolling Readers. Stacked higher than the tall windows. The cartons are a size

¹⁴⁶ The Sixth Floor Museum’s website has an entire section describing its pedagogical “mission” and the material it makes available for teachers and students (“school programs, teacher workshops, gallery guides, online assets[,] and other unique educational resources”).

¹⁴⁷ In this regard, Cowart notes the significance of the choice of “a single astrological emblem” for the novel’s title: “DeLillo resourcefully exploits the sign of Libra for its associations with doubling, tergiversation, and a host of self-contradictory gestures” (*Physics* 104).

you have to wrestle ... sunny dust forming among the books” (369). The Texas School Book Depository is merely one of a series of book- or paper-filled spaces that Oswald and others enter, inhabit, and make use of throughout the novel. But what I want to emphasize here is its privileged, doubled position as both location of the historical event’s occurrence and site of its archivization. In DeLillo’s rendition, Oswald’s three shots quite literally *depend* on stored paper—on the “stacked cartons” with which he has surrounded himself in order to form a makeshift gun-mount, and which, in addition, simultaneously assume an explicitly memorious function:

He stood at the southeast window inside a barrier of cartons. The larger ones formed a wall about five feet high and carried a memory with them, a sense of a kid’s snug hideout, making [Oswald] feel apart and secure. Inside the barrier were four more cartons—one set lengthwise on the floor, two stacked, one small carton resting on the brick windowsill. A bench, a support, a gun rest. The wrapping paper he’d used to conceal the rifle was on the floor near his feet. Dust. Broken spider webs hanging from the ceiling ... Cartons stamped books. Ten Rolling Readers ... He got down on one knee, placed his left elbow on the stacked cartons and rested the gun barrel on the edge of the carton on the sill. He sighted on the back of the President’s head ... He fired through an opening in the leaf cover. (395)

In sum, then, DeLillo here depicts Oswald shooting at President Kennedy while he is symbolically ensconced *within* the documentary archive.¹⁴⁸

Chapter Four centres on uncovering some of the reasons, beyond the mere expediency of historical verisimilitude, for DeLillo's pointed recourse to the recursive figure of the archive at the crucial instant of the novel's violent climax, as well as for the obvious fascination throughout the novel with the collection and storage of various documents and objects. A key figure in this regard is Nicholas Branch, an ex-CIA analyst who makes intermittent appearances amidst the novel's primary narrative lines, which consist of Oswald's biography on the one hand, and the unfolding of the conspiracy against the President on the other. Branch casts a retrospective, somewhat controlling eye over the labyrinthine assassination plot(s) from the ostensibly distanced vantage of the late-1980s, thus functioning, as Cowart observes, as an author surrogate (*Physics* 102). Rather like DeLillo himself, Branch sifts through endless documents and other historical sources left in the wake of the event in hopes of crafting a piece of "finished prose," a monumental work he envisages—or rather, fondly hopes—will ultimately become the "secret history of the assassination of President Kennedy" (DeLillo, *Libra* 59, 15). I begin this chapter with an analysis of Branch, a crucial figure for my purposes in that, as Jed Rasula notes, he is the novel's "archivist of the

¹⁴⁸ See Foertsch, who discusses the centrality of paper imagery in DeLillo's rendition of the events of the "assassination day." As well as noting the literal cartons of paper that surround Oswald, Foertsch also points to the "leaves" through which the shots are fired. Foertsch also hazards that, in his role as a patsy or "back-up shooter" for the *actual* assassins charged with firing the kill-shot, Oswald functions in the conspiracy plot analogously to the otherwise redundant technology of the paper record, which is "still relied upon to 'back up' electronic files, faulty memories, and injured parties." Finally, Foertsch points out that "it is papers (or lack thereof) that do [Oswald] in," since he is finally caught after murdering a Dallas police officer who hailed him on the street, asking for ID (290-91).

assassination files” (34). Like McCarthy’s Judge Holden, Morrison’s schoolteacher, and Mukherjee’s Beigh Masters and Venn Iyer, DeLillo’s Branch is shown continually collecting and ordering—or, at least, *attempting* to order—the textual and material traces of the past. Indeed, Branch’s ultimate achievement is the production of a giant collation of data, an encyclopedic, all-encompassing archive that, as with the judge’s ledger or Venn’s X-2989 program, promises the creation of an ordered structure out of the perceived chaos of historical potentiality.

However, as we shall soon discover, Branch is considerably less adept than these other fictional encyclopedists, and he appears to be paralyzed—“stuck”—by the sheer volume of accumulated material related to the assassination: “The stuff keeps coming” (DeLillo, *Libra* 181, 59). His chronic inability to fashion from this unending stream of empirical data a satisfying, overarching story about the assassination suggests the alignment of Branch’s situation with the more general condition of postmodernity which, as Jean-François Lyotard has famously argued, can be defined in terms of a fundamental “incredulity toward metanarratives,” those totalizing explanatory structures, by which “modern” (particularly, for Lyotard, “scientific”) thought has structured social reality (xxiv). This chapter begins, then, by considering the possibility that Nicholas Branch is, precisely, a “postmodern” archivist, given, among other key characteristics, his inability to come up with “the grand and *masterful* scheme” that will account for Kennedy’s death once and for all (DeLillo, *Libra* 58, my emphasis). In what follows, I first read DeLillo’s depiction of Branch in the light

of the growing body of theoretical discourse—a heterogeneous conglomeration of Archival Science, deconstruction, poststructuralist or postmodern theory in general, and certain branches of the philosophy of history—that has sought to provide provisional answers to the kind of question recently and provocatively posed by the performance theorist Michal Kobińska: “*Can there be such a thing as a postmodern archive?*” (3). If I tentatively answer this admittedly rhetorical question in the affirmative, it is with the proviso that the “postmodern” archive may not be something that we immediately recognize in familiar terms.

In particular, this chapter draws on *Libra* to demonstrate that the implications of postmodern thought necessitate a fundamental reconceptualization of the link between the archive and the historical “reality” or “events” to which it refers. One of the radical implications of the postmodern critique of representation is, of course, that the relation between language and the world, the signifier and referent, has, under the multiply mediated conditions of a socio-economic postmodernity, grown so recursive that it has become unstable or even untenable. It is no longer possible, so the argument runs, to posit a fixed, material referent that inevitably precedes and predetermines the play of discourse; rather, the referent or the real is shown to be structured by discourse in the first instance. As Cowart intimates, DeLillo’s oeuvre both emerges from and strives to represent “a culture wholly wedded to the image, a culture that has long since discarded the assumption that signifieds exist behind or beneath signifiers”; in this simulacral America, that is, the “only reality knowable is the one shaped by endlessly self-referential sign systems” (*Physics* 3). The particular concern in *Libra*, though, is

the relation between historical “reality” and its discursive representation by means of his persistently reiterative depiction of the archive. In essence, that is, Branch’s attempts to determine or “master” the historical truth of the assassination founder because the event itself is *already* “archival” in origin. This means that there can be no “assassination” as such, no event that can finally be separated from the archival machinations of the novel’s parade of men in “small rooms”: the brutal murder of a President is revealed as one more scripted and collected signifier in an increasingly mediated, postmodern world. In the final part of this chapter, I will attempt to evaluate the ideological repercussions of the representational system that DeLillo insistently delineates in his novel, as well as throughout his fiction more generally. Bearing in mind that various commentators on the concept of postmodernity—most notably, perhaps, Fredric Jameson—have bemoaned the political effects of just this kind of mediatization or virtualization of the social, I conclude by considering the grave implications of DeLillo’s highly ambivalent depiction of the archive for the work of critical historical representation.

Ultimately, if it is this “moment of original violence” that lies at the core of America’s “postmodern neurosis” (Cowart, *Physics* 95), DeLillo perceives the various attempts to archive the assassination less as a means of achieving epistemological closure, than as a kind of symptomatic repetition compulsion by which the violence of the event lives on.¹⁴⁹

¹⁴⁹ Generally speaking, DeLillo seems to view representational “iteration” (particularly in the form of the technologized new media) as inextricable from the perpetuation of violence. See Cowart’s illuminating discussion of video and media technology in *Libra*, *Underworld*, and *Valparaiso*. In his reading of the “Texas Highway Killer” episode in *Underworld*, Cowart argues that “serial killing and serial re-playing of the footage [of the crime] seem to partake of the same economy of replication”; there is thus “something murderous in the medium itself” (*Physics* 99, 100). In *Libra*, the key moment of mediatized, reiterative violence is, of course, Oswald’s death,

“Your Museum of Contradictory Facts”: The Branch Archive

If, as Christopher M. Mott suggests, the “management of information” is of paramount concern under the ideological terms of Cold War power politics (141), then the archive is the crucial site at which that information or knowledge is “managed” in its material form, as collections of files, documents, images, artifacts, and so on. On the cultural register, as Jacqueline Foertsch argues, the archive is of crucial importance in the genre of Cold War “novels of intrigue,” in which “papers proliferate and sustain the networks of conspiracy, betrayal, and death that define the genre” (279, 280). “Neither conspirators nor spies can function without paper” (Foertsch 284)—nor, we might add, without the archive in which, as Derrida notes, “official documents are filed” and their interpretation is secured (*Archive 2*). The preeminent space of archival “*domiciliation*” or “house arrest” (Derrida, *Archive 2*) in *Libra* is the Central Intelligence Agency, a seemingly all-powerful institution devoted to the technologized gathering of knowledge. As one awe-struck character realizes, the Agency deploys its arsenal of ““Spy planes, drone aircraft, [and] satellites with cameras”” to ““see and ... hear”” with a kind of quasi-mystical acuity: ““Like ancient monks, you know, who recorded knowledge, who wrote it painstakingly down. These systems collect and process. All the secret knowledge in the world”” (77). From the most sweeping geopolitical data (“huge collections of intelligence on banana republics and their

which, while televised live initially, is later subject to “ceaseless, unremitting repetition” (Coward, *Physics* 101).

leaders” [126]), to traces of the most intimate, nebulous shards of being (““CIA has a picture of my prelapsarian soul in their files,”” one character suspects [20]), the Agency collects all it can before sequestering the results “in a locked safe or some computer buried in the ground” (117). Indeed, ironically enough, the Agency actually perceives that “Knowledge [is] a danger, ignorance a cherished asset,” and that the *less* its Director or, say, the President knows, “the more decisively he [can] act” (21); thus, the specialized information it gathers is not necessarily reserved for what Derrida would call the “archons” (*Archive 2*)—those in privileged positions of power are to be “insulated from knowing”—but, rather, for individuals at the margins of the institution’s “curious and obsessive webbing” (DeLillo, *Libra* 22).

At the end of one of these multiplying paths we find the aptly named Nicholas Branch. Branch is a scholarly figure, a former CIA analyst who, following his retirement, has been hired on again by the Agency to undertake an intriguing, if challenging, task: “to write the secret history of the assassination of President Kennedy” (15). Appropriately enough, given the secrecy of Branch’s brief, we learn relatively little about this figure, who thus remains a vague, sketchy outline rather than a fully realized character. Nonetheless, there are several basic facts DeLillo enables us to glean about him: Branch is an older man whose physical and mental capacities are just beginning an inexorable decline (14-15); he works from his home office, which has been fully furnished and supplied with CIA funds (183); he has little or no contact with his superiors (59-60), other than the “Curator” with whom he converses, periodically, on the phone

(15); there is no indication that Branch has a spouse or any social life to speak of, and he almost seems to have retreated permanently into the cramped space of his office, where he now eats and sleeps as well as works (184, 445); and although he has devoted the last decade-and-a-half to compiling this history, Branch often finds it painfully difficult to write and is beginning to think it unlikely that he will ever complete the project (181, 183, 301).¹⁵⁰ Finally, although he has been the subject of extensive critical attention, Branch is actually a surprisingly marginal figure in the novel, at least in terms of the frequency and duration of his appearances; this somewhat evanescent or immaterial scholar—he thinks of himself as “bodiless” (14)—features in just six brief sections that are scattered throughout the novel and together add up to less than twenty pages of total text.

Nonetheless, for all that he might seem somewhat “seal[ed] off [from] the rest of the novel” (Johnston, “Superlinear” 324), Branch clearly needs to be accounted for in any reading of DeLillo’s treatment of the archive. Indeed, I would argue that, while most critics do mention Branch at some point in their analyses, he is at times afforded little more than a cursory glance on the way to a more in-depth interpretation of the novel’s more obvious protagonist, Lee Oswald. The critical consensus concerning Branch is that his relationship with the archive is ambivalent and largely self-defeating, due to the fact that the “metastasizing

¹⁵⁰ In terms of the timeline of Branch’s activities, we learn that he “is in the fifteenth year of his labor” (14) and that he “first set to work” in 1973 (59-60). This means that the narrative present of the Branch sections is around 1987-88, or approximately when *Libra* itself was published, thus suggesting a certain analogy between the novel and Branch’s “secret history.” For further discussion of Branch as a metafictional author or historian figure by which DeLillo reflects back on the processes and implications of constructing a narrative about the events surrounding Kennedy’s death, see Cowart (*Physics* 106), Dewey (96), Johnston (“Superlinear” 323), and Lentricchia (453).

information” of the case inevitably “confound[s] the desire for historical order” (Coward, *Physics* 97). Branch is thus left “suffocated,” “Overwhelmed,” or “paralyzed” (Brent 182; Johnston, “Superlinear” 324; Keesey 174) by the unending stream of records and data left in the wake of the assassination; as a consequence, his “impotent” (DeLillo, Interview 27) attempt to fashion a history out of all of these primary sources is necessarily seen as a “failure” (Radford 230). Christian Moraru’s description of Branch as “a librarian lost in *Libra*’s Borgesian library” (*Memorious Discourse* 222) would thus be neatly paradigmatic of this recurrent critical sense of Branch as a somewhat pitiable, Sisyphean figure of intellectual futility. I do not fundamentally disagree with these assessments—Branch is, without question, lost in the archive—but my sense is that there is rather more going on in the brief but condensed sections in which Branch appears than is often acknowledged; in other words, in my estimation, the Branch archive could do with a more thorough cataloguing.¹⁵¹

In a deceptively small room in his house—one that that CIA has “paid to fireproof” in order to safeguard the collection from accidental destruction—Branch has, over the course of more than a decade, amassed an archive of seemingly “Everything” remotely connected to the death of President Kennedy (183, 181). Branch is assisted in this project by the supremely efficient Curator, a kind of nameless meta-archivist who, at first anyway, furnishes his protégé with whatever he should require: “When he needs something, a report or transcript,

¹⁵¹ One exception to this rule is Codebò’s recent monograph *Narrating From the Archive: Novels, Records, and Bureaucrats in the Modern Age*. As I do in this chapter, Codebò engages in a close analysis of the trope of the archive in *Libra*, and much of his analysis of DeLillo’s novel is devoted to a reading of Branch (137-57).

anything, any level of difficulty, [Branch] simply has to ask. The Curator is quick to respond” (15).¹⁵² As a result, Branch possesses a huge collection of textual materials, including (but not limited to) the tall shelves of books that dominate three of the room’s walls and a “massive file cabinet stuffed with documents” (14), previously sealed minutes from government committee meetings and the data printouts from scientific analyses (59), as well as the “CIA’s one-hundred-and-forty-four-volume file on Oswald” and entire “cartons” of legal transcripts (378). In addition to such a wide range of written or printed documents and texts, Branch has also gathered together other forms of media: photographs of Dealey Plaza prior to the assassination (59), of the curtain rods of an acquaintance of Oswald’s (182), and of a fresh-faced Marine Pfc. Oswald (300); audio recordings of “the [Dallas] police radio net on November 22,” 1963 (181), as well as a “sound tape” of a minor conspirator talking to an undercover agent (375); film stock ranging from seemingly insignificant “home movies” (181) to Zapruder’s grainy, now iconic footage capturing the moment of Kennedy’s death (441)—which, moreover, has been migrated onto an electronic platform, and is now available as a “computer-enhanced” version designed to facilitate closer scrutiny (441); more generally, the digitally savvy Branch employs a CIA-provisioned “home computer” for the “convenient tracking” of his data (15). “Beyond documents now,” beyond the virtual level of his electronic data, Branch has also collected a range of potentially pertinent material objects, including “an actual

¹⁵² Even more so than Branch, the Curator is not so much a character as an impersonal function of some larger archival principle, an Ur-archon perhaps. Notice, as such, that it is impossible to identify him with a particular individual; the fact that “Branch is on his second Curator” (59) suggests this figure is a serialized, differential self.

warped bullet” taken from a ballistics test on a “seated cadaver” (299). (More on this curio in a moment.) Finally, in a sort of *mise en abyme* effect, Branch’s archive also contains a nested version of itself in the form of the multi-million-word Warren Commission Report,¹⁵³ which, with its “incredible haul of human utterance,” seems to encompass the span of life itself: from birth (“Baptismal records”), through childhood (“report cards”) and maturity (“divorce petitions . . . tax returns”), and, finally, on to the inevitability of mortality (“things gathered up at a dying”), “Everything is here” (181-82).

As noted previously, Branch’s ultimate motivation in gathering together all of this heterogeneous documentary and physical material is to write the definitive, albeit secret or classified, historical account of President Kennedy’s assassination. However, on any number of levels, the nature of that event is uncertain and full of “mystery” (58) and thus resistant to any such attempt at narrative comprehension. For example, the moment of the assassination is repeatedly referred to as a “blur” (15, 59), a fundamental haziness that is merely exacerbated by the fact that it was simultaneously captured on film; Zapruder’s “murky” footage similarly consists of “blurs” and is understood as “a major emblem of uncertainty and chaos” rather than a source of potential clarification (441). As Branch investigates further, the basic uncertainty surrounding Kennedy’s death—who shot him? From where did they fire? And for what reasons?—is compounded by a number of factors, including the structural

¹⁵³ The full title of this text at the time of its publication (1964) was the *Report of the President’s Commission on the Assassination of President John F. Kennedy*. For expediency’s sake, and like most of the novel’s critics, I will refer to it hereafter simply as “the Warren Report.”

incompleteness and imperfection attendant on even the most extensive of archives (Branch is cognizant of “worrisome omissions, occasional gaps in the record”) and the fact that many of the records that have not been lost in these gaps were produced by or about individuals expertly trained in *hiding* the truth (Branch thus “wonders if there is some limit inherent in the yielding of information gathered in secret” [442]).

Nevertheless, despite these recurrent impediments and frustrations, Branch, as the narrator affirms, “is writing a history, not a study of the ways in which people succumb to paranoia” (57). Although the looking-glass world he has entered in taking on this assignment is “marked by ambiguity and error” (15), Branch nonetheless clings to the basic goals of conventional historical scholarship; as Leonard Wilcox notes, he is an “empiricist” who seeks “an absolute correspondence between the structure of events and the organizational structure of his account” (344).¹⁵⁴ Branch’s intellectual training is thus consistent with that of a “pure historian,” one who is impatient with flights of “imaginative license” (Cowart, *Physics* 96). “Before his retirement,” we discover, “Branch analyzed intelligence, sought patterns in random scads of data. He believed secrets were childish things,” and to this day, he maintains a belief in the solidity of

¹⁵⁴ Other critics who similarly emphasize Branch’s empirical bent include Johnston, who describes him as attempting to write a “strictly empirical account” of the assassination (“Superlinear” 325), and Radford, who emphasizes Branch’s desire to locate a “stable realm of empirical data” amidst the confusion precipitated by Kennedy’s death (226). As do I, however, these critics all find Branch’s empiricism to be fundamentally quixotic. Johnston’s formulation is emblematic: Branch “represents the failures of a strictly historical, empirically governed account, and its incapacity, when faced with the multiplicity of proliferating information generated by the event, even to represent it as a coherent totality, much less explain it. Overwhelmed by the documents, statistics, memos and ‘grisly exhibits’ sent to him by the CIA’s curator, Branch gradually despairs of establishing even the simple facts” (“Superlinear” 324).

“actuarial fact” (DeLillo, *Libra* 442, 57). If Kennedy’s death seems to have had an epistemologically destabilizing effect, causing “an aberration in the heartland of the real,” Branch’s task is thus to help us “regain our grip on things” by reestablishing the dominion of stable, factual knowledge (15). This stabilization depends on a work of archival recovery and transparent historical representation that is premised on the perceived solidity of the “actual,” an important term that recurs at significant moments in the text, and which signifies Branch’s desire for an epistemological grounding. For instance, Branch is described as seeking out the fundamental causal relations that preceded and lead up to those “Six point nine seconds of heat and light,” first by “follow[ing] the bullet trajectories backwards to the lives that occupy the shadows, *actual* men who moan in their dreams,” before finally constructing out of this data a corresponding, mimetic narrative comprised of “*actual* finished prose” (15, 59, my emphases). Branch’s archival project can thus be summarized as follows: to “master the data” (442) by examining and assessing all—or as much as is physically possible—of the extant evidence related to the assassination; next, to determine with “fine-grained” (14) accuracy the chain of events beyond all the mystery and obfuscation, whether accidental or deliberate; and, finally, to produce a definitive historiographic narrative that presents those myriad events as directly or mimetically as possible,¹⁵⁵ finally substituting the clarity of positivist historical knowledge for the outright distortions of “political bias” and “systemic fantasy” (15).

¹⁵⁵ According to Jenkins, the empirical mode of history seeks to represent the past “as clearly as possible in unambiguous, plain, commonsense language” (14).

However, given the sheer range and amount of material, as well as its ceaseless accretion (“trickling down the years,” it just “keeps coming” [59]), it is hardly surprising that Branch’s archive is difficult to control or organize. Despite the Agency’s providing him with the means to digitize some of the records, or even paying to increase the size of his house (183), Branch struggles with the basic material problem of collection management. Faced with what O’Driscoll views as the characteristically *modern* problem of “overwhelming quantities of material inscriptions,” Branch is understandably preoccupied with “the management of material texts” (288): “Paper is beginning to slide out of the room and across the doorway to the house proper. The floor is covered with books and papers. The closet is stuffed with material [Branch] has yet to read. He has to wedge new books into the shelves, force them in, insert them sideways, squeeze everything, keep everything” (DeLillo, *Libra* 378). Here, Branch is almost literally buried beneath “a growing mountain” of documents (Cowart, *Physics* 96), as he attempts to cope with the mixed blessing of a seemingly never-ending archive. But even more troubling than these exigencies of archive management, I would argue, is the way in which DeLillo destabilizes some of Branch’s key methodological and epistemological assumptions. In particular, the basic historiographic desire to reverse time’s arrow—once again, to “follow the bullet trajectories backwards to the ... actual,” to access past “reality” through the close study of, say, official documents, eyewitness accounts, or material objects—is repeatedly complicated by the novel’s replacement of a supposed “actuality” with either a complete absence or an aesthetic construction. *Libra* suggests that the past

reality Branch seeks is unattainable or, at best, a deliberate product of human design instead of an a priori, objective phenomenon.

It is, significantly, the act of studying the aforementioned warped bullet that affords Branch and us an inkling of the substitutive logic of his archive.¹⁵⁶ At one point the Curator forwards him some “grisly material” relating to the deaths of the two main protagonists, Oswald and Kennedy, including autopsy photographs of the former, various data from police ballistics tests meant to simulate the President’s death (“photographs of skulls with the right cranial portion blown away”), as well as the “actual” bullet used on a cadaver in a subsequent simulation of the moment of the President’s death (298-99). Branch is immediately struck by what he perceives to be the insistent materiality of it all, especially noticing the precise detail of the slug “with its nose leveled and spread like a penny left on trolley tracks.”¹⁵⁷ Imagining the Curator advising him that ““This is your history ... this is the true nature of the event,”” Branch feels as though he has reached “another level here,” one where textual mediation has given way to direct physical sensation: “Beyond documents, now. They want me to *touch* and *smell*” (299). However, while the flattened bullet at first seems to enable a direct connection to the “Shattered bone and horror” (299) of the assassination itself, thereby promising to facilitate Branch’s aforementioned

¹⁵⁶ This notion of substitution (or, perhaps rather, deferral) is also suggested earlier by the narrator’s claim that “everything in the Warren Report is *elsewhere*” (181-82, my emphasis). In other words, the “meaning” of the report (and, implicitly, of Branch’s archive in general) is never present in anything remotely resembling self-presence, but is rather in constant movement, endlessly slipping away from the analytical gaze.

¹⁵⁷ The fact that the bullet seems redolent of a sense of the deep historical past is indicated by Branch’s immediate reaction to his memory of an antique mode of transport: “How old he is,” he admits parenthetically (299).

ability to “follow” such an object “backwards” in time via a kind of metonymic chain (15), several key details suggest the illusory nature of this apparent historical propinquity. Most obviously, the bullet—along with much of the other material Branch has been sent—is the product of a “simulat[ion],” the deliberately artificial reenactment of the event (299). Tracing it backwards merely leads to a secondary repetition that refers to something *else*—something that is, moreover, doubly displaced in this chain of simulations, since “the President’s brain,” the target of Oswald’s bullets, “has been missing from the National Archives for over twenty years.” The brute matter of “blood and gunk” (299) is, finally, absent, replaced by the order of representation.¹⁵⁸ In lieu of the President’s brain—what we might think of as the absent transcendental signified of this secret history—Branch confronts a series of doubly removed representations, oddly aestheticized replicas of the “excerebrate” (Coward, *Physics* 106) presidential corpse: “Branch studies a picture of a gelatin-tissue model, ‘dressed’ like the President. It is pure *modernist sculpture*, a block of gelatin layered in suit and shirt material with a strip of undershirt showing” (DeLillo, *Libra* 299, my emphases). This pattern of the desire for a material connection to the historical past giving way to an absence that is then filled by some form of aesthetic substitute—or what the narrator calls “a picture of a . . . model”—is evident elsewhere in the novel, as when we see Branch studying a photograph of a “notorious” conspirators’ hideout, “544 Camp Street in New Orleans” (59). Although Branch possesses this image, the building

¹⁵⁸ Wilcox similarly argues that the grisly material that Branch is sent here is not “the real” as such, even if it seems like it; rather, it is the “repetition of trauma . . . not so much an encounter with the real as a ‘missed encounter,’” a trace that shows up only in the wake of the failure of representation to capture reality, which is instead present in metonymic displacements (347-48).

itself is “long gone,” and, just like Kennedy’s brain, it has been replaced by a work of plastic art: “the site is an urban renewal plaza now. The Curator sends recent photos ... There are granite benches, brick paving, *a piece of sculpture* with a subsidized look about it, called ‘Out of There’” (59, my emphases). In both these cases, then, Branch’s work of archival recovery turns up not empirical or material “fact” per se, but rather, “doubly” mediated aesthetic substitutions for the lost object of (historiographic) desire.

In the previous examples, then, sculptural objects—a surrealistic gelatin President and a banal work of civic “art”—stand in, perhaps a bit bathetically, for a sought-after historical actuality. One of the important implications we can draw from this motif of absencing and aestheticization is that, unlike his fictional researcher, DeLillo refuses, as Cowart points out, to position his own investigation of the assassination “as some kind of superior analysis of such facts as have been determined” (*Physics* 110). Indeed, DeLillo tends to view history in general—or, more specifically, the discourse of historiography—as a similarly “sculpted” artifice, rather than a means of accessing a concrete reality that can somehow be transmitted objectively via a mode of linguistic representation that is unproblematically neutral or transparent. For all Nicholas Branch’s stated obsession with quantitative “data” (59, 182, 442) and discrete “facts” (57, 58, 299, 300), much of his time is occupied by activities that resemble a kind of fuzzy hermeneutics or poetics more than a precise, quasi-scientific analysis. Late in the novel, when we might otherwise expect Branch to be zeroing in on his final conclusions, the Curator quite literally “begins to send fiction” instead of factual

data: “twenty-five years of novels and plays about the assassination,” along with a range of similarly focused “feature films” (442). A rather reluctant Branch “has no choice but to study this material” (442), but, even prior to this (to him) pointless muddying of the empirical waters, it is evident that his archive consists as much of “fictive” or “literary” discourse as of putatively unvarnished fragments of historical actuality.

For example, even as, on the one hand, Branch attempts to affirm the apparently stable boundaries between fact and fantasy, “history” and “paranoia,” on the other hand, he simultaneously “concedes” the blurring of such lines by acknowledging that historical documentation is often the product of contingent or artificial generic determinants (57). Thus, as he reads an ostensibly bland “printout” from a “House select committee” on the series of deaths linked to the assassination, Branch realizes that it has been expertly crafted in “the *language of the manner of death*”: “Shot in the back of head. Died of cut throat. Shot in police station. Shot in motel. Shot by husband after one month marriage. Found hanging by toreador pants in jail cell. Killed by karate chop.” The otherwise terse, chronicle-like tone of this bureaucratic discursive mode in fact strikes Branch as a lurid, updated version of one of the oldest genres in literature: “It is the neon *epic of Saturday night*” (57, my emphases). Just so, the gargantuan Warren Report puts Branch in mind of a similarly updated epic, this time a kind of anachronistic Midwestern *Ulysses*: with its “millions of words” and “twenty-six volumes accompanying volumes of testimony and exhibits,” the Report resembles “the megaton novel James Joyce would have written if he’d moved to Iowa City and

lived to be a hundred” (181). The Report exhibits the formal density characteristic of Modernism’s famed stylistic difficulty: “lost to syntax and other arrangement,” it “resembles a kind of mind-spatter, a poetry of lives muddied and dripping in language” (181). But this poetic “Joycean book of America” also has all the affective resonance of a popular “novel,” one whose relatable characters “feel real pain” and which might be worth more to Branch for its latent content (it is a “valuable document of human heartbreak and muddle”) than for its patina of drily factual historical description (182). Overall, DeLillo suggests here that the historian’s primary sources are, as with more obviously literary forms, first and foremost discursive mediations of past reality. In this emphasis, *Libra*, as Mott contends, is akin to the contemporary historiographic theory of a thinker such as Hayden White. In a comparable fashion to White’s influential tropological analysis of historical writing, DeLillo’s novel “foregrounds the narrativization of history” to emphasize the “linguistic structures such as rhetorical tropes by which we organize and give meaning (retroactively) to the flow of human events” (133). Ultimately, the Warren Report’s formal and thematic literariness, like that of the archive in which it has been filed away, directs us toward DeLillo’s sense of the complex, constitutive interrelations between raw phenomenal occurrence and shaped historiographic narrative—or what the novel eloquently refers to as “the strained merging of written and living characters, of words and politics” (301).

The Postmodern Archive

This emphasis on the inextricable relation between Branch's "empirical" methodology and more overtly constructed or artificial discourses such as art, poetry, fiction, and so on, indicates a key point of connection between DeLillo's engagement with the figure of the archive in *Libra* and the refiguring of the archive consonant with the postmodern critique of historiography. Specifically, the conventional mode of academic historiography (or what Keith Jenkins calls "lower case history" [5]), in pursuing its fundamental goal of the objectivist reconstruction of the past, privileges the archive as a means of attaining this desired objectivity. Hence, "in the land of proper history the way to achieve this state of grace [i.e. the unbiased, undistorted presentation of past events] ... is through the demand that, above all, historians should go back to the sovereignty of the sources, to the primary evidence," particularly "direct informational documents" including "bureaucratic reports, state papers, wills, eye-witness accounts" (Jenkins 11, 12). As the word "direct" implies, such sources are supposed to open out onto past reality in a relatively unmediated fashion: the "critical sifting of the traces/sources of the past" results in the uncovering of "hard facts" (Jenkins 12). However, as we saw in the previous section—from DeLillo's perspective, at least—the clear lines of demarcation between the privileged forms of so-called "primary evidence" and more overtly rhetorical or fictive are easily blurred; Branch indeed finds his primary sources ("unpublished state documents, polygraph reports, Dictabelt recordings," and "photo enhancements") to be increasingly indistinguishable from the decidedly unempirical information

provided by “rumors, mirages, [and] dreams” (DeLillo, *Libra* 181).¹⁵⁹ In generally emphasizing the saturation of historiography by narrative, “postmodern approaches” to history, as Jenkins puts it, at once attack the traditional “‘technicist fallacy’” that treats the archive as a neutral instrument for recovering the facts of the past, and draw attention to “the way documents and sources are themselves texts” that “require a critical reading” that goes beyond merely mining the archive for informational content (13).¹⁶⁰

For the moment, I want to take a step back from the particular question of historical narrativity so as to sketch the broad lineaments of this postmodern critique of history, before turning to a closer consideration of the question of the “postmodern archive” as such, as well elaborating on the latter’s particular relevance for my reading of *Libra*. My discussion here draws primarily on H el ene Bowen Raddeker’s useful discussion of the relations between postmodernism and history in her 2007 monograph *Sceptical History: Feminist and Postmodern Approaches in Practice*. Raddeker locates the origin of postmodernist treatments of history in the twentieth-century, structuralist derived “linguistic turn” in the human sciences, which contested “the empiricist assumption of ‘referentiality’” with the assertion that “the connection between a real thing or phenomenon

¹⁵⁹ See also Raddeker on the way postmodern historical theory places in doubt this basic distinction between different “levels” of source material: “privileging primary (e.g., archival) sources over secondary (scholarly interpretive) ones makes no sense in postmodernist or other histories focussed upon discourse and rhetoric,” in which “‘secondary’ sources are, in effect, transformed into ‘primary’ ones” (40).

¹⁶⁰ Jenkins borrows the useful phrase “technicist fallacy” from LaCapra’s critique of archival fetishism in his *History and Criticism*. On the distinction between “mining” the archive and “reading” it critically, see also the contrast Stoler makes between what she terms the “extraction” and “ethnographic” paradigms of archival methodology (“Colonial Archives” 109).

(signified or referent) and a word that ‘refers’ to it and signifies its meaning is arbitrary” (19-20).¹⁶¹ Following on from this basic conceptual premise, the key tenet of postmodernist-inflected history is thus that the past events to which historians ostensibly refer are likewise arbitrarily constituted in language. (I will look more closely at the important question of the postmodern “event” subsequently.) From this point of view, language is “generative” rather than “mimetic,” meaning that the discrete events it seems to represent in an a posteriori fashion are actually “artifact[s]” or “effect[s]” of the very discourse used to describe them (20). The linguistic turn thus bequeaths the postmodern historian the knowledge that its “language is not transparent or straightforward, but ‘opaque’” (22).

For Raddeker, this linguistic awareness encourages the development of another defining characteristic of “postist” (36) history, that of acute disciplinary self-reflexivity. Whereas conventional or “modern” historians—in the service of the ideal posture of objective neutrality—tend to downplay (or even occlude entirely) their active role in writing about, as well as their ideological and affective investments *in*, their objects of study, the postmodern historian advocates “both self-criticism and frank admissions of [his or her] own position” (33). In the wake of this initial and overt acknowledgement of the positionality of the producer of historical knowledge, several other “principles” may be deduced concerning this method of history (33). In Raddeker’s scheme, postmodernist

¹⁶¹ Cowart similarly views the linguistic turn or “‘revolution’” as having led to a fundamental questioning of the basis of historical representation—a sense that both historical discourse, and the “evidence” on which it is based, are “Inevitably colored by the language in which they receive expression” (*History* 19).

history may be defined in the following terms: it rejects “closures of knowledge” in favour of “the provisional nature of any argument or interpretation”; it eschews “teleological or essentialist representations of the past” for narratives that are structured according to “ruptures, breaks[,] or discontinuities”; it emphasizes “difference” as determinant of socially-constructed subject positions (of race, class, gender, culture, and so on), over and against the naturalizing force of universalist assumptions; it replaces “essentialized and static” models of national and individual identity with a view of subjectivity as “discursively constituted in an ongoing process”; and, finally, it asserts that the demystifying analysis of “historiography”—in other words, history considered as a essentially a “technical operation,”¹⁶² an artificial mode of written communication grounded in a number of (usually) sublimated material factors (institutional authority, physical sites, technical practices)—is as germane to the historical project as is the study of the past for its own sake (33).¹⁶³

These general guidelines concerning what Raddeker also refers to as the “sceptical” [sic] mode of history (1) are useful for defining what we mean by a

¹⁶² This concept is drawn from Michel de Certeau’s exhaustive analysis of what he calls the “historiographical operation” (73) in *The Writing of History*.

¹⁶³ See Jenkins for a detailed and intriguing critique of what he calls “own-sakism” (16), which he views as the ideological default setting of contemporary academic historiography. Essentially, Jenkins argues that historians who try to represent the past on its own terms—thus explicitly seeking to avoid being didactically or even propagandistically “present/future oriented”—are actually caught in an ideological moment *par excellence*. Arguing that academic historiography is fundamentally a bourgeois discourse, Jenkins suggests that its attempt to treat the past in this hermetic fashion reinforces the Fukuyama-esque fantasy that human society “has now arrived at its preferred historical destination—liberal, bourgeois, market capitalism” (15). The “own-sakist” historian’s apolitical reluctance to recruit the past to a specific political project is ultimately as “political” a mode of history as any baldly Marxist, Enlightenment, or eschatological teleology; thus, according to Jenkins, the way much contemporary historical discourse “‘pretend[s]’ not to be present-oriented is precisely what constitutes [its] present-centredness” (16).

“postmodern archive.”¹⁶⁴ As Kobialka similarly notes, in that it “strip[s] naked the modern myth of objective writing,” the sort of critique just outlined facilitates a methodological interrogation centred on the nature of the “research material” most often to be found in the documentary record (7). Postmodernism thus admonishes us to pay self-conscious attention to the archive as the discursive foundation of historical representation, rather than assuming its self-evident transparency as a mere storehouse of facts. Burton neatly articulates this position, which she views in terms of a recent flurry of “questions about the relationship between evidence and history” precipitated by specific technological and socio-political determinants, including the emergence of the Internet (with its “tremendous challenge to the basic assumptions of archival fixity and materiality”) and the urgency of recent debates about the relation between social justice and cultural memory (the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission in the wake of apartheid being emblematic here) (“Archive Stories” 2). Burton argues that such developments have insistently drawn attention to the contingency, artifice, and ideological nature of archives, which

do not simply arrive or emerge fully formed; nor are they innocent of struggles for power in either their creation or their interpretive

¹⁶⁴ If, as was discussed in the Introduction, “archive” is a potentially ambiguous term, “postmodernism” is even more radically overdetermined. Some of the possible meanings of the term include: a periodizing concept relating to the socio-economic conditions of late capitalism or neoliberalism; a post-WW2 aesthetic or generic category; and a post-Enlightenment critical-philosophical tradition. Compounding this situation, of course, is the fact that many variants of postmodernism stress its deliberate resistance to the very notion of stable meaning or ordered categorization; from this kind of perspective, postmodernism is “open, eclectic, anti-hierarchical, and nondoctrinal” (Coward, *Physics* 12). For an excellent discussion of the conceptual and terminological complexities of the postmodern, including summaries of the positions of key theorists, see Juan-Navarro (19-34).

applications. Though their own origins are often occluded and the exclusions on which they are premised often dimly understood, all archives come into being in and as history as a result of specific political, cultural, and socioeconomic pressures—pressures which leave traces and which render archives themselves artifacts of history. (“Archive Stories” 6)

A fundamental realization congruent with the advent of the postmodern, then, is that archives are discursive constructs that, in their artificiality, embody the affective investments and ideological presuppositions of the individuals and groups that produce them: “all archives are ‘figured,’” meaning that they are also “monuments to particular configurations of power” (Burton, “Archive Stories” 6-7). Responding to this realization, Burton advocates a self-reflexive historiographic practice that strives to incorporate the necessarily ideological “stories” inscribed in its primary sources, the result of which is the production of “self-conscious ethnographies of one of the chief investigative foundations of History as a discipline” (“Archive Stories” 6). In similar terms, albeit from the standpoint of Archival Science, Erik Ketelaar argues that we need to think of archives as a mode of deliberate “storytelling” themselves, thus laying bare the “tacit narratives of power and knowledge” that have habitually been ignored as a result his own discipline’s privileging of an ideology of objectivity (140, 132).¹⁶⁵

¹⁶⁵ Drawing on the work of the archival theorist Luciana Duranti, Cook broadly defines the discipline of Archival Science as “the body of knowledge about the nature and characteristics of archives and archival work systematically organized into theory, methodology, and practice” (13). Premised on notions of “universality” and “objectivity,” Archival Science—at least in its predominant mode—is “rooted in nineteenth-century positivism” (14, 3). However, Cook perceives that, as a result of the dissemination of some of the insights of postmodern thought, as well as of critiques of objective representation in other disciplines in the human and social

In addition, this kind of documentary self-reflexivity is increasingly evident in the realm of aesthetic or cultural production. In the late-1980s, for example, Hutcheon identified a key characteristic of postmodern historical fiction as the attempt to denaturalize the notion of the archive as a “repository of truth,” primarily by “foregrounding . . . the textuality of its representations” (*Politics* 83, 88). In a more recent intervention, meanwhile, Jaimie Baron has identified a “new relationship with archives and archival practices” in contemporary avant-garde documentary filmmaking. “Rather than simply mobilizing archival materials in a transparent manner,” such films “figure the archive itself and thus simulate for the viewer the experience of being in an archive”; in doing so, they draw viewers’ attention to the implication of archival sources in the constructive “process” of meaning-making, simultaneously undermining such sources’ usual equation with the “straightforward recovery of ‘the facts’” (14).

In self-consciously reflecting back on the interpretive mechanisms by which the meanings of documentary source materials are produced, Baron’s films also posit an archive comprised of “indirect, dispersed, and nonlinear” fragments, rather than an overarching structure that is inherently “comprehensive or fully

sciences, a “paradigm shift is indeed occurring,” one that “challenge[s] how archivists think and thus how they do their work” (4). This growing acceptance of postmodern ideas in Cook’s discipline entails a shifting conceptualization of the archive, “from product to process, from structure to function, from archives to archiving, from the record to the recording context, from the ‘natural’ residue or passive by-product of administrative activity to the consciously constructed and actively mediated ‘archivalisation’ of social memory” (4). Along with Cook, other archivists and archival scientists who make use of the concept of postmodernism include Duff, Harris, E. Kaplan, Ketelaar, and Schwartz. While I am not specifically concerned with debates about Archival Science in this dissertation, when necessary I have made use of some of the more general reflections on the changing nature of archives that have recently emerged from those debates. Scholars like Harris and Ketelaar, in particular, have proven useful for my thinking through the necessarily partial, ideological process of archival exclusion. (Amongst archival scientists, Harris is especially receptive to rethinking the archive in relation to the challenges posed by deconstruction.)

coherent” (14, 23). Just as Raddeker’s skeptical historical model privileges the provisionality of interpretation over the epistemological closure of teleological narratives, the postmodern archive resists “closing the book, as it were, on the *meaning* of its subject” (Baron 23). Inheriting a generalized postmodern suspicion of what Hutcheon refers to as the “dream of a ‘total history’” (*Politics* 60), and conscious of a concomitant fracturing of the historical field, many archival theorists and practitioners have replaced “expectations of absolute truth” with an openness to the possibility of the fragmentation of meaning, or the “multiplicity of interpretive possibilities” (Burton, “Archive Stories” 19). A model of the archive stressing unity, order, and top-down hierarchy, has consequently, in many theoretical and methodological discussions, given way to one emphasizing decentred, sometimes chaotic “horizontal networks” of heterogeneous signification (Cook 4). Ketelaar, for instance, suggests that we should no longer “regard the [individual] record as an artifact with fixed boundaries of contents and contexts”; instead, what he calls the “posttraditional” archive should be seen as consisting of “multilayered, multifaceted meanings ... which can be deconstructed and reconstructed, then interpreted and used by scholars ... *ad infinitum*” (138, 139). In similar terms, Kobialka describes the postmodern archive as consisting of “fragments” continuously circulating in “a dynamic process of rearrangement” that frustrates any desire for the “consolation and pleasure” inherent in an ordered totality (8).

Moreover, according to Ed Folsom, in the wake of “the end of grand Narratives of Enlightenment,” the postmodern archive (Folsom’s preferred

nomenclature is “database”) needs to be seen as “an endless and unstructured collection of images, texts, and other data records” (1574). Harris similarly argues that, congruent with this shift from a closed, centralized archive invested in the “detaining of meaning,” to a radical “opening [of] the archive,” is a problematization of the archive as site of the production of teleological metanarratives (84). Speaking in the specific context of South African politics, Harris argues that whereas the hegemonic archive of the apartheid state (or even of the multicultural, post-apartheid “Rainbow Nation”) was “harnessed ... to promote particular narratives” of “reconciliation and nation building,” a “transform[ed],” deconstructive archival practice opens up the possibility of attending to “a myriad narratives of the past,” rather than just a single, official account (78, 82).

Harris contends that this multiple, fragmented, fundamentally “open” archive provides an opportunity to pay attention to stories and voices that had previously been hidden or silenced by a totalizing dominant discourse. His concept of an “alternative archival practice” encourages archivists and historians to bring “the hidden, the marginalized, the exiled, the ‘other’ ... into the mainstream,” even as it simultaneously “trouble[s] conceptualizations of the ‘mainstream’” (76). In emphasizing the importance of archiving non-traditional forms of record and hitherto sidelined histories (particularly in terms of South Africa’s indigenous oral cultures), Harris is “driven by the ... imperative to ‘give the voiceless voice,’” in part by focusing “not only [on] society’s pinnacles”—as in elitist or “Great Man” methods of history—but also on “grassroots experience

and the full gamut of experience in between” (80). In other words, “bound by the principle of hospitality to ‘otherness’” (Harris 86), the postmodern archive makes “difference”—whether in terms of race, class, gender, or queer¹⁶⁶ determinants—visible, thus allowing for the universalizing assumptions of conventional historiography to be contested. At the same time, as Harris points out, even as it enables a shift in focus toward difference or otherness, the postmodern archive also encourages a critical attitude toward the lure of essentialism that is difficult to excise from this model of personal identity. Extrapolating from Harris’s approving citation of Spivak concerning the dubious tendency of some intellectuals to try “to fix and diagnose the identity of the most deserving marginal” (86), we might argue that the concept of the postmodern archive is also indissociable from the recognition of subjectivity as a phenomenon that is both always in process and always produced in discourse, rather than inhering in a static, unified “self.” Indeed, according to Ketelaar, an important tenet of postmodern thinking about the archive involves unveiling the multiple ways in which archival institutions are, precisely, implicated in the “social reification” (134)—that is, the discursive production and ideological interpellation—of subjects. Thus, in late capitalism, Ketelaar argues, subjects are inscribed via a “system of disciplinary surveillance by government and in the private sector, using a complex of technologies involving the collection, processing, and sharing of information”; more concisely, “Collecting information [in archives]” is what “constitutes individuals” in the first instance (134).

¹⁶⁶ For a good overview of the notion of “queering” the archive, see de Groot (150-51). This idea is also a central focus of Cvetkovich’s *An Archive of Feelings*.

Finally, in addition to their characteristic emphasis on self-reflexivity, fragmentation, resistance to narrative closure, “difference,” and the production of subjects, theorizations of the postmodern archive may be defined (again, following Raddeker’s guidelines) in terms of their foregrounding of textuality as the enabling condition of historical—or, more precisely, *historiographic*—representation. One of the fundamental (and, for some, most controversial) claims arising from postmodern thought’s engagement with questions of history is that the past “is inaccessible to us except in textual form . . . our approach to it and the Real itself necessarily passes through its prior textualization” (Jameson 35). Traditional forms of what Roland Barthes refers to as the “discourse of history” tend to conceal this mediation by acting as though the language in which they are expressed is directly attached to the “extra-structural domain of the ‘real’” (17). The “double operation” of mimetic historiography assumes that the referent is at once external to discourse (“its founding and governing principle”) and identical with the linguistic signifier: “the referent enters into a direct relation with the signifier, and the discourse, solely charged with expressing the real, believes itself authorized to dispense with the fundamental term in imaginary structures, which is the signified.” For Barthes, conventional history is thus designed to produce a “*realistic effect*” in which the real and its signifier seem to “come together” (17). Conversely, postmodern-derived theoretical and literary engagements with historical representation draw attention to, rather than occluding, the relatively determining role of language in the production of effects of the real. In particular, they emphasize what Hutcheon calls “the archive as text,” or the “specifically

textual nature of the archival traces of [past] events, traces by which we infer meaning and grant factual status to those empirical data” (*Politics* 75). As Hutcheon elaborates, “If the past is only known to us today through its textualized traces (which, like all texts, are always open to interpretation), then the writing of both history and historiographic metafiction becomes a form of complex intertextual cross-referencing that operates within (and does not deny) its unavoidably discursive context” (*Politics* 78). If “brute event[s]” did, unquestionably, occur in a material sense, nonetheless “we can only know them today through texts” (*Politics* 77, 78).¹⁶⁷

From this perspective, the temporal relations structuring the representation of the past are fundamentally inverted. The archive-text is no longer considered the residual or belated effect of an “actual” prior event; rather, the event, insofar as we can know or perceive it in the present, is “the *effect* of [textual] representations, not their source” (Hutcheon, *Politics* 6-7). Moraru helpfully outlines some of the broader implications for a postmodern model of representation that operates “intertextually, [by] retrieving texts from our textual archive” (*Memorious Discourse* 19):

Postmoderns offer ... that, to represent “real” things and situations, representation must work its way through, first engage with, literary and cultural texts, stylistic codes, and representation models—in brief,

¹⁶⁷ See Raddeker’s basic distinction between “events” and “facts” (25). In this formulation, phenomenal events that occurred in the past do not have an inherent meaning, “just waiting to be unearthed (or found in documents in the archives).” Rather, they are, in themselves, chaotic, meaningless, and, in any case, inaccessible, meaning that they are only granted meaning—and are, in fact, only knowable as such—via the interrelated processes of archiving and narrative construction (28). My basic argument in this chapter is, instead, that what we come to understand as “events” are products of the archive.

other representations. Plato posited, outside and before mimesis, an origin, center, or model for artists' mimetic activities; the postmoderns make no bones about ... [their] belief that there is no such center prior, external to, or above structures and structuring, textuality, representation—no representable object that has not been fashioned by representation already. (*Memorious Discourse* 20)

A postmodern model of archivization would thus draw attention to the textualized processes by which representations of the past, whether in literary, theoretical, or historiographic form, actively produce the objects known as “events” which are then, in more conventional, mimetic approaches, taken as signs of the “real.”

In *Libra*, DeLillo's depiction of Nicholas Branch's activities clearly exhibits many of the characteristics of the postmodern archive that I have just described. For instance, Branch's increasingly “Frustrated” attitude toward his recalcitrant documents and objects is concomitant with a more self-aware—or “self-watching,” as DeLillo puts it—view of the archive (181). In addition, there is a fragmentary, “wandering”¹⁶⁸ aspect to Branch's work that lends itself to the perception of “fine-grained detail” (14) but not to any “grand and masterful scheme” (58), the latter being a model of historical narrative that Branch begins to perceive as insufficient for dealing with such chaotic material. As a result, Branch

¹⁶⁸ There is a similarly “peripatetic” quality to DeLillo's own depiction of Branch as well. In other words, the six Branch sections that pepper the novel are accretive and reiterative, rather than being structured according to any linear plot. Intermittent and seemingly randomly placed, these sections are also highly repetitive in their diction and tone; repeated phrases, or variations thereon, include “the room of growing old,” “the room of theories,” and “gleaming theories” (see 59, 181-82). DeLillo's stylistic choices here are suggestive, I would argue, of the endlessly reiterative nature of Branch's task, his project being thus formally figured or mimicked in the novel's linguistic repetitions.

“despair[s] of ever getting to the end” (59), just as the haunting, fragmentary narratives contained in the material he is dealing with resist any satisfying closure (“Men and women surface,” are “tracked for several pages, [and] then disappear” [182]). These archival narratives, meanwhile, tend to focus on those marginalized by the structures of American power: although he is writing the history of a President’s death, Branch thus finds himself more often reading and writing about obscure, supposedly unimportant people—“waitresses, prostitutes, mind readers, motel managers, owners of rifle ranges”—whose lives, nonetheless, are affecting (their “sadness has [Branch] fixed to his chair”) (182, 183). In studying those lives, however, Branch rarely locates any essential core of identity. The subjects found in his archive are, rather, determinedly textualized and unstable. Just as there seem to be “multiple Oswalds” that have been constructed, every character Branch comes across seems to have some form of alias: “Every name takes him on a map tour of the Dallas labyrinth” while making him feel “like a child with alphabet blocks, trying to make a pretty word” (300-01). Finally, Branch’s postmodern archive—self-reflexive, fragmentary, “other”—also repeatedly reveals how the traces of the past it contains are constitutive of the events they represent. In the following sections, I will return to a close reading of *Libra* to argue that the central historical event of the novel—the assassination of President Kennedy—is inextricable from its discursive representation in various archives, including, significantly, other collections than merely Branch’s.

The Event of the Archive

In its figuring of the postmodern archive, *Libra* clearly acknowledges that, to borrow again from Hutcheon, history “does not exist except as a text”; therefore “We cannot know the past except through its texts,” including “documents, eye-witness accounts, [and] archives” (*Poetics* 16, 92). What I would like to suggest here, though, is that DeLillo himself is, in fact, less interested in dwelling on this realization of the final inaccessibility of the reality of the past than in demonstrating a slightly—but significantly—different point: that “the past” itself is always already inextricable from its discursive representation, or, in other words, that the event is not, finally, ontologically distinct from or absolutely exterior to its archive but is constituted by and in relation to it from the very outset. From this viewpoint, rather than existing merely as a sort of belated textual residue or trace of a certain happening, the archive would already be there, *in the past*. More specifically, while Nicholas Branch attempts to investigate the nature of past “reality” via the mediated form of documentary and material traces, what he actually uncovers in the course of that search is an ever-receding chain of duplicate archives—and archivists—that uncannily mirror his own endeavours and thus perpetually defer the possibility of his arriving at any sense of finalized or stable historical meaning.

Archiving is without question the single most recurrent activity depicted in *Libra*; if many of its characters seem obsessed with compiling files, dossiers, and collections of various kinds, the novel catalogues this activity in a similarly fixated manner. One of the text’s most enigmatic archivists, for example, is a man

named “Captain” Dave Ferrie, a central if shadowy figure in DeLillo’s imagination of the Kennedy conspiracy, who, by dint of once having commanded a young Lee Oswald’s unit in the Civil Air Patrol (42), is subsequently in a position to assist in recruiting the latter as the plot’s necessary patsy. Ferrie somewhat resembles McCarthy’s Judge Holden in a sort of minor, absurdist key: he has “lively [intellectual] interests,” having assumed at various points the roles of “professional pilot, amateur researcher in cancer, anti-Castro militant,” and “defrocked priest” (29, 58, 64); he is afflicted with “alopecia universalis” meaning that he is “one hundred percent bald” (316, 29); he formulates deliberately dense and obfuscatory philosophies of history (330, 339) and attempts to offer demystifying explanations of religious doxa (320-21); and, a bit like the judge in the latrine at the end of *Blood Meridian*, he also sexually seduces the younger male protagonist while simultaneously recruiting him to his violent, ideological project (340-42).¹⁶⁹ More to the point, in addition to these other Holden-esque characteristics, Ferrie is an inveterate collector of texts and information. When Oswald first enters his apartment, for instance, he immediately encounters an extensive library of works covering a wide range of subjects: “The bookshelves ... bowed under the weight of many hundreds of medical books, law books, encyclopedias, stacks of autopsy records, books on cancer, forensic pathology, firearms” (315-16). Later on, of course, Branch will discover that, like

¹⁶⁹ Indeed, if, in *Blood Meridian*, Judge Holden apparently rapes the kid before killing him, Dave Ferrie’s less obviously destructive embrace nonetheless similarly leads, circuitously, to Oswald’s death: thus, right after ejaculating on the unwilling Oswald, Ferrie offers him some hashish, before commenting on the etymology of this “interesting word” as “the source of the word assassin” (341-42). In other words, in helping tip “The Balance” of the “easily influenced” Oswald’s astrological scales (315), Ferrie encourages his participation in a conspiracy plot that, like all such “narratives,” leads inexorably toward death (221).

himself, Ferrie has collected a “complete library of books and other materials ... on the Kennedy assassination” as well (58).

But Ferrie is far from being the only peripheral character in *Libra* whose behaviour clearly echoes—or, more accurately, foreshadows and thus predetermines—Branch’s archival project. There is also, for example, the New Orleans private investigator, Guy Banister, whose fetish for “collecting information” (66, 130) is a manifestation of his paranoid fantasies of communist invasion, countercultural subversion, and racial unrest. Within his own “small room” set aside for the purposes of “gathering” and “compiling” (65), Banister has “steel cabinets covered in dust” that contain his multiform “intelligence records”: “files on people who volunteered for the anti-Castro groups in the area”; “microfilmed records of left-wing activity in Louisiana”; “material supplied by the FBI on Castro agents and sympathizers”; “handbooks on guerilla tactics”; “back issues of a racist magazine Guy published” (63). Indeed, like Branch with his overflowing documents or Ferrie with his overburdened bookshelves, Banister finds that he almost has too much material. Working “longer hours” to “[compile] longer lists,” he begins to realize that ““Once you start a file ... it’s just a matter of time before the material comes pouring in”” (140, 143). Banister’s increasingly obsessive gathering of files and compiling of lists is in response to another kind of out-of-control “massing,” that of “Red Chinese troops” whom he fervently believes are “being dropped into the Baja by the fucking tens of thousands” (352). Eerily, the collecting impulse of another unpleasant character, the right-wing activist and virulent anti-segregationist General Edwin Walker, are prompted by

the very same nightmare of threatened ethno-national borders. Thus, while the US government (or “Real Control Apparatus” as Walker calls it) “infiltrat[es] our minds and bodies with fluoridation,” the “Red Chinese” are simultaneously “massing below the California border,” ready to invade (282). Like Branch, who painstakingly tries to analyze blurs or break seconds down into microscopic units of time, Walker manages these anxieties concerning a threat that he “can’t measure . . . [or] photograph” by surrounding himself with stacked documents that provide a comforting, counterbalancing sense of ideological and spatial organization: “He sat with his back to the window, totaling figures on a scratch pad, taxes, doing his taxes . . . Letters from the true believers were stacked in a basket to his right. The Christian Crusade women, the John Birch men . . . To his left was another basket, this one filled with news stories clipped by an aide” (282, 283).

Significantly, Walker’s sorted papers—and particularly the final detail, here, of the clippings—are themselves replicated in those of Beryl Parmenter, wife of a disaffected CIA agent turned conspirator. Beryl thinks of her husband’s main job as being “to collect and store everything that everyone has ever said and then reduce it to a microdot”; in turn, this project of encyclopedic archivization is meant to guard against epistemological chaos—the “deeper truth” that “nothing can be finally known”—by protecting all knowledge beneath the “great sheltering nave of the Agency” (260). Likewise, in the more modest terms of her domestic frame of reference, Beryl wants nothing more than “to live in small dusty rooms, layered safely in, out of the reach of dizzying things, of heat and light and strange

spaces” (260). She attempts to create this sense of being securely enclosed against a threatening universe via her habitual clipping and dissemination of newspaper articles: “Pages were spread over the wineglasses and dinner plates . . . She said the news clippings she sent to friends were a perfectly reasonable way to correspond. There were a thousand things to clip and they all said something about the way she felt” (261). Although each clipping admittedly contains information “about a violent act,” the ostensible goal of Beryl’s newspaper archive is to shore up the “personal” and “intimate” sphere whose borders are menaced by such “crazed” actions (261).

However, by the end of the novel, Beryl’s faith in the efficacy of this “sheltering” archival structure is shaken; the violence she once sought to contain—“a bombed Negro home, a Buddhist monk who sets himself on fire” (261)—proliferates and invades the confines of her small, domestic room.¹⁷⁰ We can start to understand why this work of archiving fails to protect Beryl from that “heat and light of strange spaces” by further examining two of the more prominent archival figures in *Libra*. In essence, what I want to argue here is that one explanation for Beryl Parmenter’s failure to exercise discursive control over the world of violent events—and, ultimately, for Nicholas Branch’s inability to

¹⁷⁰ If Beryl’s archive of newspaper clippings is designed to mitigate the effects of acts of violence (in other words, to work as a kind of *pharmakon*, inoculating the social body against that which it also carries), this function is compromised by the novel’s end. As she watches the traumatizing, endless television footage of Oswald being shot by Jack Ruby, Beryl realizes that the violence of the assassination and its aftermath has penetrated her domestic sanctum: “These men [on TV] were *in her house* with their hats and guns. Pictures from the other world. They’d located her, forced her to look, and it was not at all like the news items she clipped and mailed to friends. She felt this violence *spilling in*, over and over” (446, my emphases). In a sense, Beryl is no longer in control of the mechanism of representation: instead of sending newspaper clippings to others, she is *sent* “Pictures from the other world” that she is then “forced . . . to look” at (446).

“regain [his] grip on things” by gathering together the JFK archive (15)—resides in the fact that the archive *constitutes* those events in the first instance. As a result, any subsequent deployment of the archive, with a view to gaining, say, the controlling perspective supposedly provided by historical understanding, is necessarily accompanied by the unwitting repetition of the enabling conditions of the event’s historical emergence.

Derrida has usefully theorized these complex, convoluted imbrications of event and archive. As he argues in *Archive Fever*, for example, in speculating on the transformative effects e-mail might have had on the early twentieth-century elaboration of psychoanalysis, the archive does not merely contain the traces of preexistent, phenomenal happenings. Rather it is already at work, constituting history “in its very *events*”:

the archive, as printing, writing, prosthesis, or hypomnesic technique in general is not only the place for stocking and for conserving an archivable content *of the past* which would exist in any case, such as, without the archive, one still believes it was or will have been. No, the technical structure of the *archiving* archive also determines the structure of the *archivable* content even in its very coming into existence and in its relationship to the future. The archivization produces as much as it records the event. (16-17)

One way of interpreting this argument would be to suggest that the event, in its singular occurrence, its pure “happening,” cannot finally be known by the observer or interpreter who must therefore inevitably have recourse to the

prosthetic processes of archivization (inscription, representation, and so on). In other words, the “event” actually only *exists* for us, as such, in the archival traces it leaves behind. On the other hand—and this, I think, is the more radical claim that Derrida is making here—one could suggest that a more complex temporality is at work in the structure of any event, and that those traces are already at play at the moment of the so-called singular occurrence itself. The archive here is not merely involved in a belated, *a posteriori* coming-to-terms with the event, but is in actuality what enables or conditions the appearance of eventfulness in its “originary” singularity.

Derrida elaborates further on this paradoxical interaction in the essay “A Certain Impossible Possibility of Saying the Event.” He begins the essay by posing the question ““Is saying the event possible?”” (442). Although he immediately says “plainly and simply” that the answer is ““yes,”” it would appear that things are not that simple. Derrida is, of course, interested in interrogating every aspect of the question ““Is saying the event possible?”” from the question of the “question” itself, to what might be signified by the terms “saying,” “possible,” and, of course, “event” itself. In defining what an event might be, Derrida—paradoxically, using theoretical language to do so—points to its resistance to being defined according to the terms of theoretical discourse, and thus to being framed or closed off as an object of determinate knowledge. Slippery and elusive, the event “implies surprise, exposure, the unanticipatable,” and is “never ... something that is predicted or planned, or even really decided upon” (441). If the event is “what happens [*arrive*],” it is as the radical occurrence of the absolute

“other,” that comes “when it’s not expected” (443). The event is resistant to ordering (it is “exceptional, an exception to the rule. Once there are rules ... there is no event” [457]), and hence leaves one “baffled in the face of the always unique, exceptional, and unpredictable arrival of the other, of the event as other” (452). Lurking on the border between knowledge and its negation—Derrida speaks of it in terms of a certain “non-knowing ... something that is not of the same nature of knowing” (448)—the event in its impossibility seems “to constitute so many challenges to knowledge and theory” (458). There remains, then, “a certain impossibility of saying the event” (445); the event would appear to be beyond the bounds of discourse, knowledge, the archive.

This impossibility would certainly appear to be the case with what Derrida, drawing on the terms of speech act theory, calls “constative” speech: “enunciating, referring to, naming, describing, imparting knowledge, informing”—the “saying of knowledge” that “says something about something” (445). When it comes to saying the event, constative speech attempts to say “what is, saying things as they present themselves, historical events as they take place,” thereby effectively converting the event into “information.” However, Derrida argues that it is impossible to frame the event in these terms, since this informational speech is inevitably *belated* in relation to the singular irruption of the event: such a “cognitive saying ... is always somewhat problematical because the structure of saying is such that it always comes after the event.” Moreover, since it is marked by the general “structure of language”—the structure of the trace—this saying is “bound to a measure of generality, iterability, and

repeatability,” meaning that “it always misses the singularity of the event” (446), whose “uniqueness” would otherwise be “swept into ... iterability” (452).

However, Derrida’s point here is precisely that the event is, paradoxically, at one and the same time absolutely singular *and* necessarily iterable, since “the event cannot appear to be an event, when it appears, unless it is already repeatable in its very uniqueness.” Admitting that this is a “very difficult” concept to think, he elaborates further: “right away, from the very outset of saying or the first appearance of the event, there is iterability and return in absolute uniqueness and utter singularity.” Thus, the event—like the archive—is necessarily spectral, marking the unprecedented arrival of an absolutely unique other that is nonetheless also a “*revenance*,” “a return, a coming back” (452). In other words, while the event might at first seem to be exterior to speech or discourse, Derrida ends up arguing that the “impossibility of saying the event” is not “impossible” in the sense that it cannot occur at all, but is rather part of the general structure of impossibility that defines the event as such, and under whose terms the “impossible” is “not merely impossible, ... [or] the opposite of possible, [but] is also the condition or chance of the possible” (454). Just as the notion of the event upsets such distinctions as those between “the possible and the impossible,” or between the virtual and real (454), it also causes us to rethink the opposition between event and speech. If the collapse of this binary structure is particularly apparent when it comes to “performative” speech acts—a “saying that *does in saying*, a saying that does, that enacts” (445) and thereby “consists in *making the event*” (448)—Derrida nonetheless suggests that constative, descriptive speech

also inevitably produces events, even when the speaker claims not to be doing so. Thus, pointing to the example of the saturated media coverage of the first Gulf War, Derrida argues that while it “pretend[ed] simply to state, show, and inform”—that is, to refer to an external “event”— it was actually “already performative in a way,” a “saying of the event” that in actuality *made* the event it was putatively referring to (447). In sum, then, even the most patently constative or descriptive discourse can be revealed as “a saying that makes the event while feigning simply to state, describe, and relate it ... Event-making is covertly being substituted for event-saying” (447). For Derrida, then, “saying the event” is impossible to the extent that it *constitutes* the event: the “saying-event” (446) is not what comes belatedly after the event’s occurrence and thus, with a sort of epistemological closure, refers to “an object that the event would be,” but is rather the “saying [of] an event that the saying produces” (458).

At every turn, *Libra* emphasizes the archival production of the plot—in Derrida’s terms, the “saying of the event”—to shoot at and kill the president. The conspiracy originates with Win Everett, a disgraced former CIA agent who has been demoted and marginalized (he now holds a tenuous academic post at Texas Women’s University) as a result of his involvement in covert machinations aimed at restoring American influence in communist Cuba. Feeling that the pro-Cuba cause that still persists in certain sectors of the American government ““needs to be brought back to life”” following the stunning failure of the Bay of Pigs invasion, Everett senses that the solution is an ““electrifying event ... that will excite and shock the [Cuban] exile community, the whole country.”” The

“event”—an attempt on the life of the President of the United States—will point to the ostensible presence of Cuban Intelligence agents ““at the heart of our government,”” thereby galvanizing America’s flagging anti-Castro sentiment and precipitating a second, ““full-bore”” invasion of Cuba (27). What is particularly interesting in Everett’s elucidation of his plan here is not so much its ultimate end; indeed, the assassination itself is, at least at first, meant to be an ““attempt”” that misses on purpose (27-28). In a sense, in fact, designed to function purely as a *sign*, the symbolic climax of a deliberately constructed “fiction” (DeLillo, *Libra* 50) that has no meaning in and of itself, the event is merely a pretext for the dissemination of information (Johnston, *Information* 168): its apparent purpose is to point elsewhere in a sort of endless deferral of meaning—to a ““dim trail”” of ““ambiguous”” evidence that in turn refers to further ““levels and variations,”” and ““a second set of clues, even more unclear, more intriguing”” (28). More significant for my purposes, however, is the fact that at the centre of the plan sits the archive. ““We do the whole thing with paper,”” Everett explains: ““Passports, drivers’ licenses, address books. Our team of shooters disappears but the police find a trail. Mail-order forms, change-of-address cards, photographs ... Shots ring out, the country is shocked, aroused. The paper trail leads to paid agents who have disappeared in Venezuela, in Mexico”” (28). As Jeremy Green argues, the conspiracy plot in *Libra* situates the representation or simulation prior to the occurrence of the event itself: the ““model”” of the assassination, in other words, ““precedes and constitutes the actual events in Dallas”” (98).¹⁷¹

¹⁷¹ In its inversion of the conventional relationship between “reality” and “representation,” the assassination plot echoes an earlier instance in which one of the conspirators,

Everett is, in a way, analogous to a novelist (Aaron 317), and at the centre of his “plot” is the quasi-fictional protagonist who will take on the assassin’s role and who, at first, exists solely in the form of a paper trail.¹⁷² He thus spends most of the novel locked away in his basement office “putting together a man with scissors and tape” (145)—building up an imaginary archive of forged documents that will create the illusion of “an identity, a skein of persuasion and habit, ever so subtle” (78). Creating a gunman from “ordinary dog-eared paper, the contents of a wallet” (50), Everett is surrounded by what could just as well be the tools of an office clerk as those of a Cold War man of action:

His tools and materials were set before him, mainly household things, small and cheap—cutting instruments, acetate overlays, glues and pastes, a soft eraser, a travel iron ... His gunman would emerge and vanish in a maze of false names. Investigators would find an application for a post-office box; a certificate of service, U.S. Marine Corps; a Social Security card; a passport application; a driver’s license; a stolen credit card and half a dozen other documents—in two

Laurence Parmenter, engineers a coup in Guatemala. The “peak experience” of his career, the project involved radio broadcasts designed to destabilize the government through the dissemination of “Rumors, false battle reports, meaningless codes, inflammatory speeches, orders to non-existent rebels.” Although it has real material effects—the government falls after nine days—the plot is largely imaginary, consisting mainly of “vivid imagery,” old lines from spy movies, and “gibberish” dreamed up by Parmenter itself (125-27). If, as the narrator suggests, it represents a “class project in the structure of reality,” then the lesson learned is that “reality” is constituted by simulation.

¹⁷² *Libra* draws explicit attention to the pun contained in the word “plot”: it refers, of course, at once to a “conspiracy of armed men” and to the temporal structure of a narrative. In both cases, DeLillo suggests, the plot entails a certain inevitable “logic,” a tendency “to move toward death” (221).

or three different names, each leading to a trail that would end at the Cuban Intelligence Directorate.

He worked on a Diners Club card, removing the ink on the raised letters with a Q-tip doused in polyester resin ... He pressed the card against the warm iron, heating it slowly to flatten the letters. Then he used a razor blade to level the remaining bumps or juts. He would eventually reheat the card and stamp a new name and number on its face with an addressograph plate ... The young man's address book would be next. A major project. (146)

Built into the very structure of this archive is the prospect of its subsequent discovery and interpretation. Everett takes a certain amount of pride in the fact that "It would all require a massive decipherment," and he "envision[s] teams of linguists, photo analysts, fingerprint experts, handwriting experts, experts in hairs and fibers, smudges and blurs. Investigators building up chronologies ... [in] basement rooms" (78). Of course, Everett thus anticipates, in both senses of that word, Branch's later activities: on the one hand, he self-consciously compiles an archive for someone in the future to pore over, while, on the other, he functions as Branch's precursor, the instituting archon who at once enables a subsequent hermeneutic project and simultaneously renders it reiterative or even redundant. The events that Branch will, years later, attempt to understand have their "origins"—if they can ultimately be referred to as such—in an archival project

that bears an uncanny resemblance to Branch's own. In other words, in *Libra* the archive tends to function as a belated repetition of *itself*.¹⁷³

But Everett's archive, in turn, is itself inevitably caught up in this repetitious logic. Thus, he is astounded to find that the "illustrated history" of a lone gunman he has been painstakingly constructing in his basement has already taken shape, seemingly independently, "in a kind of storeroom" in the Oswald household: "Oswald had names. He had his own names. He had variations of names. He had forged documents. Why was Everett playing in his basement with scissors and tape?" (180). As another conspirator quips sardonically, "Lee Oswald matches the cardboard cutout they've been shaping all along" (330). But surely the point here is that the "real" Oswald is himself his *own* belated cutout, a "model" that can be replicated endlessly as a "substitute" for the "original" (50, 137). Long before his assimilation by Everett's archive, Oswald is revealed to be a "scripted" (or, in my terms, "archival") subject, "the material manifestation of [whose structuration] is present to us in the form of documents and artifacts" (Mott 138-39).

One of the most persistent archivists in the novel, Oswald is from the outset associated with the continual production and collection of textual records. As a young truant, for example, Oswald leaves an incriminating paper trail in his wake, receiving yet "another notice" in the mail for his harried mother,

¹⁷³ Branch and Everett are clearly doppelgänger. Both men spend most of the novel in "small rooms" (52, 181); both are immersed in labyrinthine paperwork; both have an ambiguous half-life within the CIA (Everett has been demoted yet still has his contacts, while Branch has retired on full pay); while both try to use the archive as the basis for order-giving metanarratives: Everett attempts to transform "endless ... spirals" into a neat "fabric of connections" (147-48), whereas Branch, as we have seen, is trying to write a "coherent history" that will enable him to "regain [a] grip on things" (301, 15).

Marguerite (6), becoming a “matter on the calendar” at the juvenile court, and being written up in bureaucratized psychiatric reports as “in the upper range of Bright Normal Intelligence” (11). Oswald here is the subject of the archives of others, but even at this early point he desires the kind of power he thinks is inherent in the gathering of records. Handed a piece of paper one day on the street (it is scrawled with “*Save the Rosenbergs*”) he “fold[s] the leaflet neatly and put[s] it in his pocket to save for later,” sensing that this material somehow offers privileged access to “a world inside the world” (12-13). Subsequently, Oswald begins his lifelong habit of spending “serious time” at various public libraries, surmising that the texts and ideas gathered together in such spaces might offer him a comparable sense of transcendence by putting him “at a distance from his classmates,” with the world “closed ... around him” (33). Ultimately arriving at the understanding that a fundamental connection inheres between the possession or control of documents and one’s sense of identity—that the absence of documents causes a “failure to cohere” in the subject (313), whereas, conversely, “A man with papers is substantial” (357)—Oswald thereafter collects archival material with an admirable, if desultory, fervour. Thus, when one of the conspirators in the assassination plot breaks into Lee’s apartment in New Orleans, he finds himself in a kind of archive containing a collection of “leaflets,” “Oswald’s correspondence with the national director of the Fair Play for Cuba Committee,” “socialist” texts, a “booklet with a Castro quotation on the cover,” “books and pamphlets in Russian,” flashcards “with Cyrillic characters,” a stamp album, a journal, Lee’s draft card, a passport, and “forms filled out in the names

Osbourne, Leslie Oswald, Aleksei Oswald” (179). Later, after moving to Fort Worth, Oswald continues this obsessive archiving, “build[ing] up [a] record” of everything from license-plate numbers of the cars parked outside his house, to the publications of “an obscure press in New York” and his correspondence with ideologically “sympathetic souls” (232, 235, 236). By shoring up these reams of “fabricated paper” (180) Lee is literally trying to *collect* himself: he attempts to fashion his subjectivity into “the rugged individual agent of history” through a project of “historical self-construction” that requires the “writing [of] history before it writes you” (Melley 150).

However, in this attempted “archaeology before the event” (Melley 150), Oswald ultimately fails to constitute himself as the autonomous subject of his “*fondes dreams*” [sic] (DeLillo, *Libra* 152). As Moraru argues, Oswald strives, using an archive of texts, documents, and photographs, to “[manufacture] himself a heroic, fantasmatic identity. He gradually becomes his own narrative project.” However, this ostensibly self-directed project simultaneously subordinates Oswald to others’ authority: he “unknowingly helps his readers write him, *script* and in-scribe him and his readings into a deadly text, a textual *crypt*” (*Memorious Discourse* 221). That is, Oswald’s attempt to inscribe himself at the origins of an agential history merely ends up subjecting him to external discursive forces.

According to Thomas Carmichael, the individual known as “Lee Harvey Oswald” is revealed in the course of the novel to be a constructed, artificial subjectivity that emerges via a series of informational effects produced by the articulation of “codes” and “intertextual traces” (206). As DeLillo repeatedly

intimates, there seems to be no central, stable self that defines just who this Oswald *is*. By means of an endless archive of faked or misleading documents, Oswald (re)constructs his identity as a series of performative, artificial roles that remain useful for as long as they provide him with a sense of social acceptance or “historical” significance: the tragic, fatherless boy; the heroic revolutionary who resists the capitalist system; the stoic marine who serves his country proudly; the happy Soviet worker. In the midst of such myriad posturings, there can be no determinable content to Oswald’s identity, no “real” self beyond these multiple, documentary “impersonations” (Keesey 161). Symptomatic of this discursive fracturing of the self is Oswald’s supreme ideological adaptability, whereby he is—seemingly without contradiction—able “simultaneously [to] do the following: (1) openly campaign for Cuba; (2) betray Cuban sympathizers to an anti-Castro group; and (3) provide the FBI with information that will hurt the same anti-Castro group” (Melley 149). While it might be suggested that this performativity merely constitutes Oswald’s “public” persona—that, somewhere inside, there exists the “secret force of [his] soul” (DeLillo, *Libra* 13)—*Libra* demonstrates that even his most intimate moments are unavoidably mediated. Thus, when Oswald attempts suicide in Moscow—and, like the original plan for the “attempt” on Kennedy’s life, this one is seemingly designed to be a simulation of *itself*—he simultaneously, self-consciously represents the act in the clichéd terms of a maudlin movie scene (Keesey 162). Here, Oswald is undecidably split between the roles of performer and observer: “why was it funny? Why was he watching himself do it without a moan or cry? ... He flopped his left arm over the rim of the

tub ... *somewhere, a violin plays, as I watch my life whirl away*" (DeLillo, *Libra* 152). As Mark Osteen observes, the ostensibly documentary record provided by Oswald's italicized entry in his "Historic Diary" actually represents an oxymoronic exteriorized performance of interiority: "at once a private fetish and a message to posterity," the diary represents "both secret history and public autobiography" (160).

If, as was discussed previously, Nicholas Branch's ultimate goal in entering the archive is to "follow the bullet trajectories backward to the ... actual men" who fired them (15), DeLillo suggests that the "actuality" of a supposedly agential subjectivity itself emerges from the archive. As a result, rather than somehow providing access to the originary moment or first cause of the assassination—its absolute *arkhē*—Oswald represents yet one more instance of the motif of the man in a "small room" (29, 35, 155), feverishly (and hopelessly) trying to *reach* some kind of origin. After remarking at one point that "his subject is not politics or violent crime but men in small rooms," Branch himself allows for the possibility that he might be "one of [those men] now" (181). Branch suspects here that the relations of exteriority between the subjects and objects of knowledge, between archival scholar and archived text, have begun to collapse. In fact, for DeLillo, this distinction has always been untenable. In a sense, that is, Branch's work has already been done—or, at least, begun—by the figure who, in the conventional scheme of knowledge production, should be the focal point of that project:

Lee Harvey Oswald was awake in his cell. It was beginning to occur to him that he'd found his life's work. After the crime comes the reconstruction. He will have motives to analyze, the whole rich question of truth and guilt. Time to reflect, time to turn this thing in his mind. Here is a crime that clearly yields material for deep interpretation ... He will fill his cell with books about the case. He will have time to educate himself in criminal law, ballistics, acoustics, photography. Whatever pertains to the case he will examine and consume ... His life had a single clear subject now, called Lee Harvey Oswald. (434-35)

While the depiction of temporality in this passage appears quite conventional (“After the crime comes the reconstruction”), the novel insists that the assassin’s ostensible apotheosis here is, in fact, what he wanted all along. Oswald’s archive fever thus structures the chain of events that leads him to this belated point of “true beginning” (434). Sitting in his bedroom years earlier, the teenaged Oswald reads works of Marxist theory and senses that they “altered the room, charged it with meaning ... He saw himself as part of something vast and sweeping ... The books made him part of something ... Men in small rooms. Men reading and waiting, struggling with secret and feverish ideas ... He would join a cell located in the old buildings near the docks. They would talk theory into the night. But they would act as well” (41). Oswald does, in a certain obvious sense, *act*, but his actions—and the shattering event they cause—ultimately begin and end in the archive.

The Murder of the Real

One of the many, often incompatible roles that Lee Harvey Oswald plays in *Libra* is that of a historian *manqué*. Oswald venerates historiography as a mode of discourse that “brings a persuasion and form to events”; “explain[ing] himself to posterity” by means of his Historic Diary means that he will have “validated [his] experience” (211). However, if Oswald desperately wants to “script” himself into a grand, teleological historical progression, one of the reasons he finally fails to do so is that he has no facility with written language: “word-blind,” he can produce only a “childish mess of composition” (210, 211). Aside from the obvious impediment of Oswald’s dyslexia, though, one of the main causes of his particular “struggle” with the writing of history is a more fundamental lack of representational transparency: “He could not find order in the field of little symbols ... He could not clearly see the picture that is called a word. A word is also a picture of a word ... Things slipped through his perceptions. He could not get a grip on the runaway world” (211). In perceiving this hitch between “word” and “world,” Oswald understands a key problematic. As Cowart explains, “Seeking to write history, he discovers that his subject matter cannot exist apart from its embodiment on the page or on the tongue” (*Physics* 94). Although he cannot know it fully himself, Oswald hits on the idea that, when it comes to the depiction of the historical event, the “deed ... remains swaddled in the word, in the language or narrative that attempts to represent it,” meaning that “even so

stark a deed as the Kennedy assassination ... has become an object lesson in the elusiveness of the historical signified” (Coward, *Physics* 94).¹⁷⁴

In the terms laid down by my argument, in other words, *Libra* repeatedly demonstrates that the archive must be seen as inextricable from the event. Nicholas Branch delves into the “data spew” (15) poured forth by the assassination and discovers, among other things, that Win Everett’s conspiracy was produced using archival documents and methods, and, moreover, that its final goal was not just to “stage” an assassination as such but also to pave the way for a future hermeneutic scenario in which men such as Branch would consult and interpret an archive of that staging. Similarly, Branch finds that Lee Harvey Oswald, the supposedly self-motivated “lone gunman,” was required by the scheme both to be the patsy who shoots Kennedy and then gets caught, and “to provide artifacts of historical interest, a traceable weapon, all the cuttings and hoardings of his Cuban career” (386). Kennedy’s murder is—or, at least, is meant to be—a “textbook operation” (125) in both the figurative and literal senses: a smoothly organized series of events integrating the acts of multiple agents *and* a product of a comparably ordered organization of textual or discursive elements. Hence, in a sort of ultimately unfathomable web of causal relations, the event leaves behind archival traces which, when investigated in the present, reveal that behind that event lie similar “traces” in endless regression, backwards in time

¹⁷⁴ A number of other critics discuss *Libra*’s adherence to a “textualist” or “linguistic” model of history, social reality, or even nature itself. Kronick contends, for example, that the “event” of the assassination that Branch seeks to limn and understand is, in fact, “already a text” from the very outset, or before emerging in its “empirical” existence (120). Likewise, Carmichael (204) and Thomas (108) both view *Libra* as a fictional instantiation of postmodern, constructivist theories of history (108). See also Martucci, who takes the more radical position that, in DeLillo’s fiction, the non-human environment is on some level a product of discourse (155).

(Everett creates a documentary record pointing to a fictitious assassin before finding that Oswald has himself *already* created a similar archive, and so on). At the same time, moreover, as Branch's inability to reach the end of his project indicates, the assassination's textual residue continues to grow—again, “The stuff keeps coming” (59)—rather than contracting or being subject to closure, meaning that the archive also seems to stretch off into an endlessly reiterative future. Just so, the past can only be represented by Branch “by means of an economy of signification that endlessly postpones referential closure” (Cowart, *Physics* 94).

A key conclusion to be drawn from the premise that the archive creates the structural conditions necessary for the assassination-event to occur is that the archive is, on some level, *complicit* with this act of violence. In other words, since the “event” in question here is a murder, it follows that the archive, in the scheme established by *Libra*, is fundamentally inextricable from an act of destructive violence. Like those entropic “plots” discussed by the narrator, the archive in *Libra* exhibits “a tendency . . . to move toward death” (221). Certainly the novel's various archivists seem to be haunted, perpetually, by the spectre of a (usually) violent demise. For example, following a passage in which his desire to produce a documentary record meant for future decipherment is clearly articulated (78), Everett—who also lives in constant fear of domestic tragedy, whether as a result of burning down the house by leaving the oven on or tumbling fatally down the stairs—immediately starts meditating on his own mortality, which is tied up with visions of the violent deaths of his wife and child: “He hadn't felt well for a long time now . . . He imagined accidents all the time. A stunned wreck at the side of

the road ... It was all part of the long fall, the general sense that he was dying” (79). This vague yet haunting intimation of mortality in the archive is more overt in the case of Branch himself, whose collection includes such grisly items as images of autopsy photographs of the “large wound in [Oswald’s] left side,” “human skulls,” “bloody goat heads ... oozing rudimentary matter” (298-300), along with endless narrative accounts of violent or sudden death that resemble grim shadows cast down the years by the “misty light” emanating from the President’s own head wound (400). One by one, people connected to the assassination die from, variously, shotgun blasts through the mouth and axe blows to the skull; gunshots to the head, heart attack, and dismemberment; and mob execution, morphine overdose, and helicopter crash (58, 183, 378-79). Ensclosed in his archive of violent ends, Branch thus “feels the dead” are in there with him (183), and consequently he begins to get the sense that the “mournful power” of his collected texts and objects will be the death of him, too. With his deteriorating, “old man’s mind,” and conviction that “he can’t get out” of his room or the assignment that put him there, Branch is “immobilized by his sense of the dead” and fears that he too is likely to expire in this “room of growing old” (445).

Of course, a fundamental, if paradoxical, connection between the archive and death is one of Derrida’s key contentions in *Archive Fever*. The archive would seem, in its most straightforward sense, to be about cheating or avoiding death: we place something in an archive in order for it to be preserved from the vicissitudes of time, so that someone at some point in the future will be able to read or look at it. Derrida refers to this function as the “*eco-nomic* archive” that

“keeps ... puts in reserve ... saves” (7). However, since Derrida has already admitted from the outset that “a series of cleavages will incessantly divide every atom of our lexicon” (1), it should come as no surprise that the archive that institutes and conserves (7) is also inextricable from the threat of its own destruction. In discussing Freud’s formulation of a “death” or “destruction” drive, Derrida notes that it seems fundamentally in opposition to any concept of the archive, or of preservation in general. The death drive “is above all *anarchivic*, one could say, or *archiviolithic*”: “it never leaves any archives of its own. It destroys in advance its own archive ... It works *to destroy the archive*” (10). However, rather than simply opposing the death drive to a “conservation” or “*archive drive*,” Derrida insists that they are coextensive, that there would be “no archive desire” without “radical finitude” and “the possibility of forgetfulness,” no “archive fever without the threat of this death drive” (19). Of course, this contradiction is precisely what accounts for *mal d’archive*, archive fever, which on the one hand refers to all the “trouble[s]” that threaten the archive with dissolution—forgetfulness, loss, holocaust—and, on the other, names the need or passion for archives that persists in the face of such threats (90-91). The Derridean concept of the archive (which is also, of course, a Freudian one too) is thus marked by an “internal division” in which the archival “compulsion” we experience—a “desire” or “passion” that causes us to “run after the archive”—is simultaneously a “repetition compulsion” that has death and destruction as its ultimate end (91).

As well as containing violence as a sort of “theme” or “object,” then, Branch’s archive also is itself a *form* of violence. That is, Branch compulsively *repeats* the activities of the subjects he is supposed to be studying at an objective remove—historiography as neurotic disorder, from Oswald’s “Historic Diary” (212) to Everett’s “illustrated history” (180) to Branch’s “secret history” (15). More to the point, however, Branch’s archival project at times seems like a symbolic repetition of the assassination itself; he has, after all, been “hired on contract” (15), just as a killer might be. Branch’s efforts, as we have seen, are ostensibly devoted to understanding what the narrator calls “Six point nine seconds of heat and light”—the precise moment of Kennedy’s death, broken down into its absolute spatio-temporal and sensible quanta (15). But this specific, synaesthetic pairing (“heat and light”) is also a recurrent motif throughout the novel, occurring most often in relation to moments of sudden violence: for instance, the bursts from a Cuban militant’s machine gun emit “Heat and light” (72); Oswald fires into “light ... so clear it was heartbreaking” at a presidential limousine that “glow[s]” and “flashe[s]” in the “heat and light” of Dallas on November 22 (400, 392, 394); while Oswald, in turn, experiences the “auguring heat of the bullet” fired out of the “glare” of the media’s “artificial flashbulbs” by Jack Ruby, who will later think of this chain of events as the “flashes of a single incandescent homicide” (439, 437, 444). Crucially, at the heart of the archive is the very same incandescence: the narrator describes Branch’s “massive file cabinet” as “stuffed with documents so old and densely packed that they may be ready to ignite spontaneously. *Heat and light*” (14, my emphases). Of course, the

largely sedentary, “unfailingly polite” (15) Branch is, in the end, irreducible to the figure of a hardened assassin or devious conspirator in any obvious or literal sense. However, the pointed reverberation of this signal phrase throughout the novel, yoking as it does the sudden irruption of murderous violence to the persistent, smouldering conditions of archivization, suggests that an undeniable symbolic or figurative logic is at work. If the prior archival projects of Everett and Oswald (not to mention those of the novel’s various other archivists) clearly furnish the underlying conditions that enable the historical “flashpoint” of Kennedy’s murder, then Branch’s activities, at the very least, run the risk of sparking off a similar conflagration.¹⁷⁵

By his final appearance in the novel, Branch appears to be trapped: “he can’t get out,” either from his claustrophobic room or from the increasing colonization of his point of view by that of conspiracy (445). This physical and

¹⁷⁵ Keesey makes a somewhat similar claim in his analysis of the novel when he suggests that Branch has been caught up in an endless structure of discursive iterations in which violence and its representation are inextricable, and, indeed, feed off each other. As Keesey explains, Oswald becomes involved in the plot to assassinate Kennedy because he desires to metamorphose into the more official sounding persona “Lee Harvey Oswald,” a “figure of historic importance whose act is known throughout the world” by means of the obsessive media attention that it generates (168). That is, Oswald helps plan and carry out the assassination, at least in part, in the expectation of becoming the object of media and scholarly scrutiny. Sitting in his cell after the fact, he envisages that “People will come to see him, the lawyers first, then psychologists, historians, biographers,” and garners a feeling of “strength” from the realization that “Everybody knew who he was now” (DeLillo, *Libra* 435). In other words, according to Keesey, Branch’s obsessive study of Oswald and his historical context entails a level of complicity in the crime itself, since it promises a “fulfilling [of] Oswald’s hopes” that undercuts its ostensible goal of “gain[ing] a controlling perspective on ... violence and death”; Branch’s archival work thus merely “ends up perpetuating that violence, seeming to justify it in retrospect with [its] devoted attention and giving other dangerous men reason to expect the same reward for their crimes” (173). My argument is slightly different from Keesey’s, in that, where he reads the “violence” of Branch’s project in terms of its capacity to encourage *actual* “dangerous men” to act in a similar way to Oswald, I am suggesting a more fundamental correlation that implicates the work of archivization itself in the *structural condition* of violence; that is, the archive is “violent” in and of itself, rather than just something that encourages presumably *already* violent men to act on their deadly impulses.

perspectival confinement in the archive—Branch’s imprisonment both by its physical space and its discursive boundaries—indicates the novel’s engagement with a broader ideological and representational problematic. What I want to argue here is that DeLillo uses the violence of the archive as a metaphor for some of the fundamental dilemmas of historical representation, if not representation *tout court*, under what we might call the conditions of postmodernity. If, once again, the patterns of DeLillo’s language and imagery effectively suture Branch’s historiographic labours to the conspirators’ deathward-tending plots in ways that are at once non-causal and ineluctable, then this structure of figurative repetition seems to suggest the foreclosure of history’s ideological horizons, and thus the catastrophic collapse of the possibility of establishing any sense of “critical distance” in relation to the object of historical representation. According to *Libra*, then, the advent of what I referred to earlier as the “postmodern archive” would appear both to produce the enabling conditions for a necessary critique of, say, outmoded, totalizing concepts of “truth” and “objectivity,” or of the exclusionary models of history attendant on those concepts, *and* to be concurrent with the impossibility of conceiving of a radically different vision of history with which to replace them.

The fundamental question of what I have called the conflation of the archive and the event—or, in general terms, what we might call the subsuming of the material within the discursive—has been taken up by many of DeLillo’s critics, often in ambivalent terms that present this conflation as politically or ethically crippling. For example, in an early, influential essay treating the relation

between DeLillo's oeuvre and its cultural and intellectual context, Frank Lentricchia argues that DeLillo's work evinces a sort of "postmodern" self-reflexivity concerning how, in the contemporary moment, the realm of the social has been overtaken by a parade of simulacra with little or no relation to any originary "reality."¹⁷⁶ According to Lentricchia, *Libra* depicts an image-saturated America in which the individual, encouraged by the all-pervasive presence of the (now electronic) media, is paradoxically constituted by and through the "dream" of being someone else, a spectral "third" person, an image on the silver screen (432). Thus, the "I" is always already displaced from itself in the desire to become a "he" or "she," an ideal subject that has the appearance of being more "real" than the "I" itself. As a result of this desire, Lentricchia suggests, the "distinction between the real and the fictional," between reality and representation breaks down or becomes irrelevant (433). DeLillo's work thus describes a "strange new world" in which the "referent" becomes lost in the discourses used to describe it, and "where the object of perception is perception itself ... a 'sight' ... not a 'thing'" (434). Focusing his analysis on DeLillo's depiction of Oswald's own murder as a televised spectacle, Lentricchia ultimately claims that, in *Libra*, historical reality is reduced to "a world without exit from representation," since it

¹⁷⁶ See Knight for a useful summary discussion of the relation between DeLillo's fiction and both aesthetic "postmodernism" and socio-economic "postmodernity." Knight poses the question of whether DeLillo's writing may be seen as a "symptom," "endorsement," or critical "diagnosis" of the condition of postmodernity, defined as the debilitating condition of life "in the age of media saturation and globalized free market capitalism" (27). Somewhat like Lentricchia, Knight eventually comes down cautiously on the side of the last of these terms: DeLillo, in fact, imagines an "alternative" to an ideologically suffocating postmodernity "within the very technologies and discourses of contemporary life" (38-39). Similarly, Cowart reads DeLillo's fiction as being at once a "transcrib[ing]" and an immanent critique of the "social and psychological reality" of postmodernity; a novel such as *Libra* would thus be best described as "homeopathic" in its "desire to inoculate ... cultural production against the tyranny of the two-dimensional [simulacrum] that threatens to devalue it" (*Physics* 12).

is “totally inside the representation generated in the print and visual media” (444-45).¹⁷⁷

But while Lentricchia seems relatively sanguine about a scenario he sees DeLillo as simply anatomizing rather than causing or exacerbating, other critics are concerned with what they take to be the political implications of DeLillo’s apparent reduction of socio-historical phenomena to the products of the textual archive. Noting that “a plethora of texts cluster around the assassination,” Andrew Radford argues that, for DeLillo, this material seems to have displaced any viable relation to historical actuality. Instead, in *Libra*, “the historical record . . . becomes another enticing yet speculative form of fictional event that panders repeatedly to the giddy suspicion that a darker energy moulds reality” (225). Thus, since Branch’s “Interaction with the past is only effected through amorphous or partial textual productions,” he can find “no conclusive proof” of anything at all beyond a perception of the “radical dishevelment of [the] historical record” itself (240). As a result, history devolves into a groundless free-for-all of endless—and insubstantial—interpretation: “The past, far from being a hermetically sealed entity, awaiting the sage historian's intervention to edit, arrange, and describe what has occurred, is an ever-changing narrative whose definitions are maddeningly erratic, arcane, inchoate” (241). Because of this situation, we are, like Branch, left with an unavoidably “jaded perspective” on our relation to the

¹⁷⁷ For another reading of death in *Libra* as a mediatised spectacle, see Schuster who argues that the assassination, as well as Oswald’s own murder, is an “act of consumption” that is tied to the “endless media simulations” that circulate in contemporary American culture (104).

past that undermines the possibility of “active agency” or “trenchant political analysis” (242).

Radford acknowledges that *Libra* does, in many ways, foreground a kind of manifest political *content*: “in an overtly political gesture,” for example, DeLillo contests the official line of the Warren Report by proposing that “the CIA actively participated in President Kennedy's assassination” (239). However, on a more implicit or formal level, DeLillo’s ideological positioning appears dubious. By “point[ing] towards the profound indeterminacy of all historical accounts, while fiercely debunking the limpid clarity of statement, clinical objectivity, and neutrality, upon which such accounts are ostensibly based,” DeLillo actually engages in an irresponsible “abdication of political responsibility, settling for the easy option that implies the assassination is too slippery and abstruse to be distilled within the glib fixities of print” (226). In other words, from Radford’s perspective, DeLillo’s privileging of the textualist view of history opens up the past to the possibility of “covert manipulation” by those in power,¹⁷⁸ thus ceding “Historical authority” to a “nexus of corporate, criminal, and official interests” and “smother[ing] the opportunity for patriotic social action” (227). If DeLillo occasionally gestures toward a materialist critique by depicting “the harsh

¹⁷⁸ See also Parrish’s claim that DeLillo’s CIA actually endorses a textualist or constructivist view of reality, since one of its prime tasks is to “invent and distribute different narratives” that contain “multipl[e] possible truths” (“Lesson of History” 6, 7). Cowart makes a similar point in claiming that, “Insofar as [the conspirators] propose to manipulate the signifiers of identity and commitment, they demonstrate how intelligence was always already postmodern in its premises” (*Physics* 102). In other words, a theoretical model of history that many theorists and critics accept as an inherently radical destabilization of positivist verities (and so on) might, worryingly, be of no little use to an arm of the state’s repressive apparatus. Indeed, the convoluted, rhizomatic anti-hierarchy of the CIA (DeLillo, *Libra* 21-22) is somewhat more akin to the decentered, disarticulated model of power favoured by postmodern and poststructuralist thought.

palpable conditions of Lee Oswald's upbringing," especially via interspersed passages in which his mother, Marguerite, mounts an "anxious defense of him to unspecified authorities," nonetheless *Libra* ultimately undercuts this nascent "determinist social critique" by making it, too, belated and subordinate to the "pervasiveness of the media" (232). As another critic phrases it, DeLillo seems to understand the contemporary "episteme" as being structured according to discursive rules that "eschew any essential grounding" in the material and thus refuse to offer "any path to the real" (Mott 140). Perhaps, then, it makes sense to read the "simulacral chess match" (Mott 140) that is the conspiracy as leading simultaneously to an attempt on the life of a President and to "the murder of the real."¹⁷⁹

¹⁷⁹ In referring to the plot as a vertiginous layering of simulations, Mott sees as exemplary the moment at which a "right-wing group fakes an interest in Oswald who fakes an interest in them while faking his role as informant for the FBI" (140). The suggestive phrase "the murder of the real" is borrowed from the title of an essay in Baudrillard's collection *The Vital Illusion* (2000). Here, Baudrillard elaborates on his longstanding concern with the question of the simulacral, lamenting that, as a result of the "process of virtualization" that defines contemporary technologized postmodernity—that is, the unprecedented extension into the social and natural worlds of electronic (and other) technologies of representation—"the question of the Real, of the referent, of the subject and its object, can no longer even be posed" (63, 62). This scenario implicitly leaves human society in general in a Branch-esque predicament in relation to its past, since history, too, is "no longer *real*" and "nothing is either true or false any longer [since] everything is drifting indifferently between cause and effect, between origin and finality" (62). Indeed, like Branch, again, our sense of connection to reality has been eroded by an uncontrolled proliferation of information sources: "It is the excess of reality that puts an end to reality, just as the excess of information puts an end to information, or the excess of communication puts an end to communication" (66). According to Baudrillard, then, in the confusion caused by this scenario, the "Perfect Crime" (63) has been committed: nothing less than the "extermination" of reality, of which there remains "no trace, not even a corpse. The corps(e) of the Real—if there is any—has not been recovered, is nowhere to be found" (61). In this regard, see my argument above concerning the relation between Branch's inability to access the "actuality" of the past and the loss from the archives of Kennedy's brain, which, in Baudrillard's terms, is also "nowhere to be found." This is, of course, a fortuitous connection, but I think it does help to confirm that the events fictionalized in *Libra* have grave epistemological implications that reverberate beyond the admittedly tragic murder of a single individual, however powerfully symbolic that individual might be.

Deferred Obedience

The question remains, however, whether DeLillo's suggestion that history itself takes the form of an all-encompassing structure of archivization necessarily leads to such a pessimistic conclusion. Might there be another, more critically productive or even politically enabling way of responding to the multiple fatalities—whether we mean the assassination of a President or the so-called murder of the real—documented in *Libra*? I would like to close by suggesting an alternative approach to the “fatality” of the archive.

One of the ways in which Derrida frames his discussion of “violence” in *Archive Fever* is in terms of its being a “performative effect” that is characterized by “structural fatality” (63). What does Derrida mean by these enigmatic statements? They occur in the context of his long and complex discussion of Yosef Yerushalmi's reading of Freud's *Moses and Monotheism*, a reading that is both “archival” in a traditional scholarly sense—based on a close examination of primary documents—and, as Derrida seeks to demonstrate, in its implicit concern with the philosophical question of archivization itself. In essence, Derrida's argument here is that Yerushalmi's “scholarly” discourse is divided against itself. On the one hand, as a conventional, rational historian working in the archives, Yerushalmi sets out to disprove Freud's speculative, “fictive” argument in *Moses and Monotheism* that the Israelites murdered Moses and repressed all knowledge of the crime, before, in subsequent generations, formalizing their religio-cultural belief system under a *second* Moses (for further discussion of this narrative, see Chapter Two). However, beyond the argumentative surface level, Derrida claims

to detect a secret or sublimated support for Freud's thesis. That is, despite this apparent antagonism with Freud—an *agon* that is also connected to an underlying struggle over the "Jewishness" of psychoanalysis—Yerushalmi is ironically entirely "filial" in a fundamental way: if the *content* of his argument is, to some extent, critical of Freud, its *form* confirms, perhaps unconsciously, the veracity of Freud's basic point in *Moses and Monotheism*. Yerushalmi's "Monologue with Freud" is a performative repetition (and thus, in a sense, confirmation) of Freud's argument (67). This repetition is best explained by the psychoanalytic term "deferred obedience," which, Derrida notes, Yerushalmi at once *uses* and refuses to use, or uses only in the conditional tense (58). Deferred obedience can be defined as an initial disobedience of a living father figure followed by a renewed obedience to him once he is dead or spectral (and, hence, "stronger").¹⁸⁰ Thus, the Israelites murder Moses and subsequently install him as a central figure in their religion; Freud, in writing *Moses and Monotheism*, belatedly obeys his father Jakob Freud's injunction to return to a close study of the Bible, which the enlightened Freud seems to have forsaken (he later writes a letter to a friend in which he affirms the importance of the Bible for his work and life); Yerushalmi, in turn, secretly "obeys" the Freud he also takes to task by using the terminology of psychoanalysis, thus conforming to the wishes of another dead father, Freud himself, the "patriarch" of psychoanalysis; and, finally, Derrida himself manifests deferred obedience to Yerushalmi by couching his own critique in terms of an intensely respectful and generous response to the historian's text.

¹⁸⁰ Derrida quotes Freud's statement in *Totem and Taboo* concerning how the "dead father" is "always stronger than the living one" (*Archive* 59).

While an argument about psychoanalysis and Judaic history might not seem to have all that much to do with *Libra*, I would argue that, in many ways, it gets to the crux of the novel's concern with historical representation, and also might suggest a way of thinking our way beyond what I have identified as the seemingly "fatal" constraints of the postmodern archive.¹⁸¹ Derrida extrapolates from the specific, agonistic relation between Yerushalmi and Freud in order to suggest more generally that the work of archivization similarly entails the inevitably repetition of the past, or, more specifically, prior *archives*. In other words, Yerushalmi is ultimately unable to critique Freud fully or from a position of absolute exteriority because the form of his argument expresses his affiliation with the latter. This Catch-22 in turn evokes for Derrida the way in which "the general structure of every archive" (68) carries within it the traces of earlier archives and thus can never be entirely independent or "new" in relation to its patrimony: "The strange result of this performative repetition, the irrepressible effectuation of this *enactment* ... is that the interpretation of the archive (here, for example, Yerushalmi's book) can only illuminate, read, interpret, establish its object, namely a given inheritance, by inscribing itself into it, that is to say by opening it and by enriching it enough to have a rightful place in it" (67). "There is no meta-archive" (67), Derrida intones, given what we might call the necessarily

¹⁸¹ Indeed, in his reading of DeLillo's novel as a kind of refracted "myth" (*Physics* 106), Cowart also argues for the centrality of *Moses and Monotheism*: "In *Libra* the author brings together the primal slaying of the father (the president) and the sacrifice of the son (Oswald). Psychoanalytically, the violent death of the presidential father is a terrifying reenactment of the crime that Freud ... sees as giving rise to primitive ideas of the sacred" (*Physics* 107). Kennedy would thus be analogous to the figure of Moses in the Freudian schema: the scapegoat on whom the "primal transgression" (the killing of the father by the "horde" of disaffected brothers) is re-enacted (*Physics* 108, 107).

differential or intertextual nature of archivization as such; while incorporating the proliferation of prior representations allows the archive to expand its boundaries endlessly, the archive also thereby “loses the absolute and meta-textual authority it might claim to have” (68). This “loss” seems to foreclose the possibility of fixed historical knowledge. Not only is the archive structurally dependent on or secondary to what came before, it also perpetuates this structure into the future and thus “produces more archive” as a matter of course (68). However, for Derrida, this fact of an endlessly capacious “engross[ing]” is precisely what enables a crucial conceptual shift in thinking about the archive: instead of a conservative—and potentially dominating—technology of epistemological specification and closure, the archive can be remodeled as something that is “never closed” and that consequently “opens out of the future” (68).

Paradoxically, then, for Derrida, an archive of difference—that is, an archive that brings with it ways of thinking less programmatically about the past, thus inviting new ways of conceiving of the future—can only result from its (short) circuit through an archive of the same. Or, to put it in the terms that this chapter has used, if the archive predetermines the structure of the event, it is perhaps only insofar as this seeming determinism also opens the very possibility for the archive itself to become an unpredictable event. If DeLillo has elsewhere described his fiction in terms of a striving to find a point of exit from the determining, impersonal force of “history’s flat, thin, tight and relentless designs” (“Power” 62), he also suggests that this quasi-utopian space might actually be

identical with the archives inhabited successively by Oswald, Everett, and Branch:
that cramped “room of history and dreams” (*Libra* 445).

Conclusion

On the Uses of Literary Violence

Vandals and Ringmasters

In a brief but excoriating 1988 review of *Libra* in *The Washington Post*, the conservative commentator George F. Will found fault with DeLillo's recently published novel on almost every level imaginable. Whether in terms of its aesthetic form, its treatment of historical fact, or its political orientation, *Libra* was an abject failure, perhaps even dangerous. In Will's mind, the novel's language was "hyperventilating" and "overwrought," its imaginings unappealingly "lurid." A more serious flaw, though, was its seemingly cavalier handling of the events of recent American history. Here DeLillo was seen to have committed a wide range of abuses, including exaggerating the banally obvious—the novel's premise being "the unremarkable fact recent assassins or would-be assassins ... have been marginal men"—and manipulating the facts of the extant documentary record so that they might correspond to his "lunatic conspiracy theory" about CIA involvement in Kennedy's death. As a result, Will accused DeLillo of "traduc[ing] an ethic" of historical fiction by refusing to "be constrained by concern for truthfulness" or "by respect for the record and a judicious weighing of probabilities." More egregious still, however, was the fact that DeLillo sacrificed his admitted "literary talent" to the programmatic demands of an "ideological virulence." In the terms of Will's late Cold War binarism,

DeLillo was a committed culture warrior for the Left, someone who continually found fault with his own society instead of assigning blame to those individuals (like Oswald) who were *actually* at fault in the various crises that had racked America since the turbulent 1960s. Thus, Will charged DeLillo with being “a study in credulity regarding the crudities of the American left . . . His intimation is that America is a sick society that breeds extremism and conspiracies and that Oswald was a national type, a product of the culture.” The primary flaw in *Libra*, then, was its propagation of an inaccurate and irresponsible vision of history as a subjectless process in which “large events” were caused by “impersonal forces” rather than by the acts of individual human beings and their “inner turmoil.” Ultimately, for Will, this emphasis led to an unthinking and therefore “sophomoric” suspicion of one’s government and related institutions that, coupled with the kneejerk “celebration” of the “outsider” (whether Oswald or the alienated writer himself) as victim of those social formations, amounted to nothing less than a kind of novelistic treason: *Libra* was “an act of literary vandalism and bad citizenship” (a25).

Violence is thus at the crux of Will’s argument: DeLillo’s decision to “blam[e] America for Oswald's act of derangement”—in other words, to understand violent acts as products of a “pathological public sphere” (Seltzer 22) instead of a pathological *individual*—means that the novel itself ends up committing an act of discursive violation (“literary vandalism”). In one way or another, moreover, each of the novelists in this study has been subject to a similar kind of attack on the basis of his or her ostensibly irresponsible or even unethical

representation of violence. In his extraordinarily vitriolic 1987 review of *Beloved* in *The New Republic*, for example, Stanley Crouch situated Morrison's novel in relation to what he perceived as a newfound predilection for self-interested victimhood in contemporary African-American culture. In recent years, Crouch argued, the depiction of the "Catastrophic experience" (38) of slavery had become the basis of a dubious ethno-feminist identity politics, one in which images of violence and suffering circulated as a kind of cultural capital in a "big-time martyr ratings contest" (40). *Beloved* was thus essentially "a blackface holocaust novel" (40) in which Morrison glibly exploited both historical atrocity and contemporary white guilt so as to "consolidate her position as a literary conjure woman," a kind of black-feminist "P. T. Barnum" (43). At a conference in the United Kingdom in 2000, meanwhile, John Beck argued that the explicit description of Native American "savagery" in the Comanche raid scene in *Blood Meridian* was essentially the expression of political and cultural conservatism that was quite at home in Reagan's 1980s, and that McCarthy's fixation on excessive brutality—despite his novel's superficially liberal moral relativism—was more generally a sign of his "reactionary," "New Right" political affiliation (qtd. in Ellis, "Identity" 145). Finally, in an essay focusing on the representation of violence in the 1989 novel *Jasmine*, Kristin Carter-Sanborn argued that Mukherjee's fetishizing of "the metaphorical violence of identity transformation"—the process by which her downtrodden female protagonists liberate themselves from traditional patriarchal constraints—masked her neglect of the material conditions of the postcolonial scene in general, and of "Third World" or immigrant women in particular. Thus,

the tendency of Mukherjee's fiction to privilege "psychic violence" as the wellspring of political agency and self-realization had the ironic effect of "derogating material violence—the physical violation of living bodies—and any political motivation one might have for wanting to represent it textually" (583-84).

Launched from both ends of the political spectrum, these broadsides exemplify what Anthony C. Alessandrini has identified as a potential pitfall of criticism that has overt ideological motivations. Commenting on the especially harsh reception Mukherjee's work has had at the hands of several postcolonial critics for whom novels such as *Jasmine* and *The Holder of the World* are not sufficiently radical or resistant, Alessandrini suggests that such arguments are themselves problematic because they judge the fiction to be inadequate according to prefabricated criteria and a rather simplistic conception of "the political." Thus, "Mukherjee's work has become a symptom; it can ... be plugged, whole, into whatever particular disciplinary or political argument a critic wants to make, and comes to function as a stand-in for that which needs to be rejected" (268). While he is, in fact, largely sympathetic to the political concerns motivating these critics, Alessandrini is nonetheless uncomfortable with what he sees as their failure to do the difficult, necessary work of actually *reading* the texts themselves (270). Instead of "ask[ing] the text to be other" so that it corresponds to our preferred ethical or political beliefs, then, as critics we must "address ourselves to the text as it exists" (271).

I would argue that each of these critics—Will, Crouch, Beck, and Carter-Sanborn—is on one level motivated by the unanswerable and ultimately somewhat pointless question delineated by Alessandrini: “*why is this text not other than what it is?*” (268). At the same time, however, the quite intense—if not quite “hyperventilating”—emotional investment that can be detected at various moments in their critiques also points to a range of more important issues that *are* worth considering, ones concerning the serious implications of literary (and academic) representations of violence. That is, if, as I have argued, it is precisely these novelists’ depictions of violent events that cause particular critics’ and reviewers’ prickly responses, then perhaps this discomfort is also a legitimate sign that something more profound is at stake in the ambivalent reception of these texts than merely a certain ornery individual’s desire to prevail in a minor skirmish at the fringes of the Culture Wars that were raging in the 1980s and early 1990s. To put it another way: does a writer’s decision to depict various cruel and brutal images necessarily result in the depressing alternatives of either a wonton wallowing in destruction (literary vandalism) or a Barnum-esque hucksterism that exploits the suffering of others? Alternatively, might it be possible to formulate a more measured and productive response to the violence—including the “archival” violence—that undeniably besets the novels of McCarthy, Morrison, Mukherjee, and DeLillo? What, after all, are we as readers and critics meant to *do* with texts that not only depict troubling phenomena such as scalping and murder, slavery and colonialism, but also repeatedly suggest that, in our very acts of interpretation, we might somehow be implicated in these phenomena?

Phantasms of the Archive: A Dialectic

In *Deadly Musings: Violence and Verbal Form in American Fiction*, Kowalewski argues that the representation of violence has a long and storied history in literature produced in the United States: “American writers have persistently, almost obsessively, turned violence . . . into an imaginative resource” (4). Wryly propounding that, as a consequence, “American fiction is not for hemophobics,” Kowalewski goes on to argue that the tendency exhibited by certain texts to use violence as a plot device, figuration or image, or stylistic principle has a fundamentally contradictory effect on their readers. Since the “energies of its performance are as gut-wrenching or discomfiting as they are pleasurable, as heart-rending in pain as in lyric aspiration,” Kowalewski writes, violent American fiction forces its readers to “explore the power of words to sicken and befoul as well as freshen and redeem” (11). Kowalewski’s description of the paradoxical interpretive position in which violent fictional images and scenarios often seem to place audiences echoes a more general contradiction that shapes theoretical, philosophical, and sociological responses to the representation of violence as such. We tend, that is, at least from a conventional standpoint, to respond to violent textual phenomena in one of two ways: dissociation or desire. As Grosz puts it in her critical assessment of the place of violence in deconstructive theory, people often attempt (fallaciously, as it turns out) to “distinguish between a ‘good’ and a ‘bad’ violence, a violence that is necessary and one that is wanton, excessive, and capable of, in principle, elimination—one

that is justified by virtue of its constructive force while the other is condemned as destructive, negative” (141).

On the one hand, we might respond to violent representations with distaste or discomfort, viewing them as signs of something that is ethically reprehensible (if not reprehensible themselves). On occasion, that is, the symbolization of violence tends to promote feelings of “moral rectitude” (Whitehead, “Poetics of Violence” 10) in readers or an audience who thus become eager to distance themselves from the implications of the text in question, either by dismissing it as callous or gratuitous in and of itself, or by viewing it as a rejection of its *own* content. From the latter perspective, such texts could be seen to function as, at best, indictments of the violence they depict, in the manner, for instance, of a kind of “protest” literature that is designed to make us angry about injustice and cruelty and thus force us to work to better ourselves and our society by renouncing violence in favour of peace and tolerance (*nonviolence*). In any case, in these terms violence “become[s] the domain of the other,” something that is “antithetical to the way in which we imagine ourselves behaving” (McGowen 140).

The obverse approach to the thorny question of the function and effects of violent representations entails a more celebratory (or at least optimistic or positive) stance, one in which violence is embraced as something productive, critical, or transformative—a necessary intervention in moribund ideological structures or a way of opposing oppressive political systems, one that marks a radical attempt to bring revolution, potentiality, or “the future” into being by

force. On this level, even if we are concerned—as many of these texts in this study seem to be—largely with expressing solidarity with the *victims* of injustice, otherwise destructive modes of violence could nonetheless be usefully reappropriated in narrative form in the service of a righteous, revisionist cause, in a variant of the argument for immanent critique put forward by some feminists concerning the ways in which the master’s house (patriarchy) can be dismantled using the master’s tools (patriarchally-inflected language). Ledbetter, for one, makes quite a convincing case for this kind of “productive” reading of violence in the specific context of postmodern literature, arguing somewhat counter-intuitively that, when it comes to texts that are concerned with allowing the “silenced victims” of historical atrocities “to speak,” moments when violence is done to characters who stand in for those victims actually serve to *disrupt* the dominant ideologies that perpetrate that violence in the first place (2). Ledbetter thus contends that, paradoxically, “moments of ethical knowing and activity, which shatter existing worlds and give new visions of possibly better worlds, come when the body has violence perpetrated on it” (14). Gottfried makes a similar case in relation to contemporary writing by women that attempts both to depict the reality, and contest the ongoing effects of “abusive pasts.” While in a certain sense such depictions of violence could be seen as merely reiterative, disheartening “illustration[s] of women’s subjection to tyranny,” Gottfried suggests instead that these narratives also posit “a ‘useful’ violence, one that overturns old histories and offers startlingly new models for remembering and telling those histories” (5). Beyond the literary register, moreover, comparable

arguments have of course been made about the strategic utility of radically transformative modes of *actual* violence in the context of political resistance and social struggle, as in, for example, Franz Fanon's justification of anticolonial violence, and Walter Benjamin's theory of "divine violence" as "law-destroying" in the arena of class conflict (LaCapra, *Limits* 112; Benjamin 249).

There are serious limitations to each of these possible responses to violent representations, however. First and most obviously, it is not at all clear what violent images and narratives have to do with *actual* violence; in any case, the relation is not simply one-to-one. This means that the outright rejection of those images and narratives on the basis of a fear that they will somehow propagate violent behaviour in the real world stems from the extremely flimsy premise of "media-generated" determinism (Wesley 3). Ironically, in fact, the gesture of "uncritically condemning violent representation" because it seems to encourage real-world acts is unlikely to lead to any reduction of the latter, since it fails to grapple with the more complex or subterranean ways in which representational or narrative violence *might* potentially condition "the expectations that contribute to real violence" (Wesley xv). Indeed, to criticize out of hand (or even refuse to read entirely) violent texts on the basis *of* their violence more generally indicates a problematic desire on the part of the reader to foreclose the work of interpretation before it has even begun; in other words, this desire runs the risk of failing to attend to the texts in their own terms. To this extent, as Marco Abel puts it, violent images confront us with the question of our "response-ability"; they call forth an

affective and “ethical” response that is marked by an “exteriority” to determinate moral judgment or condemnation (10).

But if the knee-jerk condemnation of violent figurations appears to lead to a critical dead end, the same is potentially true of the opposite tendency, the desire to find in such images a kind of redeeming or resistant force. In its privileging of certain limit-case events as innately transgressive, for instance, such an approach risks treating violence as an aestheticized “object of contemplation” in a manner that is almost “pornographic” (Whitehead 11). In Kowalewski’s terms, this approach begins by “savoring the violence that a critical study claims to investigate,” and ultimately leads to a problematic romanticizing that “overemphasiz[es] the specialness of violence in human experience as some kind of ultimate confrontation, some furious sign of ‘real’ life” (*Deadly Musings* 15). On the other hand, this fetishization of the “real” also constitutes a dubious disavowal of materiality at the same time: the second approach to violence at times somewhat cavalierly downplays the uncomfortable possibility that an unhealthy fixation on linguistic or symbolic representations of violence as objects of interpretive desire always potentially involves doing an injustice to actual pain and suffering. (However much we can problematize any outright divide between the orders of materiality and discourse when it comes to violence, there remains a nagging sense of their unavoidable imbrications.) This tendency leads to what LaCapra identifies in *History and its Limits* as the glorification of violence as “an object of desire ... replete with sacrificial or sublime motifs and presented as a redemptive or regenerative force” (92). Although, as LaCapra discusses, the

“fascination with figurations of violence” is characteristic of certain strains of radical thought and ideology critique “whose ostensible role is to limit violence,” the “process of sacralization” in which these intellectual traditions engage in the service of putatively utopian ends also appears “to sanctify or glorify violence and killing rather than to limit and counteract their uncontrolled, invidious effects” (90-91, 95). At its most problematic extreme, in fact, this sacralizing tendency is identified by LaCapra with fascism’s infatuation with violence as “an ecstatic existential peak that [has] sacrificial and regenerative force” (108).

These are all valid concerns that are well worth further exploration, but what I want to propose as the key problem with the antithetical positions outlined above—and, finally, what makes the novels analyzed in this study particularly useful as literary theorizations of the “problem” of histories of violence—has, in a sense, to do with the larger question of representation itself. In my view, what is shared by these gestures that reject violence and endorse nonviolence, on the one hand, and that privilege a sacralized violence as productively transformative, on the other, is a deceptively simple—or what we might call a “mimetic”—view of the relation between discourse and materiality, representation and reality, word and world. That is, the first gesture implicitly posits violence as a kind of derivative supplement, a deviation from and disruption of a “peaceful,” quasi-Platonic ideal—a state of affairs that we might be able to return to if only we could control our brutish proclivities. In Abel’s terms, this outlook thus “insinuate[s] the existence of a nonviolent space, suggesting that a nonviolated phenomenological whole exists prior to the onset of violence” (xiii). Conversely,

the second gesture—the antithesis in our dialectic—figures violence itself as that “phenomenon” which exceeds the order of representation in its seeming ontological wholeness or self-sufficiency (or at least, as something that *leads* to this “unified” state of affairs). Commenting on Derrida’s discussion in “Force of Law,” LaCapra suggests that, in the terms laid down by that particular essay, “violence and force seem to assume an originary, performative role, with interpretation and, presumably, discourse . . . having a derivative or at least secondary status” (*Limits* 99). So, if an idealized space of nonviolence functions as sort of lost, archaic origin, the mirror image of this fantasy is the utopian future of justice ushered into (potential) existence by a performative, productive violence that has itself assumed “a transcendental status as an *actus purus* creation ex nihilo”; in that it is supposedly “dissociated from history,” violence would thus restore us to unity or self-presence through a revolutionary, “mystical” break with the constraints of “normative discourse” (LaCapra, *Limits* 99). Whatever their explicit ideological content, whether they express, say, a conservative nostalgia or a radical hope for the future, these conventional responses to the representation of violence thus hinge on a similar kind of feint or sleight of hand: that is, they both construct an illusory space consisting of an ideal, totalized “utopia” in which there is either no violence whatsoever, or where, in Hanssen’s terms, a “transformative sociopolitical agenda” has finally been achieved via a “revolutionary counterviolence” that has done away with *unjust* forms of violence once and for all (4).

In my view, however, such visions of the ultimate absence or transcendence of violence are illusory—*phantasmatic* in the particular sense discussed by Michael Naas. Drawing on Derrida’s persistent engagement throughout his career with a thematics of spectrality, Naas argues that whereas the “spectre” is “one of those non-synonymous substitutes for ... *différance*,” for the “intrinsic possibility of doubling and iteration that makes any phenomenal appearance possible,” the “phantasm” refers to the illusion of an escape from the differing and deferral of the signifier, even as it is itself a product of the play of signification. The phantasm thus purports to be a point of absolute origin, metaphysical presence, self-coincidence, and so on—an *arkhē*, if you will—while it is, actually, merely the belated, beguiling simulation of those (mistakenly) privileged ontological categories. As Naas explains, a “defining characteristic of the phantasm” is that it

Suggests or leads us to believe in a non-alienation of the self from itself in language, it leads us to believe in a coincidence of the self that speaks and the self that hears itself speak in a *vouloir dire*, the immediate apprehension of a self by itself in a *vouloir dire* ... Though the phantasm as phenomenon, as an appearing to the self, always introduces appearance, iterability, and, thus, difference into every self-relation, the phenomenon of the phantasm suggests an expulsion, repression, or purification of this phenomenon. The phantasm is thus both the phenomenon of the phantasm and the suppression or

repression of the phantasm as phenomenon, the lure of a phantasm,
then, beyond the phenomenon ... (5)

In sum, the phantasm emerges from the endless play of “difference” while, at the very instant of its apparition, it does away with seemingly every trace of this “originary contamination of presence” by conjuring its beginnings in a “simple, seemingly self-evident or axiomatic, origin” (10, 5).

In this double movement, this appearance-in-disappearance, the phantasm institutes *and* sublimates a simultaneously insubstantial and very real, very powerful mode of “sovereignty,” whether on the level of the individual subject, the nation state, or “a sovereign God” (9). Thus, it promotes the illusion of “a self-same self that can act, that has power, in a word, that is sovereign” (12). However, by presenting that sovereignty as, in turn, entirely, radically originary or “pure” (rather than inevitably “linguistically coded,” a product of contingent signification), the phantasm dissembles itself as “natural” or “organic,” thus effectively “pass[ing] off what is always a historically conditioned performative fiction as a constative or objective observation” (12). The troubling power of sovereignty—a power that manifests itself, in the worst of times, in such political extremes as patriarchy’s habitual “violence against women,” certain forms of “ethico-religious violence,” and the War on Terror (13, 16)—is thus made (ostensibly) unassailable or unquestionable. If the phantasm is “at the origin of political power,” it augments that power by precisely “not appear[ing] as what it ‘is’” (12).

All of which is to say that to respond to representations of violence in the various ways I have outlined in this conclusion is inevitably to take the phantasm at face value: it is to mistake either a utopian nonviolence or productive, critical counterviolence for a legitimate means of escape from, or contestation of violence as such, when, in actual fact, they may be the phantasmatic dissimulations of the violence of the very sovereignty they hope to contest.

Each of the novels analyzed in this study deconstructs in some fashion the recuperative allure of the archive (itself a kind of phantasm), revealing this technology of historical recovery to be problematic or even destructive, even as it momentarily holds out the promise of the salutary return of the past in the form of what Morrison calls a “true-to-life presence” (*Beloved* 119). While the explicit aim of these novels’ interventions in the process of retelling American history may be seen as broadly “revisionist,” that is, as signaling an attempt to challenge, subvert, or transform accepted views of the past that are seen as problematic or distorting, the texts themselves simultaneously undermine (or at least, *qualify*) their own critical projects through the self-conscious representation of analogous acts of historical investigation/representation. They thus persistently interrogate their own ostensive premise: whether or not it is even possible to produce representations of the violent American past that are not fatally bound up with that same violence. *Blood Meridian*, *Beloved*, *The Holder of the World*, and *Libra* all question the very notion of representing the past at all—particularly the attractive idea that this endeavour provides a means of avoiding the recurrence of past acts of violence through an understanding of their causes, say, or a way of mitigating

the ongoing effects of past injustices by attending to the under-represented, heretofore mute *victims* of those acts. This might seem, on the surface, to be a highly pessimistic stance, one that encourages, on the one hand, amnesia as the only valid response to the crushing weight of history, and, on the other, a self-involved ethico-political paralysis in reaction to the problems of the present. What I hope the dissertation as a whole and this concluding discussion in particular have suggested, though, is that a truly useful (and perhaps even hopeful) literary and, indeed, literary *critical* engagement with America's violent past must begin with an acknowledgement that the "material" violence of this history—those countless acts of conquest, slavery, and murder—is itself, for us in the contemporary moment, phantasmic: a "phenomenal" brutality that serves to sublimate the more insidious violence of our own attempts at archivization.

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