

Faculty of English

The Politics of Male Friendship
in Contemporary American Fiction

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December 2018

This dissertation is submitted for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Declaration

This dissertation is the result of my own work and includes nothing which is the outcome of work done in collaboration except as declared in the Preface and specified in the text.

It is not substantially the same as any that I have submitted, or, is being concurrently submitted for a degree or diploma or other qualification at the University of Cambridge or any other University or similar institution except as declared in the Preface and specified in the text. I further state that no substantial part of my dissertation has already been submitted, or, is being concurrently submitted for any such degree, diploma or other qualification at the University of Cambridge or any other University or similar institution except as declared in the Preface and specified in the text

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Abstract

Exploring the traffic between U.S. literary culture and political philosophy, this thesis surveys works by a range of leading male contemporary American novelists alongside the recent resurgent interest in friendship as a political concept. Long exiled from serious political philosophy, friendship returned as a crucial term in late twentieth-century communitarian debates about citizenship. Friendship also became integral to continental philosophy's exploration of the ontology of democracy, and, in a different guise, to histories of sexuality. Across these disciplines, friendship has been invoked as a pliable figure of affiliation, and often idealised as modelling equality. This thesis probes the origins of friendship's re-emergence in American political thought, and analyses how this far-reaching revival has registered in American fiction.

The Introduction outlines how friendship has played a central role in the theory and practice of democratic politics since Aristotle suggested *philia* as fundamental to citizenship. In the U.S. context, male friendship in particular functioned as model for civic association in the nascent republic, and continued to be employed as a figure of egalitarian association in canonical works of nineteenth-century fiction. Yet despite its prominence historically in the U.S. civic imaginary, friendship was sidelined from American political culture for much of the twentieth century, until its rediscovery in the 1980s and 1990s as part of a wide-ranging critique of liberal individualism. The Introduction analyses how this renewal of critical commentary within mainstream liberal thought mirrored continental philosophy's contemporaneous exploration of democratic theory, wherein friendship was similarly examined as a vexed yet evocative site for the contestation of forms of political community.

Marshalling this history, the thesis' main chapters argue that contemporary U.S. fiction continues to look to male friendship to explore questions of civic affiliation, political agency, and community, and to probe the history of these concepts in twentieth-century American liberalism. Chapter One focuses on Philip Roth's *I Married a Communist* (1998) and *The Human Stain* (2000), and analyses how Roth connects the political culture of the 1940s to the 1990s through the male friendships framing each narrative. Chapter Two draws on the anthropology of the gift to examine forms of reciprocity between male friends in Paul Auster's fiction. Chapter Three considers how novels by Michael Chabon and Jonathan Lethem contextualise their portrayals of interracial male friendship within the legacies of 1960s political radicalism. A Conclusion considers how some of the key themes emerging in previous chapters are reflected in Benjamin Markovits' *You Don't Have to Live Like This* (2015).

Acknowledgements

One of the great pleasures of working on this thesis has been the chance to talk shop (and football) with Kasia Boddy; I'm incredibly grateful for her guidance, enthusiasm, and generosity. For help along the way, thank you to David Brauner, Amy Morris, and Pam Thurschwell.

For financial support, I owe thanks to the School of Arts and Humanities at Cambridge, and the English Faculty. I'm also grateful to the Oxford and Cambridge Trustees of the Henry Fund for electing me to a Procter Fellowship at Princeton University, where much of Chapter Three was written.

Harriet Baker made all the difference.

This thesis is dedicated with love to my parents.

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Introduction

1. 'the precise moment when friendship is formed'

Set in 2003, with the Iraq invasion looming, Norman Rush's *Subtle Bodies* (2013) is the story of a group of male college friends reuniting in middle age to mourn the death of Douglas, the charismatic leader of their group. At NYU together in the mid-1970s, the young men had thought of themselves as a clique of 'wits', and aspired to be 'social renovators of some unclear kind [...] by somehow generalizing their friendship'.¹ In the intervening decades, however, both their friendship and their political commitments have waned: one friend owns 'an agency dedicated to creating public service announcements for television'; another is a stockbroker; a third, a cynical lawyer.² We learn that Douglas, meanwhile, became 'half-famous' in later life for 'debunking [literary] forgeries'.³ But the friends begin to wonder whether Douglas was in fact the real fake among them: were the politically-tinged practical jokes they carried out together at college under his direction really that savvily satirical, or just adolescent and irritating? And, given how they've all drifted apart, was their friendship genuine, or itself merely a kind of counterfeit?

Only Ned, the novel's protagonist, still seems to take seriously the group's original idealism. Working for a Fair Trade co-op, he devotes his spare time to organising

¹ Norman Rush, *Subtle Bodies* (New York: Knopf, 2013), 9, 11-12.

² Rush, *Subtle Bodies*, 41.

³ Rush, *Subtle Bodies*, 10.

a mass rally against the war – ‘the Convergence’ – and a central thread of the narrative concerns his efforts to persuade his old friends to sign his petition opposing the invasion. Recalling his 1970s college days, Ned finds it ‘embarrassing’ how ‘seriously he had taken the whole thing, the world remade, friendship at the core of everything’.⁴ But in fact, he remains invested in the idea that friendship might inform and inspire a broader kind of political engagement and solidarity. His wife, Nina, notes that Ned ‘could still get solemn’ talking about the group’s original hope for what they called ‘molecular socialism’ – a progressive politics grounded in their personal relationships that offers an alternative to normative family life.⁵ As one reviewer observes, ‘far from being spiritual as the title might imply, the question of friendship becomes a political one’ in the novel.⁶ Nicholas Dames suggests that *Subtle Bodies* mourns the political culture of the 1970s, a period marked by the ‘decline of sixties radicalism’, but in which a ‘ramshackle’, attenuated utopianism founded in collective action and community living still captivated the American New Left’s imagination.⁷ The novel is not only an elegy for the counterculture, however, but for an older ideal of male friendship itself. In his eulogy for Douglas, Ned reads from his friend’s favourite book – a book in part about a male friendship – Boswell’s *Life of Samuel Johnson*: ‘We cannot tell the precise moment when friendship is formed’.⁸ Quoted at the funeral of a friend, the implication is that a friendship is only ever truly formed in retrospect. If the temporality of friendship can seem utopian in the novel –

⁴ Rush, *Subtle Bodies*, 48.

⁵ Rush, *Subtle Bodies*, 12, 48.

⁶ Jenny Hendrix, “Empty Chairs at Empty Tables: Norman Rush’s *Subtle Bodies*”, *Los Angeles Review of Books*, September 9, 2013.

⁷ Nicholas Dames, “Seventies Throwback Fiction: A Decade in Review”, *n+1*, 21 (Winter 2014).

⁸ Rush, *Subtle Bodies*, 234.

encapsulating the promise of a ‘world remade’ – then *Subtle Bodies* also suggests that the time of friendship and the time of mourning might be ineluctably linked. By the end of the novel, in fact, the time of male friendship seems to have given way to another temporality, that of conception. As the narrative opens, we learn that Ned and Nina have been trying for their first child, and as it closes, we discover that she is pregnant.

Rush has suggested that although ‘it’s an old idea [...] I discovered when I began the book that the subject of male friendship is not a common one in literary fiction’.⁹ He claims that although ‘the utopian function of friendship’ pervades the ‘old New Ages of Whitman and Edward Carpenter’, and their celebrations of the democratic potential of comradesly love, the theme is largely absent from modern literature, and especially from the novel.¹⁰ Speculating as to why this might be, Rush notes that a ‘reflexive tendency to analyze male friendships [...] as homosexual in nature would undoubtedly [have been] an inhibiting factor’ throughout much of the twentieth century, while there ‘has also been a shadow interpretation of many male friendships in literature as enactments of the search by a disillusioned son for a replacement father’.¹¹ In other words, male friendship has often been read with suspicion (in literature as in life) as a cover story of sublimation and displacement of one kind or another, rather than as a relationship in its own right.

Rush is certainly not alone in suggesting that what Foucault called the invention of the homosexual as a ‘species’ in the late nineteenth century pathologised male

⁹ Tim Horvath, “*Subtle Bodies*: An Interview with Norman Rush”, *Tin House*, November 25, 2013.

¹⁰ On comradeship in Whitman and Carpenter, see for example Kirsten Harris, *Walt Whitman and British Socialism: ‘The Love of Comrades’* (London: Routledge, 2016), 30-64.

¹¹ Horvath, “*Subtle Bodies*: An Interview with Norman Rush”.

intimacy, making friendship among men a site of cultural anxiety, and consequently a less popular and prominent literary theme.¹² In fact, it's become something of a commonplace in histories of sexuality 'before homosexuality' to contrast the 'valences and nuances of love between men in pre-homosexual cultures' with the rigidity of the 'homosexual-heterosexual binary' of the twentieth century, and to suggest that male friendship became 'less visible and less of a topic to be discussed in literature' as a result.¹³ Turning to the twenty-first century, however, Rush suggests that this might no longer be the case. 'Times have changed radically', he notes, 'and there is now more freedom to address the subject itself'. No longer such a source of defensive suspicion and misunderstanding, Rush argues, male friendship can again be explored in fiction.

This thesis demonstrates that male friendship re-emerges as a significant theme in late twentieth- and twenty-first-century American fiction, and I offer extended analyses of works by some of the most critically-acclaimed and widely-read novelists of the last forty years: Philip Roth, Paul Auster, Michael Chabon, and Jonathan Lethem. But I also argue that the reasons behind this re-emergence are not simply to do with changing attitudes towards same-sex intimacy, as Rush implies. In fact, I suggest that the tendency to read the history of male friendship as only a facet of the history of sexuality has obscured

¹² Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1: An Introduction* [1976], trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Random House, 1980), 42.

¹³ Axel Nissen, *Manly Love: Romantic Friendship in American Fiction* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 6, 14; Peter Nardi, "Friendship", in Michael Kimmel and Amy Aronson (eds.), *Men and Masculinities: A Social, Cultural, and Historical Encyclopaedia* (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO Press, 2004), pp. 321-324 (321). 'The twentieth century was the age of female friendship', Mark Peel argues, 'as the boundaries between male intimacy, male friendship and homosexuality became ever more difficult to control'. Peel, "New Worlds of Friendship: The Early Twentieth Century", in Barbara Caine (ed.), *Friendship: A History* (London: Equinox, 2009), pp. 279-316 (281).

friendship's discrete conceptual genealogy, and cultural and political significance. Sharon Marcus made a similar argument in her study of female friendship in Victorian fiction, *Between Women* (2007). Marcus notes that feminist critics from the 1970s through to the early 1990s placed women's friendships 'on a continuum with lesbian relationships', and while she acknowledges that this concept of a 'continuum' was 'once a powerful means of drawing attention to overlooked bonds between women', Marcus contends that it has also 'ironically obscured everything that female friendship and lesbianism did not share'.¹⁴ I argue that something similar might be said of recent critical studies of the literary and cultural history of male same-sex intimacy, wherein a corresponding concept of a 'continuum' between homosexuality and homosociality – derived from Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's study *Between Men* (1985), to which Marcus's title alludes – has uncovered the historical congruencies between practices and representations of male friendship and homosexuality, but often at the risk of eliding the differences between them.¹⁵

In this thesis, I argue that, in order to analyse the role of male friendship in contemporary American fiction, we need to read beyond the paradigm of sexuality. Instead, I situate the thematising of male friendship in recent U.S. fiction within three interlinking critical contexts. Firstly, as Rush notes, male friendship is 'an old idea', and I argue that to understand the role of this idea in the contemporary novel, we need to

¹⁴ Sharon Marcus, *Between Women: Friendship, Desire, and Marriage in Victorian England* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), 29.

¹⁵ See Nissen, *Manly Love*; Caleb Crain, *American Sympathy: Men, Friendship, and Literature in the New Nation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001); Jonathan Ned Katz, *Love Stories: Sex Between Men Before Homosexuality* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003); Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985).

understand something of the classical philosophy that underpins it. Secondly – and as Rush also notes in his allusion to Whitman – I suggest that portrayals of friendship between men in contemporary fiction need to be contextualised within the long literary and cultural history of male friendship’s integral yet contested place in the American civic imaginary, a history that stretches back to Independence. Finally, and most importantly, I demonstrate that the resurgence of literary interest in male friendship that I trace belongs to a broader cultural moment, in which not only novelists, but political theorists, sociologists, and philosophers looked to friendship to scrutinise and reimagine structures of affiliation, allegiance, and community more widely in American life. In *Subtle Bodies*, Ned and his college gang hope to ‘somehow generaliz[e]’ their friendship into a broader politics, and in the next section of this Introduction, I will show that over the past four decades or so, there has been a far-reaching revival of critical interest in this very idea.

2. Civic Friendship, Community and Liberalism’s Crisis of Citizenship

Joris – the cynical lawyer whom Ned has the most trouble convincing to sign his anti-war petition – is reading Morris Berman’s bestseller, *The Twilight of American Culture* (2000).¹⁶ Mourning the collapse of civil society, Berman’s diatribe draws a parallel between America at end-of-century and the final days of the Roman empire. Joris is similarly nihilistic, telling Ned that there is little point in protesting, or in fact in any form of civic participation: ‘you can spend your whole life on it’, he says, ‘and you can die, and the next day the market is doing the same thing’.¹⁷ Berman’s book takes its cues

¹⁶ Rush, *Subtle Bodies*, 38.

¹⁷ Rush, *Subtle Bodies*, 42.

from Allan Bloom's *The Closing of the American Mind* (1987), the ur-text of the modern American jeremiad.¹⁸ But whereas Bloom's neo-conservative ire focuses on the university, Berman's critique is more eclectic, taking in not just education but corporate multinationalism – to which Joris indirectly alludes – and 'the replacement of intelligent citizens with mindless consumers'.¹⁹ As Michiko Kakutani writes of the book's follow-up – the even bleaker *Dark Ages America* (2006) – *Twilight of American Culture* is 'the kind of book that gives the Left a bad name', a description that captures something of what Ned feels about Joris's fatalism.²⁰

But there is another reason why Rush has Joris reading Berman. Joris realises that much of his pessimism stems from his increasing isolation after falling out of contact with the college gang, and the fact that 'he couldn't tell anyone about his private life, because he didn't have any friends'.²¹ In this, Berman would argue, Joris is not unusual. 'There is a fear of any kind of involvement at all' in modern society, he writes in *Twilight*, 'for real friendships require risk and vulnerability, and more and more Americans feel that they lack the psychological strength for that'. Instead, 'bottled rage and resentment are the norm as millions live in isolation, without any form of community'.²² In *Dark Ages America*, meanwhile, Berman argues that 'Americans care only about their individual

¹⁸ See Mark Stephen Jendrysik, *Modern Jeremiahs: Contemporary Visions of American Decline* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2008), 37-56.

¹⁹ Morris Berman, *The Twilight of American Culture* (New York: Norton, 2000), 35.

²⁰ Michiko Kakutani, "Grim View of a Nation at the End of Days", *New York Times*, June 16, 2006, E35.

²¹ Rush, *Subtle Bodies*, 38.

²² Berman, *Twilight of American Culture*, 55.

lives [...] there is no genuine friendliness here, no community'.²³ In connecting the lack of friendship in America to the concept of community, and to a larger critique of the decline of civil society, Berman here is tapping into an idea that was in fact widespread in late twentieth- and early twenty-first-century cultural criticism, political philosophy, and sociology.

Writing in the mid-1990s, Anthony Giddens noted that 'on each side of the political spectrum today we see a fear of social disintegration and a call for a revival of community'.²⁴ In *Liquid Modernity* – published in the same year as Berman's *Twilight* – Zygmunt Bauman similarly observed that Western liberal democracies were beginning to experience the 'corrosion and slow disintegration of citizenship'.²⁵ The problem, Bauman argued, is that 'somewhere along the line, friendship and solidarity, once upon a time major community-building materials, became too flimsy, too rickety or too watery for the purpose'.²⁶ This critique of liberalism's crisis of citizenship permeated mainstream American culture. Taking the decline of the local bowling league as symptomatic of the decline of civil society, Robert Putnam's bestseller *Bowling Alone* (2000) argues that modern Americans suffer from diminishing 'social capital' – his term for the 'connections between people' and 'the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them' –

²³ Morris Berman, *Dark Ages America: The Final Phase of Empire* (New York: Norton, 2006), 102.

²⁴ Anthony Giddens, *Beyond Left and Right: The Future of Radical Politics* [1994] (Cambridge: Polity, 2007), 124.

²⁵ Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Modernity* (Cambridge: Polity, 2000), 36.

²⁶ Zygmunt Bauman, *In Search of Politics* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), 14.

and like Berman concludes that the result is a loss of community.²⁷ Putnam's study draws on the findings of sociologist Robert Bellah and his team in *Habits of the Heart* (1985), which decries the weakening 'sense of connection, shared fate, mutual responsibility, community' in a society in which the 'individual can only rarely and with difficulty understand himself and his activities as interrelated in morally meaningful ways with those of other, different Americans'.²⁸

The reasons given for this loss of community vary according to political perspective. Those on the Right point to the decline of 'family values', local association, faith, and morality – all of which are often traced to the cultural revolution of the 1960s, and the concomitant rise of feminism and identity politics – as causing a breakdown in the fabric of American society.²⁹ Those on the Left, meanwhile, identify as prime causes the 'privatization of the economy, the erosion of the welfare state, increased xenophobia in the face of rapid globalization and the passing of industrial labor' along with 'a relentless reemphasis on individualism and materialism' beginning in response to the

²⁷ Robert Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000), 19.

²⁸ Robert Bellah et al, *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* [1985] (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), xxxviii, 50.

²⁹ Gerard Delanty notes that cultural criticism like *Bowling Alone* 'tends to look backwards to the time when liberal Protestant values held American society together'. *Community* (London: Routledge, 2003), 65. See also Miranda Joseph, *Against the Romance of Community* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), 6-15. Discussing portrayals of family in 1990s American fiction, Kasia Boddy notes that 'reading conservative commentators at the end of the twentieth century', one might conclude that the family 'was under threat as never before'. Boddy, "Family", in Stephen Burn (ed.), *American Literature in Transition, 1990-2000* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), pp. 312-328 (312).

political radicalism of the 1960s and 1970s.³⁰ A number of commentators summarise the transformation of citizenship and the political public sphere in America in the second half of the twentieth century using the exact same figure of chiasmus: they argue that the 1960s feminist-leftist maxim ‘the personal is the political’ has in subsequent decades been contorted into the conservative principle of ‘the political is the personal’.³¹

But however it has been explained, liberal democracy’s crisis of citizenship and community became, as Giddens suggests, a serious concern across the political spectrum, with many arguing that the problem lay chiefly with the theory of liberalism itself. Indeed, as Sybil Schwarzenbach notes:

in spite of the differences that might today distinguish many continental thinkers, socialists, Marxists, feminists, civic republicans, contemporary communitarians, and even conservative, religious fundamentalists from one another, one thing at least appears to unite them: the common belief that traditional liberalism has an inadequate conception of community.³²

³⁰ Christopher Castiglia, *Interior States: Institutional Consciousness and the Inner Life of Democracy in the Antebellum United States* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008), 1; Magali Cornier Michael, *New Visions of Community in Contemporary American Fiction: Tan, Kingsolver, Castillo, Morrison* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2006), 14.

³¹ See Lauren Berlant, *The Queen of America Goes to Washington City: Essays on Sex and Citizenship* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997), 177-178; Marianne DeKoven, *Utopia Limited: The Sixties and the Emergence of the Postmodern* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), 190-191; Michael Kaplan, *Friendship Fictions: The Rhetoric of Citizenship in the Liberal Imaginary* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2010), 5; Matthew Crenson and Benjamin Ginsberg, *Downsizing Democracy: How America Sidelined Its Citizens and Privatized Its Public* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002), 7.

³² Sybil Schwarzenbach, *On Civic Friendship: Including Women in the State* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), 3.

Addressing this inadequacy, commentators and theorists of all political stripes have frequently reached for the same solution: a revitalised form of ‘civic friendship’. In *Habits of the Heart*, for example, Bellah and his collaborators outline a classical conception of civic friendship, in which ‘friendship and its virtues are not merely private: they are public, even political, for a civic order, a city, is above all a network of friends’. Without such a network, they note, ‘a city will degenerate into a struggle of contending interest groups unmediated by any public solidarity’. In this tradition, friends must not only respect one another, but must also ‘share a common commitment to the good’ – a moral obligation that Bellah and his team suggest is not easy for us to comprehend in a ‘culture of utilitarian individualism’.³³

Equally difficult to comprehend for a modern citizenry is the idea of friendship as a relationship with a political dimension, because ‘the modern idea of friendship lies in its very freedom from public roles and obligations’.³⁴ Indeed, as Gregory Jusdanis observes, on the whole ‘we think of friendship as a refuge from politics’, rather than a site of its elaboration.³⁵ But *Habits of the Heart* offers a glimpse of the Aristotelian tradition of civic friendship underpinning a whole swathe of ‘communitarian’ commentaries on liberal individualism from the past four decades that seek to revise this privatised conception of friendship. Communitarianism became something of a catch-all term in the 1980s and 1990s for a range of critiques that reasserted the importance of an active,

³³ Bellah et al, *Habits of the Heart*, 115-117.

³⁴ Ray Pahl, *On Friendship* (London: Polity, 2000), 37.

³⁵ Gregory Jusdanis, *A Tremendous Thing: Friendship from The Iliad to the Internet* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2014), 21.

engaged citizenship, and challenged liberalism's atomistic conception of the individual – what Michael Sandel, one of its main proponents, calls 'the unencumbered self'.³⁶ Communitarians frequently turned to Aristotle's account of citizenship and political community in describing either an alternative or adjustment to liberalism's theory of the division between the private and public spheres, and so a brief excursus into classical political philosophy is necessary here.

In the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle describes three categories of friendship: the useful, the pleasant, and the good. While friendships of the first two categories are common, friendships of the third kind are rare, taking time to build and trouble to maintain.³⁷ A friend of this category 'wishes for and does what is good or seems good for his friend for the friend's own sake'.³⁸ Elaborated through practices of generosity and reciprocity, such relationships engender a conception of mutual respect, care and obligation, allowing for an understanding of the friend, in Aristotle's famous formulation, as 'another self'.³⁹ The lesser forms of friendship also involve aspects of this dynamic – hence they belong to the same category of relationship – but in combination with other motivations; a good life will be composed of all three kinds of friendship. But Aristotle goes much further, suggesting that friendship is not only necessary to the well-being of the individual but to the functioning and governance of the state. 'Friendship would seem

³⁶ Michael Sandel, *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 182.

³⁷ See Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book VIII, 1156b, trans. Roger Crisp (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 145-147.

³⁸ Lorraine Smith Pangle, *Aristotle and the Philosophy of Friendship* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 142.

³⁹ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book IX, 1166a31-32, Crisp, 169.

to hold states together’, he writes, ‘and legislators would seem to be more concerned about it than about justice’. Indeed, ‘when men are friends’, he suggests, ‘they have no need for justice’.⁴⁰ In fact in both the *Politics* and the *Nicomachean Ethics*, friendship is pronounced to be the ‘greatest good of the state’, because of its ‘binding effect on communities’, and so ‘community, justice, and friendship’ are shown to be ‘coextensive’.⁴¹

Reading Aristotle, we see that democracy ‘finds its origin in a system of thought in which the idea of friendship is the major principle in terms of which political theory and practice are described, explained and analyzed’.⁴² Over the past four decades communitarian political theory has sought to test and build upon the connections the *Nicomachean Ethics* and the *Politics* draw between friendship, citizenship, and community.⁴³ Alasdair MacIntyre, for example, offers a ‘reconstructed version of

⁴⁰ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book VIII, 1155a22-28, Crisp, 144.

⁴¹ Suzanne Stern-Gillet, *Aristotle’s Philosophy of Friendship* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995), 45; David Riesback, *Aristotle on Political Community* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016). See also Pangle, *Aristotle and the Philosophy of Friendship*, 80.

⁴² Horst Hutter, *Politics as Friendship: The Origins of Classical Notions of Politics in the Theory and Practice of Friendship* (Ontario: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1978), 2.

⁴³ The rediscovery of Aristotle’s philosophy of friendship has extended far beyond communitarian political theory. The mid-1980s marked the beginning of a resurgence of studies of friendship in classical philosophy and even popular philosophy that has lasted to the present day. Early popular and influential studies and collections include Michael Pakaluk, *Other Selves: Philosophers on Friendship* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1991); Neera Kapur Badwhar (ed.), *Friendship: A Philosophical Reader* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993); Suzanne Stern-Gillet, *Aristotle’s Philosophy of Friendship*; David Konstan, *Friendship in the Classical World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997). More recent popular works include Mark Vernon, *The Philosophy of Friendship* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005); A. C. Grayling, *Friendship* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013). For a full bibliographic account charting friendship’s revival, see Heather Devere, “Amity Update: The Academic Debate on Friendship”, *AMITY: The Journal of Friendship Studies*, 1:1 (2013), pp. 5-33.

Aristotle's conception of ethics', in which friendship is conceived of as 'being the sharing of all in the common project of creating and sustaining the life of the city, a sharing incorporated in the immediacy of an individual's particular friendship' – a concept of political community that MacIntyre suggests is 'alien to the modern liberal individualist world'.⁴⁴ For MacIntyre, friendship functions as 'an avenue for acknowledging and sharing our vulnerabilities to and our dependence on one another'.⁴⁵ For Michael Sandel, restoring friendship as a civic virtue would similarly make us aware of the 'constituent attachments' that shape who we are, and allow us to understand that 'knowing oneself [...] is a less strictly private thing' than liberal individualism assumes.⁴⁶ More recent studies also call for elaborating 'a new mode of citizenship in friendship understood not as an emotion but a practice', and 'a set of hard-won, complicated habits that are used to bridge trouble, difficulty, and differences of personality, experience, and aspiration'.⁴⁷ Arguing that 'the problematic of a civic friendship between citizens is *the* forgotten problem of *modern* democratic theory', Sybil Schwarzenbach similarly suggests that 'for the construction of a plausible modern conception of a civic friendship between citizens, the vast repertoire of particular moral convictions hitherto relegated to the "private," the

⁴⁴ Stephen Mulhall and Adam Swift, *Liberals and Communitarians* [1992] (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996), 81; Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (London: Duckworth, 1981), 146.

⁴⁵ P. E. Digeser, *Friendship Reconsidered: What It Means and How It Matters to Politics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), 106; see MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 150-151, 164-165.

⁴⁶ Sandel, *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice*, 182.

⁴⁷ Danielle Allen, *Talking to Strangers: Anxieties of Citizenship since Brown v. Board of Education* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 157, xxi.

“personal,” and the prepolitical “merely social” realm can no longer be excluded from the original data pool from which a political, reflective equilibrium begins’.⁴⁸

What these theories of civic friendship all propose is a move from contract to community.⁴⁹ That is to say, they call for a shift away from liberalism’s familiar conception of ‘negative liberty’ – in which the social contract protects the individual from the intrusions of other citizens and the state in order to maximise personal liberty – towards a conception of ‘positive liberty’, in which members of a political community acknowledge and negotiate the ways in which they are implicated in one another’s freedom.⁵⁰ This particularist account of liberty counters the abstractions of liberal universalism and points instead to the ““thick” or embedded nature of ethico-political agency’.⁵¹ Above all, these accounts of civic friendship all call for the reconstitution of the liberal dichotomy of public and private life. Each proposes that the virtues of personal friendship – justice, equality, empathy, reciprocity – should shape, inspire, and form the ‘background condition’ to interactions in and the institutions of the political public sphere.⁵²

⁴⁸ Schwarzenbach, *On Civic Friendship*, xiii, 8. Emphasis in original.

⁴⁹ See Delanty, *Community*, 56.

⁵⁰ On positive and negative liberty, see Evert Van Der Zweerde, “Friendship and the Political”, *Critical Review of International Social and Political Philosophy*, 10:2 (2007), pp. 147-165 (153-155).

⁵¹ Leela Gandhi, *Affective Communities: Anticolonial Thought, Fin-de-Siècle Radicalism, and the Politics of Friendship* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 24. On particularism versus universalism in relation to communitarianism and liberalism, see Michael Walzer, “Philosophy and Democracy”, *Political Theory*, 9:3 (August 1981), pp. 379-399; Mulhall and Swift, *Liberals and Communitarians*, 128-130.

⁵² Schwarzenbach, *On Civic Friendship*, 59.

However, the danger that such accounts of civic friendship hazard is that they end up producing a normative conception of political community and citizenship. As Miranda Joseph notes in her critique of *Bowling Alone*, ‘the social value of local community formation, for Putnam, is not in the challenges that such communities might offer to dominant regimes but rather in that they are sites of incorporation into hegemonic regimes’.⁵³ Bonnie Honig levels a similar charge at Sandel’s communitarianism, suggesting that ‘the ultimate aim of friendship in Sandel’s community politics is to affirm and reinforce identification with community’ in a process of ‘perpetual reintegration’.⁵⁴ Civic friendship risks producing community and consensus at the expense of pluralism and democratic debate; Joseph and Honig alert us to how this ‘construction of friendship’ is ultimately one of ‘political exclusions’.⁵⁵ Indeed, this is one of the most troubling implications of basing a conception of citizenship on Aristotle’s political philosophy, which restricted civic friendship to ‘men of virtue’ and excluded women from citizenship entirely, an issue that some philosophers have recently tried to address.⁵⁶

A critique of the ‘androcentrism’ of Aristotelian friendship is at the heart of Jacques Derrida’s *The Politics of Friendship* (1997), the most prominent of a number of works of continental philosophy that have revisited the political philosophy of

⁵³ Joseph, *Against the Romance of Community*, 12.

⁵⁴ Bonnie Honig, *Political Theory and the Displacement of Politics* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993), 179.

⁵⁵ Jon Soske and Joanna Walsh, “Thinking About Race and Friendship in South Africa”, in Soske and Walsh (eds.), *Ties that Bind: Race and the Politics of Friendship in South Africa* (Johannesburg: Wits University Press, 2016), pp. 3-30 (8).

⁵⁶ See Schwarzenbach, *On Civic Friendship*, 27-56.

friendship.⁵⁷ Surveying the classical tradition, Derrida is particularly troubled by the commonplace conceptual elision of the figure of the friend, the brother, and the double. He believes that this elision institutes a political economy of sameness over difference, and is therefore, as Joseph and Honig also suggest, anti-pluralist.⁵⁸ Drawing on Carl Schmitt's account of the 'friend/enemy divide' as a structuring principle of political thought, Derrida demonstrates how the slippage between friendship and fraternity in particular produces a form of political community that is exclusionary, militaristic and repressive, in which friendship descends into tribalism and factionalism.⁵⁹ And yet, he also suggests, we cannot ignore the 'organising role' friendship plays in 'the definition of justice, democracy even', and that rather than abandon friendship as a political concept, we need to instead reimagine a form of friendship 'beyond the principle of fraternity': 'Let us dream of a friendship that goes beyond this proximity of the congeneric double', Derrida writes, towards 'a democracy to come'.⁶⁰ A clue as to the shape of this 'democracy to come' and of the role of friendship in its elaboration comes from the enigmatic apostrophe (traditionally though inaccurately attributed to Aristotle) that frames his study: 'O my friends, there is no friend'. This apostrophe, Giorgio Agamben notes,

⁵⁷ See, for example, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *What Is Philosophy?*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Graham Burchell (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 1-35; Maurice Blanchot, *Friendship* [1971], trans. Elizabeth Rottenberg (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997).

⁵⁸ See Samir Haddad, *Derrida and the Inheritance of Democracy* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013), 100-119.

⁵⁹ Jacques Derrida, *The Politics of Friendship*, trans. George Collins [French, 1994; English, 1997] (London: Verso, 2005), 113-137.

⁶⁰ Jacques Derrida and Geoffrey Bennington, 'Politics and Friendship: A Discussion with Jacques Derrida', December 1, 1997; Derrida, *The Politics of Friendship*, 12, vii.

‘negates friendship with the very same gesture by which it seems to invoke it’.⁶¹ For Derrida, it therefore captures something of friendship’s simultaneous necessity and impossibility as a structural concept in political philosophy, and gestures to his sense that friendship belongs to a ‘temporality of that which cannot be fixed or even figured in the present’.⁶² Analysing the canonical texts of friendship – Cicero’s *De Amicitia*, Montaigne’s “On Friendship” – Derrida notes how many of these works are also works of mourning, and this informs his conception of the experience of friendship as one shadowed by death; as he writes elsewhere, ‘To have a friend, to look at him [...] is to know in a more intense way [...] that one of the two of you will inevitably see the other die’.⁶³ The time of friendship is therefore at once utopian and mournful – forward-looking yet elegiac, a time of ‘survival’, but also of hope.⁶⁴

In Derrida’s deconstruction of the classical philosophy of friendship, the friend emerges as a less familiar figure, and the kinds of political community imaginable from such an altered conception of friendship are ‘inoperative’ and ‘unavowable’ rather than communitarian.⁶⁵ In an attempt to make it the grounds for a pluralistic politics of

⁶¹ Giorgio Agamben, *What Is An Apparatus?*, trans. David Kishik and Stefan Pedatella (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009), 26.

⁶² Pheng Cheah and Suzanne Guerlac, “Introduction”, in Cheah and Guerlac (eds.), *Derrida and The Time of the Political* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009), pp. 1-37 (11).

⁶³ Jacques Derrida, *The Work of Mourning*, ed. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 107. On Montaigne and the classical tradition of friendship, see Barry Weller, “The Rhetoric of Friendship in Montaigne’s *Essais*”, *New Literary History*, 9:3 (Spring 1978), pp. 503-523.

⁶⁴ Derrida, *The Politics of Friendship*, 12.

⁶⁵ See Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, trans. Peter Connor, Lisa Garbus, Michael Holland, and Simona Sawhney (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991); Maurice Blanchot, *The Unavowable Community*, trans. Pierre Joris (Barrytown: Station Hill Press, 1988).

inclusion, what Derrida seeks to emphasise most is friendship's unknowability; as such, friendship ranks as one of the crucial terms of the 'political turn' in Derrida's later work, alongside 'cosmopolitanism' and 'hospitality' – both of which have received far more attention from within literary studies.⁶⁶ Leela Gandhi suggests that Derrida 'recognizes in the unscripted relation of "friendship" an improvisational politics appropriate to communicative, sociable utopianism, investing it with a vision of radical democracy'.⁶⁷ Accordingly, Gandhi's own study of fin-de-siècle radicalism follows Derrida in privileging 'the trope of friendship as the most comprehensive philosophical signifier for all those invisible affective gestures that refuse alignment along the secure axes of filiation to seek expression outside, if not against, possessive communities of belonging'.⁶⁸ In conceiving of friendship as the grounds for a politics of anticolonial resistance rather than of statehood and governance, Gandhi also takes her cues from E. M. Forster's quintessentially liberal defence of personal liberty: 'if I had to choose between betraying my country and betraying my friend I hope I should have the guts to betray my country'.⁶⁹ Forster's sentiment finds something of an update in Michel Foucault's influential suggestion, in "Friendship as a Way of Life" (1981), that friendship names a variety of 'intense relations' that 'short-circuit' the 'institutional codes' of 'law, rule, or habit', and the traditional nuclear family. Our 'sanitized culture' cannot allow a space for

⁶⁶ See, for example, Katherine Hallemeier, *J.M. Coetzee and the Limits of Cosmopolitanism* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013); Jeffrey Clapp and Emily Ridge (eds.), *Security and Hospitality in Literature and Culture: Modern and Contemporary Perspectives* (London: Routledge, 2015).

⁶⁷ Gandhi, *Affective Communities*, 19.

⁶⁸ Gandhi, *Affective Communities*, 10.

⁶⁹ E. M. Forster, *Two Cheers for Democracy* (London: Edward Arnold, 1951), 66, quoted in Gandhi, *Affective Communities*, 10.

‘tenderness, friendship’, Foucault writes, ‘without fearing the formation of new alliances and the tying together of unforeseen lines of force’.⁷⁰

Schematically, then, we might distinguish two strands to the resurgence of critical interest in the political philosophy of friendship emerging since the 1980s: the communitarian reading; and the Derridean-Foucaultian reading. Communitarianism revisits Aristotle’s civic republicanism and attempts to update the classical conception of civic friendship for a modern polity. In so doing, communitarianism draws on a conservative discourse of personal responsibility, morality and virtue.⁷¹ Yet many communitarian readings – especially those that engage with the notion of ‘radical democracy’ – also chime with left-wing ideas of political agency, solidarity, and localism that are a legacy of experiments in collectivism and communal living from the 1960s and 1970s.⁷² The Derridean-Foucaultian reading, meanwhile, attempts to defamiliarise the classical tradition upon which communitarianism rests. Derrida’s critique makes less certain the kinds of community we find in and through friendship, and suggests that interactions between friends cannot be mapped and quantified in quite the way that Putnam’s notion of ‘social capital’ would imply. Derrida thus keys into a Foucaultian notion of friendship as an unpredictable relation of political opposition, one in which the

⁷⁰ Michel Foucault, “Friendship as a Way of Life”, in *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth*, ed. Paul Rabinow, trans. Robert Hurley et al (New York: New York Press, 1997), pp. 135-140 (137-138).

⁷¹ Marjorie Mayo suggests that some communitarians pursue an ‘agenda of remoralisation’. *Cultures, Communities, Identities: Cultural Strategies for Participation and Empowerment* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2000), 37.

⁷² See Paul Lichterman, *The Search for Political Community: American Activists Reinventing Commitment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 213-230. For a theorisation of radical democratic civic friendship, see Chantal Mouffe, “Democratic Citizenship and the Political Community”, in Chantal Mouffe (ed.), *Dimensions of Radical Democracy: Pluralism, Citizenship, and Community* (London: Verso, 1992), pp. 225-239.

institutional logics of the state (and the family) are queried and disrupted; friendship as a form of ‘micro-political resistance’, or a kind of ‘molecular socialism’, to recall Ned’s term in *Subtle Bodies*.⁷³

For all their purported oppositions, there are also significant overlaps between the two positions, such that we might historicise the communitarian and Derridean-Foucaultian readings as twinned critiques prompted by the same crisis of citizenship in late twentieth-century liberal democracy. Most obviously, both readings privilege friendship as the quintessential trope of ‘democratic subjectivity’, to borrow Derrida’s phrase; that is, they both employ friendship as the key figure for thinking through broader questions of citizenship, alliance, affiliation, and community. And despite their contrasting readings of Aristotle, both critiques are ultimately drawn to friendship because it ‘troubles the liberal conception of democracy with its distinct realms of political and cultural/private life’.⁷⁴ As Jon Soske and Joanna Walsh outline, friendships develop across ‘multiple sites at once’, forging links between and within the private sphere and ‘the structures and networks that enable large-scale, formalised politics’, and thus traverse ‘levels of analysis that social scientists and historians often treat separately: the local and the national, the economic and the political, the affective and the material, structure and agency’. Indeed, Soske and Walsh go on to say, ‘friendship requires rethinking the question of *scale*’ altogether.⁷⁵

⁷³ Todd May, *Friendship in an Age of Economics: Resisting the Forces of Neoliberalism* (Plymouth: Rowman & Littlefield, 2012), 59.

⁷⁴ Soske and Walsh, “Thinking About Race and Friendship in South Africa”, 13.

⁷⁵ Soske and Walsh, “Thinking About Race and Friendship in South Africa”, 12. Emphasis in original.

A crucial aspect of friendship's appeal to political theorists and philosophers in this period, then, is that it is a kind of interstitial social relation that unsettles the familiar structures of the liberal imaginary, moving across and between the personal and the political, the local and the national, reordering our sense of the foundations of and conditions for citizenship and political community. In the chapters that follow, I argue that Roth, Auster, Chabon, and Lethem are also drawn to friendship as a figure through which to explore and query the scales of association and affiliation that shape American life, and to reflect back upon their formation and contestation within the history of American liberalism. In the rest of this Introduction, I outline two further frames of reference needed to understand the contemporary connection between friendship, politics, and the novel. Firstly, I turn more specifically to male friendship, and offer a *longue durée* account of its distinct role within American political, cultural and literary history. Focusing on contemporary literary studies, I then explore how an emphasis on the politics of male friendship in works by Roth, Auster, Chabon, and Lethem intervenes in current debates about the shape of 'post-postmodernism'.

3. Male Friendship in the U.S. Civic Imaginary

I have so far traced the re-emergence of friendship as a topic in late twentieth-century political philosophy, and highlighted some points of contact between its place in mainstream American communitarianism and continental philosophy. This same period also saw a dramatic resurgence of critical interest in the social, political, and literary history of male friendship in America, and 'a particularly active focus of study in the

history of friendship has been its relationship to sexuality, especially the homosocial and homosexual aspects of same-sex friendships'.⁷⁶ As I alluded to earlier in reference to Sharon Marcus's *Between Women*, one origin point for this is the work of feminist historians from the 1970s and 1980s who argued that a world of 'female love' and 'romantic friendship' flourished in nineteenth-century America.⁷⁷ But as Marcus points out, much of this work failed to distinguish 'between friends, lovers, and family members', and therefore 'conflate[d] friendship with sexual relationships'.⁷⁸ With the 'darkening tone' of lesbian-feminist studies in the 1990s, critical attention shifted away from friendship towards ideas of 'gender trouble', 'deviance', and 'sexual dissidence'.⁷⁹ Yet 'while female romantic friendship has become increasingly marginal, attention to both the history and philosophy of friendship has been reactivated in queer studies' wherein male friendship remains 'a consistently idealized model of same-sex relations'.⁸⁰ In fact, a version of the 1970s feminist 'romantic friendship' thesis has been reincorporated into recent literary-cultural histories of male friendship in America by Axel Nissen and Caleb Crain, both of whom position their studies as emerging out of the 'groundbreaking' work of Carroll Smith-Rosenberg and Lillian Faderman.⁸¹

⁷⁶ Janet Moore Lindman, "Histories of Friendship in Early America: An Introduction", *Journal of Social History*, 50:4 (2017), pp. 603-608 (604).

⁷⁷ See Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, "The Female World of Love and Ritual: Relations between Women in Nineteenth-Century America", *Signs*, 1:1 (Autumn 1975), pp. 1-29; Lillian Faderman, *Surpassing the Love of Men: Romantic Friendship and Love Between Women, from the Renaissance to the Present* (London: Women's Press, 1981).

⁷⁸ Marcus, *Between Women*, 30, 31.

⁷⁹ Heather Love, *Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007), 76.

⁸⁰ Love, *Feeling Backward*, 76.

⁸¹ Crain, *American Sympathy*, 32; Nissen, *Manly Love*, 12.

While the interrelation of the histories of friendship and same-sex sexuality has remained an important and prominent topic, scholarly interest has also expanded in recent decades to include the political history of friendship in the U.S., and specifically ‘the overlapping ideals and practices of democracy and friendship’ in the American civic imaginary.⁸² A number of recent studies have highlighted the important role of ‘friendship as a metaphor for political coexistence in revolutionary America’, analysing how ‘friendship remained a concept through which early Americans struggled to understand competing models of sociality and alliance’ throughout the antebellum period and indeed far beyond.⁸³ While queer historians of sexuality like Nissen and Crain have sought to emphasise the congruencies between representations and practices of female and male friendship in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, when we turn to the political history of friendship in America in the same period, we see a starkly gendered division of roles. As Cassandra Good explains, ‘friendly bonds between men, in the tradition of ancient Greek and Roman history and philosophy, were deemed fundamental to political life’, and while ‘educated white women had a vital role to play in this new republic [...] they were usually excluded from descriptions of civic friendship’.⁸⁴ Inspired by an ‘Aristotelian concept of friendship as collective tissue’, early Americans understood male friendships ‘as crucial to the nation-building project and its creation of worthy republican citizens [...] encouraging empathy between citizens in a society that no longer

⁸² Dana Nelson, “Cooper’s Leatherstocking Conversations: Identity, Friendship, and Democracy in the New Nation”, in Leland Person (ed.), *A Historical Guide to James Fenimore Cooper* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), pp. 123-155 (133).

⁸³ Jusdanis, *A Tremendous Thing*, 19; Castiglia, *Interior States*, 24.

⁸⁴ Cassandra Good, *Founding Friendships: Friendships Between Men and Women in the Early American Republic* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 3.

cohered through shared loyalty to a monarch'.⁸⁵ Framing the break from England as a refusal of 'paternal authority', friendship offered an alternative metaphor of civic association in the nascent independent nation 'reflecting the egalitarian spirit of the new republic'.⁸⁶ Just as the rhetoric of the French Revolution interlinked *liberté* and *égalité* with *fraternité*, so too was the American Revolution galvanised by the egalitarian promise of friendship – even though of course this promise only extended to white men.

Indeed, some historians have argued that so widespread and potent was the revolutionary association of male friendship and freedom that the Founders and early lawmakers sought to curtail its radical potential. As Christopher Castiglia notes, echoing the Foucaultian notion of friendship I explored earlier, 'the danger faced by the Founders was the unpredictable lines of local affiliation' arising from 'the revolutionary dispersal of social agency', and 'the unrestrained modes of social imagination they produced'.⁸⁷ According to Dana Nelson, the solution was to redirect this localised, potentially radical democratic agency toward a unifying notion of 'national manhood', an ideology that 'linked a fraternal articulation of white manhood to civic identity'.⁸⁸ The formulation of national manhood meant not replacing the local forms of masculine identity forged in male friendship, 'so much as enlisting them for and orientating them toward a unified,

⁸⁵ Jسدانى, *A Tremendous Thing*, 49; Richard Godbeer, *The Overflowing of Friendship: Love Between Men and the Creation of the American Republic* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009), 12.

⁸⁶ Holly Jackson, *American Blood: The Ends of the Family in American Literature, 1850-1900* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 4; Godbeer, *The Overflowing of Friendship*, 156.

⁸⁷ Castiglia, *Interior States*, 19.

⁸⁸ Dana Nelson, *National Manhood: Capitalist Citizenship and the Imagined Fraternity of White Men* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998), ix.

homogenous national ideal'.⁸⁹ In this process of abstraction, the more troubling implications of friendship's ambiguous mediation of the private and public spheres are revealed. In this history, friendship's egalitarian promise is deferred through a conceptual elision with a violent form of fraternity, as the radical democratic potential of the relationship transforms into a repressive ideology of control and exclusion.

4. Male Friendship and the Novel

Given the complex and prominent role male friendship played in early American political discourse, it's not surprising to see the theme widely reflected in one of the primary cultural technologies through which the nation imagined itself – that is, the novel. Caleb Crain argues that in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, 'the special task of American literature, like that of American politics, was the representation of bonds between men that kept men free – the provocation of sympathy, without any tethering to it'.⁹⁰ Ivy Schweitzer similarly suggests that 'colonial and early national writers continually drew upon classical, Christian, and Enlightenment notions of friendship to fashion their accounts of American culture and politics and to script new modes of affiliation in the new world of colonial settlements, republicanism, and liberal democracy'.⁹¹ Schweitzer's study is the most thorough recent consideration of the politics of friendship in nineteenth-century American fiction, and her critical framework is the closest to my own among existing studies, insofar as she also maintains that whilst the

⁸⁹ Nelson, *National Manhood*, x.

⁹⁰ Crain, *American Sympathy*, 2.

⁹¹ Ivy Schweitzer, *Perfecting Friendship: Politics and Affiliation in Early American Literature* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006), 22.

connection between the history of friendship and sexuality is important, we also need to understand friendship as a ‘crucial and overlooked cultural [...] institution with a complex history’, a history that she too traces back to its ‘classical sources’.⁹² Schweitzer conceptualises friendship as a ‘politically-inflected cultural practice’ that ‘continually negotiates and mediates between liberty and equality, making the tension between the two possible to sustain’.⁹³ As such, Schweitzer suggests, we can understand the ‘American democratic project as the necessary and ongoing work of “perfecting friendship”’. She thus conceives of friendship not as an ideal form of democratic affiliation but as a cultural logic through which the boundaries of freedom are articulated, contested, and revised.⁹⁴

For Schweitzer, it is in fictional portrayals of interracial male bonding that the cultural and political work of friendship is most clearly visible. She notes that throughout nineteenth-century American literature, the ‘mythology of male interracial friendship’ is connected to a ‘theoretical freedom from natural or biological obligation, social coercion, and institutional regulation’, and that literary portrayals of interracial solidarity served as ‘fictional embodiments of the Revolutionary ideal – however far from reality – enshrined in the Declaration of Independence: “all men are created equal”’.⁹⁵ Schweitzer concentrates on a set of texts that she notes were ‘elevated by later critics to “classic” status and inextricably linked with an American ideal of freedom and equality and the

⁹² Schweitzer, *Perfecting Friendship*, 9, 6.

⁹³ Schweitzer, *Perfecting Friendship*, 4.

⁹⁴ Schweitzer, *Perfecting Friendship*, 4.

⁹⁵ Schweitzer, *Perfecting Friendship*, 9, 134.

emerging nation itself'.⁹⁶ Here, she has in mind the work of mid-twentieth-century American Studies scholars, and particularly Leslie Fiedler's Freudian-charged myth-and-symbol epic, *Love and Death in the American Novel* (1960), and his earlier article "Come Back to the Raft Ag'in, Huck Honey!" (1948) – described by Ross Posnock as the 'most influential single essay ever written about American literature'.⁹⁷ The 'Fiedler Thesis', as it became known, held that in contrast to the marriage plot structuring the European literary tradition, interracial 'immaculate male love' was at the heart of the American literary canon. Fiedler conceived of the 'counter-marriages' between James Fenimore Cooper's Natty Bumppo and Chingachgook in the *Leatherstocking* novels (1827-1841), Melville's Ishmael and Queequeg in *Moby-Dick* (1851), and Twain's Huck and Jim in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884), as an 'archetype' of 'classic' American literature, 'haunting almost all our major writers of fiction'.⁹⁸ A 'protest against the gentle tyranny of home and woman', these interracial friendships represent 'fragile utopian counter-spaces' that serve as a 'liminal site for male self-fulfilment in recoil from adult responsibility associated with female-dominated culture'.⁹⁹ Fiedler followed D. H. Lawrence in suggesting that these relationships were indicative of the 'immaturity' of American culture; but Lawrence also saw in the friendship of Natty Bumppo and Chingachook a 'new relation' for the 'new world', and a 'clue' to a 'new society' away

⁹⁶ Schweitzer, *Perfecting Friendship*, 8.

⁹⁷ Ross Posnock, "Innocents at Home", *Bookforum* (Summer 2003).

⁹⁸ Leslie Fiedler, *Love and Death in the American Novel* [1960] (Illinois: Dalkey Archive Press, 2003), 349.

⁹⁹ Fiedler, *Love and Death in the American Novel*, 194; Lawrence Buell, *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the Formation of American Culture* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995), 35.

from ‘the old authority of Europe’.¹⁰⁰ Fiedler similarly sees in the relationship between Huck and Jim the democratic promise ‘of a society in which, momentarily, the irreparable breach between black and white seems healed by love’.¹⁰¹ Fiedler’s argument has been ‘bashed by critics both black and white’ for its crude Freudianism, which often strays into racism and homophobia in its mapping of the American psyche. But despite his outmoded methodology, many critics have come to recognise that Fiedler nevertheless ‘really seems to have been onto something significant about the (male) national imaginary’.¹⁰² Robyn Wiegman, for example, argues that early romances of interracial male friendship like Cooper’s provide an index not, as Fiedler argues, of ‘the mythic mass mind, but of political, social, and economic tensions underwriting masculine relations in their various historical configurations’, and as I have suggested, we can historicise such literary portrayals as part of a broader political discourse of male friendship that was prominent in the American civic imaginary.¹⁰³

Consistent with other cultural and literary histories of male friendship, Schweitzer argues that by the late nineteenth century, ‘friendship as the privileged site of sympathetic attachment became increasingly feminized, privatized, and removed from the

¹⁰⁰ D. H. Lawrence, *Studies in Classic American Literature*, ed. Ezra Greenspan, Lindeth Vasey, and John Worthen [1923] (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 58.

¹⁰¹ Fiedler, *Love and Death in the American Novel*, 353.

¹⁰² Lawrence Buell, *The Dream of the Great American Novel* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2014), 510, f.n. 12.

¹⁰³ Robyn Wiegman, *American Anatomies: Theorizing Race and Gender* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1995), 159.

public sphere of republican and democratic politics'.¹⁰⁴ Schweitzer goes on to summarise some of the broader reasons for this transformation, some of which I have already touched on:

'[Male friendship's] power as a model for civic community waned in the face of liberal individualism, privatized domesticity, and the normativity of heterosexual marriage. By the twentieth century, Western culture developed an obsession with individual selfhood and sexual desire that marginalized friendship as a cogent social practice or civic ideal [...] [M]odern secular philosophy, especially liberal thought, emphasized individual selfhood and autonomy, relegating friendship and ethics to the private realm [...] and leaving the public sphere to the dictates of self-interest and market economics'.¹⁰⁵

This historicisation of male friendship has also been influential in the rise of 'masculinity studies', which also came to prominence in the 1980s and 1990s, and which similarly sought to show how the repertoire of same-sex intimacies available to heterosexual men had narrowed in the twentieth century. Most influentially, Michael Kimmel argues that the combination of the pathologisation of homosexuality and the economisation of the male-

¹⁰⁴ Schweitzer, *Perfecting Friendship*, 10. Jusdanis similarly notes that the 'idealisation of male friendship in American society came into doubt toward the end of the nineteenth century, having been associated with sentimentality, female sensibility, and eventually homosexuality', while Godbeer also suggests that 'male friendships, that were to have played such a crucial role in sustaining republican society, would come to be seen as dangerous [...] and increasingly problematic as the century drew to a close'. *A Tremendous Thing*, 52-53; *The Overflowing of Friendship*, 196.

¹⁰⁵ Schweitzer, *Perfecting Friendship*, 10-11.

dominated public sphere contributed to making ‘homophobia, men’s fear of other men,’ the ‘animating condition of the dominant definition of masculinity in America’, an argument that was matched by sociological research that showed that most modern personal friendships among men were ‘instrumental’ and based around ‘side-by-side’ activities rather than face-to-face intimacy.¹⁰⁶

We can now more clearly see how widespread the recovery of male friendship as a cultural practice and intellectual discourse was beginning in the last decades of the twentieth century, stretching across communitarian political theory, continental philosophy, histories of nineteenth-century American literature, emotion, and culture, and informing the rise of masculinity studies. What emerges from this recovery is a sense of the dense interrelation of male friendship and politics in American history, and the rich tradition of portrayals of male friendship, particularly interracial male friendship, in American literature. This thesis analyses how recent American fiction reflects and responds to this recovery, and as such reveals the literary and philosophical genealogy of the contemporary novel’s preoccupation with the connection between liberal politics and male friendship.

Of course, in focusing exclusively on friendship among men, I risk simply reproducing the exclusionary logic of friendship that, as Derrida and others have shown, has marked its history in political thought. Three factors have ultimately determined my decision to limit this study to male friendship. Firstly and most importantly, the recent

¹⁰⁶ Michael Kimmel, “Masculinity as Homophobia: Fear, Shame, and Silence in the Construction of Gender Identity”, in Mary Gergen and Sara Davis (eds.), *Toward a New Psychology of Gender* (New York: Routledge, 1997), pp. 223-245 (237); Nardi, “Friendship”, 322.

recovery of the history of friendship that I have been surveying in this Introduction shows that male friendship has a distinct literary and philosophical lineage, and that the crucial tie between friendship and politics that this thesis explores has historically been imagined as male, a factor that has shaped not only the practice of same-sex friendship but also its place in the broader culture, whether in political philosophy or in the novel. Secondly, a specific set of historical conditions distinguish the history of male friendship in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries that require treating it as a discrete subject of inquiry, separate from female friendship and male-female friendship: the pathologisation of homosexuality and the economisation of the male-dominated public sphere. While this thesis attempts to read beyond the paradigm of sexuality and to uncover the philosophical and political roots of contemporary portrayals of male friendship, it also recognises that these factors have disciplined male intimacy in ways that have ultimately defined modern practices and representations of male friendship in ways quite different from female friendship. And thirdly and more prosaically, this thesis also addresses a long-standing gender imbalance in the critical research of same-sex friendship, wherein female friendship has until very recently been the privileged relation of study, and the fact that while there have been recent studies of ‘sisterhood’ and female friendship in contemporary fiction, there has been no such study of male friendship.¹⁰⁷

Male friendship can be exclusionary in other ways, too. Recent critics of Fiedler’s thesis have pointed out the violence that the fantasy of interracial male bonding masks, and that the dream of black-white intimacy promulgated in the nineteenth-century

¹⁰⁷ See Sharon Monteith, *Advancing Sisterhood?: Interracial Friendships in Contemporary Southern Fiction* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2000).

novel was just that, far removed from the historical reality. Critics of communitarianism have similarly noted that friendship's ambiguous mediation of the private and public spheres risks misrepresenting structural or institutional inequalities as problems to be solved at the level of personal relations, and thus entrenching political discrimination. My thesis argues that contemporary fiction recognises and engages with the limitations of male friendship as a political concept – and Chapter Three pays particular attention to the issue of race. Nevertheless, I also argue that the authors I survey take seriously the utopian possibilities of friendship, even though the utopias they imagine are often male-only spaces. Indeed, one of the through-lines connecting the nineteenth-century tradition of male bonding which Fiedler uncovered and the contemporary American novel is that male friendship continues to be a site of masculine fantasy, and one often imagined as an alternative to marriage and the other familiar scripts of heterosexual family life.

Yet crucial differences exist between the older tradition of male friendship in the American novel and its contemporary iterations. For example, whereas the interracial bonds of nineteenth-century fiction often appear, as Schweitzer puts it, as imagining a 'refuge' from history, in contemporary fiction, male friendships are imagined as embedded in history – indeed, they are imagined as staging a kind of confrontation with the historical processes defining American culture.¹⁰⁸ Rather than taking place outside of society, the male friendships I survey are portrayed as being grounded in, mediating, and a figure for a range of other social and political structures, and as existing within complex networks of other kinds of relations and affiliations, including romantic partnerships, family bonds, mentorships, loose connections, neighbourhood camaraderies, local

¹⁰⁸ Schweitzer, *Perfecting Friendship*, 136.

community, and citizenship, and that consequently the shape and meaning of these friendships is deeply contextual. This thesis argues that contemporary authors are drawn to male friendship as a figure through which to examine these interlinking forms and scales of affiliation shaping American society, and to critique their historical development within U.S. liberal political culture. In the final section of this Introduction, I explore how my concern with the novel's ability to speak to these wider processes of cultural and historical formation, and to connect these processes of political and social development to the lives of individual characters, can be situated within a broader project in literary studies aimed at assessing the changing political and historical imagination of contemporary fiction.

5. Critical Paradigms

Focusing on novels written between the mid-1980s and the 2010s – and concentrated around fiction from the turn of the millennium – this thesis intervenes in recent attempts to codify and historicise contemporary American literature. In particular, much critical energy has been expended in recent years on the task of ‘mapping’ a ‘post-postmodern aesthetics’ emerging in American fiction of the past three or four decades, in ‘the wake of postmodernism’s waning influence’.¹⁰⁹ A number of critics have begun to outline a mode of contemporary writing that defines itself in relation and distinction to what Andrew Hoberek – with the likes of John Barth, William Gaddis, and Thomas

¹⁰⁹ Adam Kelly, “Beginning with Postmodernism”, *Twentieth-Century Literature*, 75:3-4 (Fall/Winter 2011), pp. 391-422 (392); Andrew Hoberek, “Introduction: After Postmodernism”, *Twentieth-Century Literature*, 53:3 (Fall, 2007), pp. 233-247 (233).

Pynchon in mind – calls ‘high postmodernist experimentalism’.¹¹⁰ It’s become commonplace, in fact, to suggest that a strand of recent fiction has spurned ‘postmodern self-referentiality’ and ‘shift[ed] away from poststructural skepticism’, and to argue that this rejection carries with it a critique of ‘postmodernism’s detachment from the social world’ and its ‘immersion in a world of non-referential language’.¹¹¹ In particular, this movement away from postmodernism has been discerned in the ‘shifting status of irony’ – often invoked, shorthand, as postmodernism’s dominant affect – and in the emergence of a ‘new sincerity’ as a prominent contemporary cultural mode, capturing a ‘renewed wish to return ethical intent to literature’, and to ‘rehabilitate concepts such as love, communication, and responsibility’.¹¹² Others have described this mode as a ‘reconstituted ethical humanism’, or a ‘new humanism’, invested in ‘generating empathy, communal bonds, ethical and political questions’.¹¹³ Indeed, this broader link between the contemporary novel and a renewed interest in ethics and politics is crucial to most critical descriptions of post-postmodernism. Robert McLaughlin, for example, analyses recent novels attempting to ‘reenergise literature’s social mission’, while Lee Konstantinou

¹¹⁰ Hoberek, “Introduction: After Postmodernism”, 236.

¹¹¹ Robert McLaughlin, “Post-Postmodern Discontent: Contemporary Fiction and the Social World”, *symploke*, 12:1/2 (2004), pp. 53-68 (55, 58); Ian Williams, “(New) Sincerity in David Foster Wallace’s ‘Octet’”, *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*, 56:3 (2015), pp. 299-314 (301).

¹¹² Amy Hungerford, “On the Period Formerly Known as Contemporary”, *American Literary History*, 20:1-2 (Spring/ Summer 2008), pp. 410-419 (415); Adam Kelly, “Moments of Decision in Contemporary American Fiction: Roth, Auster, Eugenides”, *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*, 51:4 (2010), pp. 313-332 (328).

¹¹³ Williams, “(New) Sincerity in David Foster Wallace’s ‘Octet’”, 301; Mary K. Holland, *Succeeding Postmodernism: Language and Humanism in Contemporary American Literature* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 3, 17.

tracks the emergence of ‘postironic political commitment’ in contemporary fiction, and Caren Irr surveys the recent ‘resurgence of the political novel’.¹¹⁴

Much of the criticism in this field periodises contemporary fiction not only with reference to postmodernism, but to a particular set of historical events. In many accounts, the 1990s emerge as a key time of ‘transition’, a kind of ‘interwar decade’ bookended by the end of the Cold War and the terrorist attacks of September 11th, 2001.¹¹⁵ Though the end of the Soviet Union was meant to bring to an end the age of totalising ideological warfare and so ‘the end of history’, in fact, the period witnessed an ‘explosion of historical novels’, reflecting a broader ‘historical turn evident across American culture in the 1990s’.¹¹⁶ 9/11 has also been widely invoked as a historical watershed marking a new era in American literary culture, though its critical currency and application have waned considerably in recent years, such that the clutch of studies that appeared in the first decade after the tragedy now not only seem to overstate their case, but to do so a little opportunistically.¹¹⁷ Meanwhile, for those focusing on the interconnection of neoliberalism and the novel, the 2008 stock market crash and credit crunch have emerged

¹¹⁴ McLaughlin, “Post-Postmodern Discontent”, 55; Lee Konstantinou, *Cool Characters: Irony and American Fiction* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2016), 275; Caren Irr, *Toward the Geopolitical Novel* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013), 3.

¹¹⁵ Samuel Cohen, *After the End of History: American Fiction in the 1990s* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2009), 4. On aesthetic ‘transition’ in the 1990s, see Adam Kelly, *American Fiction in Transition: Observer-hero Narrative, the 1990s, and Postmodernism* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 4-7.

¹¹⁶ Cohen, *After the End of History*, 3.

¹¹⁷ David Brauner similarly notes that ‘taking 9/11 as the starting point of a new contemporary or post-contemporary era seems premature at best, at worst a kind of literary-critical opportunism’. *Contemporary American Fiction* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010), 3. This is not to dismiss the valuable critical work employing 9/11 as a cultural reference point, most notably Richard Gray, *After the Fall: American Literature Since 9/11* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011).

as key events, while for others, President Obama's election that same year has afforded the opportunity to assess to what extent attitudes towards race have shifted in recent decades in American culture, and how contemporary fiction has reflected this.¹¹⁸

This thesis engages with many of the themes and issues raised by this recent work on post-postmodernism. My focus on friendship as a relationship of freely-chosen association ideally modelling equality, and prefiguring a broader politics concerned with questions of community and citizenship, speaks to the focus on ethical and political commitment that other critics have identified as characteristic of contemporary fiction. I also employ some of the historical markers through which these decades have come to be periodised. In my chapter on Philip Roth, for example, I discuss the 1990s boom in historical fiction, while Chapter Three and the Conclusion analyse two recent literary depictions of Obama.

But this thesis also cuts across many of these accounts of contemporary American literary culture in unusual but important ways. Firstly, discussions of 'new sincerity' – and the associated affects of postirony, commitment, and empathy – generally focus on a group of 'post-baby-boomer' authors who grew up in the 1970s, went to college and began writing in the heyday of high postmodernism and poststructuralism – with many subsequently honing their craft on postgraduate writing courses – and who came out the

¹¹⁸ See Andrew Hoberek, "Post-recession Realism", in Mitchum Huehls and Rachel Greenwald Smith (eds.), *Neoliberalism and Contemporary Literary Culture* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2017), pp. 237-253; Ramón Saldívar, "Historical Fantasy, Speculative Realism, and Postrace Aesthetics in Contemporary American Fiction", *American Literary History*, 23:3 (Fall 2011), pp. 574-599.

other side somewhat disaffected with both formal experimentalism and literary theory.¹¹⁹ My thesis obviously complicates any argument for a generational shift in literary or intellectual outlook by bringing together writers of various ages to track the uneven development of post-1990s U.S. fiction, and to highlight the significant points of contact between writers whose careers began and developed in very different eras. Nor does this thesis tell a simple story of a transition from postmodernism to post-postmodernism – as a study on, say, Don DeLillo, David Foster Wallace, Jennifer Egan, and Ben Lerner might.¹²⁰ Roth published his first collection of stories in 1959, and despite his abiding interest in ‘metafiction’ – particularly apparent in *The Counterlife* (1986) – his literary touchstones have always been distinctly modernist.¹²¹ And yet, as I show in my discussion of his turn-of-the-century ‘American Trilogy’ (1997-2000), Roth’s later fiction also exemplifies the ‘historical turn’ of 1990s fiction said to signal the end of postmodernism. Paul Auster’s card, meanwhile, has usually been marked as postmodernist, his work said to be characterised by a linguistic play and self-referentiality

¹¹⁹ For more on the historicisation of this generation, see Williams, “(New) Sincerity in David Foster Wallace’s ‘Octet’”, 301; Adam Kelly, “‘Who Is Responsible?’: Revisiting the Radical Years in Dana Spiotta’s *Eat the Document*”, in Philip Coleman and Stephen Matterson (eds.), *Forever Young’?: The Changing Images of America* (Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag Winter, 2012), pp. 219-230 (219-220); Nicholas Dames, “The Theory Generation”, *n+1*, 14 (Summer 2012).

¹²⁰ Wallace is the key figure in discussions of ‘new sincerity’, and a number of critics have traced the influence of DeLillo on his work. Egan and Lerner, meanwhile, have become important authors in discussions of post-postmodernism. See Adam Kelly, “David Foster Wallace and the New Sincerity in American Fiction”, in David Hering (ed.), *Consider David Foster Wallace: Critical Essays* (Austin: Sideshow Media Group Press, 2010), pp. 131-146; Dames, “The Theory Generation”.

¹²¹ On Roth and postmodernism, see David Brauner, *Philip Roth* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007), 46-51.

that goes down better in Europe than at home.¹²² Yet my discussion positions Auster firmly within an American realist tradition, and suggests that attending to his fictional portrayals of male friendship brings to light the stylistic and thematic similarities between his work and Roth's.¹²³ The younger writers discussed in Chapter Three, Michael Chabon and Jonathan Lethem, more comfortably fit the bill of post-postmodernists, yet are usually only included in such discussions because of their shared interest in genre fiction.¹²⁴ My reading instead suggests that their portrayals of interracial male friendship reveal a concern with American political history – particularly the intersection of 1960s radicalism and race – that links them to an older tradition of classic American literature, even as it also gestures to a 'post-utopian' outlook and sensibility that I argue might better describe the political imagination of contemporary fiction than 'new sincerity'.

As well as post-postmodernism, another, more established critical paradigm that this thesis seeks to query is that of 'Jewish-American fiction'. All the novelists considered in the three main chapters are Jewish, although each experiences and understands what this means differently, while the label 'Jewish-American author' has been used to describe some of them more than others. Roth has always had a 'paradoxical' relationship with the label, to put it mildly.¹²⁵ Part of a 'golden-age' of writers – along with Bernard

¹²² Auster's most significant literary prizes have been European, including being made Commandeur de l'Ordre des Arts et des Lettres in 2007, while his novels tend to sell better in France than in the States.

¹²³ Two recent studies discuss Roth and Auster together. See Kelly, *American Fiction in Transition*; David Coughlan, *Ghost Writing in Contemporary American Fiction* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 61-118.

¹²⁴ See Hoberek, "Introduction: After Postmodernism", 237.

¹²⁵ Brauner, *Philip Roth*, 12.

Malamud and Saul Bellow – who were promoted, praised, and pigeonholed as Jewish-American in the 1950s and 1960s, Roth has played with, up to, and against the categorisation ever since, often insisting that he is simply an ‘American’ novelist, period.¹²⁶ For Auster, on the other hand, the issue seems hardly to have ever come up. Despite being from a similar background to Roth – born and raised in Newark, New Jersey in a lower middle-class, religiously-unobservant Jewish home – Auster’s Jewishness is very rarely mentioned in critical discussions of his work, in part it seems because his novels, unlike Roth’s, appear to ‘seldom address ethnicity or Jewish identity substantively’.¹²⁷ Lethem, meanwhile, usually describes himself as ‘half-Jewish’ – his mother was, his father wasn’t – and points to how his awareness of his Jewish identity growing up was contextual.¹²⁸ In Brooklyn, where he was born and raised in a bohemian, countercultural family, Lethem notes that he ‘made a very unconvincing Jew to other Jews – unobservant, un-Bar Mitzvah’d, attending Quaker Sunday school’, while among his father’s Protestant relatives in Kansas he was ‘hot currency’.¹²⁹ In his fiction, too, ‘Jewishness hovers enigmatically’.¹³⁰ This is epitomised in a scene halfway through Lethem’s partly-autobiographical novel, *The Fortress of Solitude* (2003), in which the protagonist Dylan Ebdus, a music journalist, excitedly calls his exasperated girlfriend,

¹²⁶ For an overview, see Brauner, *Philip Roth*, 11-15.

¹²⁷ Alys Moody, “Eden of Exiles: The Ethnicities of Paul Auster’s Aesthetics”, *American Literary History*, 28:1 (Spring 2016), pp. 69-93 (69).

¹²⁸ Jonathan Lethem, “Counter-Roth”, in Jonathan Lethem, *More Alive and Less Lonely: On Books and Writers*, ed. Christopher Boucher (London: Melville House, 2017), pp. 41-48 (43). Lethem’s self-identification is idiosyncratic – most branches of Judaism define Jewishness matrilineally.

¹²⁹ Jonathan Lethem, “My Egyptian Cousin”, *London Review of Books*, 24:24 (December 12, 2002), p. 22.

¹³⁰ Blake Eskin, “Brooklyn Dodger”, *Tablet*, October 22, 2003.

Abby, to let her know that ‘The reason the Four Tops never broke up is they all go to the same synagogue. They’re Jewish. Isn’t that kind of moving?’:

“That’s what you called to say? The Four Tops are Jewish?”

“Well—”

“Dylan, I thought you always said that the fact that you happened to be Jewish was, like, the *least* defining thing about you”.¹³¹

If Lethem’s Jewishness has to some extent been the least defining thing about the critical reception of his work – he’s still more likely to be identified as a comic book nerd or a science fiction fan than Jewish – then the same cannot be said for his close friend, Michael Chabon, who has in many ways come to be acknowledged as the leading light of the ‘revival’ of Jewish-American fiction flourishing since the late 1990s.¹³² Earlier in his career, however, Chabon’s reception was less clear-cut, such that following the publication of his second novel, *Wonder Boys* (1995), Cynthia Ozick could write that ‘he may be Jewish, and he may be a writer, but he’s not a Jewish writer’.¹³³ This perception shifted with the publication of the Pulitzer-winning *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay* (2000), a novel which, according to D. G. Myers, represented Chabon’s ‘bid to enter the tradition’ of Jewish-American literature, because it dealt prominently with

¹³¹ Jonathan Lethem, *The Fortress of Solitude* (London: Faber and Faber, 2003), 459-460.

¹³² Derek Parker Royal, “Introduction”, in Royal (ed.), *Unfinalized Moments: Essays in the Development of Contemporary Jewish American Narrative* (West Lafayette: Purdue University Press, 2011), pp. 1-11 (2).

¹³³ Quoted in Bob Goodman, “Interview with Michael Chabon”, in Brannon Costello (ed.), *Conversations with Michael Chabon* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2015), pp. 16-20 (20).

recognisable Jewish themes, such as the immigrant experience in mid-twentieth-century America and the legacies of the Holocaust.¹³⁴

The contrasting reception histories of these writers reveal that the critical application of the label ‘Jewish-American author’ has less to do with whether the author is Jewish (though that’s a necessary condition), than with the perceived Jewishness of the content or thematic preoccupations of their work. The problems with this have been fleshed out many times before, but basically come down to the following questions: what counts as Jewish content?¹³⁵ Is it limited, say, to what I have described above as ‘recognisable Jewish themes’, such as the immigrant experience and the Holocaust? And if so, who’s deciding what counts as Jewish, given the plurality of both religious and cultural Jewish identity? Secondly, as Stephen Whitfield asks, ‘How much Jewish content would count?’¹³⁶ What, in other words, is the threshold of Jewish content for a novel by a Jewish-American to be included in, say, the *Cambridge History of Jewish American*

¹³⁴ D. G. Myers, “Michael Chabon’s Imaginary Jews”, *The Sewanee Review*, 116:4 (Fall, 2008), pp. 572-588 (578). Chabon himself notes that he ‘began reconnecting to my Jewish heritage’ with *Kavalier and Clay*, and ‘culminating with *Yiddish Policemen’s Union* [2007]’. Andrew O’Hehir, “Chabon on race, sex, Obama”, *Salon*, September 20, 2012.

¹³⁵ See Hana Wirth-Nesher, ‘Defining the Indefinable: What is Jewish Literature?’, in Wirth-Nesher (ed.), *What is Jewish Literature?* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1994), pp. 3-12.

¹³⁶ See Stephen Whitfield, *In Search of Jewish American Culture* (Hanover: Brandeis University Press, 1999), 19, quoted in David Brauner, “Fifty ways to see your lover: vision and revision in the fiction of Amy Bloom”, in Axel Stähler (ed.), *Anglophone Jewish Literature* (London: Routledge, 2007), pp. 108-120 (110).

Literature (2015)?¹³⁷ Lethem himself rejects this definition of Jewish-American fiction in a speech delivered, appropriately enough, at Roth's 80th birthday party – at which Paul Auster was also in attendance – and later published as “Counter-Roth”.¹³⁸ Lethem suggests that Roth's ‘books aren't Jewish because they have Jews in them. The books are Jewish in how they won't shut up or cease contradicting themselves, they're Jewish in the way they're sprung both from harangue and from defence against harangue’ – which is a vivid description of a Roth novel, perhaps, but not of all Jewish-American literature (and not even of many of Lethem's own books).¹³⁹

This thesis does not leave behind the question of Jewish identity, but rather situates it within a broader shared cultural context from which each author's work emerges. All the authors I discuss are not only from similarly nonreligious East Coast Jewish families, but also from a similar political heritage: all are Democrats and progressives of one kind or another. What primarily brings these authors together in this thesis is a shared preoccupation with the course of American liberalism and the history of U.S. civic culture as seen from the perspective of the late twentieth and early twenty-first century, and with the novel's continuing ability to speak to and of this national context. For Roth (b. 1933) – a lifelong Democrat, and an outspoken critic of Richard Nixon,

¹³⁷ Roth has dozens of citations in the *Cambridge History*, Chabon a handful, and Auster and Lethem just one each: Michael Wood groups the latter two together with Susan Sontag, Richard Price, and Jay Cantor as ‘Jewish American writers who do not advertise their Jewishness in any particular way – nor do they deny it, of course – and who seem to me to be producing fiction that is among the most interesting work of its time, by any standards’. Wood, “New Voices, New Challenges 1970–2000”, in Hana Wirth-Nesher (ed.), *The Cambridge History of Jewish American Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), pp. 144-162 (156).

¹³⁸ For an account of the party – held at Newark Public Library – see Brett Ashley Kaplan, “Do You Just Love Philip Roth?”, *Studies in American Jewish Literature*, 32:2 (2013), pp. 187-191.

¹³⁹ Lethem, “Counter-Roth”, 43.

George W. Bush and Donald Trump – that means returning to the political culture of the Popular Front – a culture that he shows had a strong Jewish inflection – and to the strong ties of patriotic fervour and fraternal feeling that captured the Left in the 1940s and early 1950s.¹⁴⁰ For Auster (b. 1947) – who took part in anti-Vietnam protests as a student at Columbia University – that means returning circuitously to the 1960s via the Reaganite 1980s, when the principles and values of the counterculture seemed to have been utterly betrayed.¹⁴¹ For Chabon (b. 1963) and Lethem (b. 1964), meanwhile – both of whom, as I discuss at length in Chapter Three, grew up in experimental and politically progressive households – that means returning, directly or indirectly, to the late 1960s and 1970s, a time that fostered and frustrated hopes for a shift in the relationship between the public and private spheres, and that invested in the idea that intimate relationships might broach the dividing lines of class and race.

As I suggested at the beginning of this Introduction, the legacies of the New Left are also a concern in Norman Rush's *Subtle Bodies*, a novel that, like those discussed in this thesis' main chapters, is drawn to male friendship to think through a broader set of questions regarding civic life and political community – a connection that also preoccupies the novel discussed in the Conclusion, Benjamin Markovits's *You Don't Have to Live Like This* (2015). If I had been concerned with literary portrayals of male

¹⁴⁰ On Nixon, see Roth's political satire, *Our Gang* (New York: Random House, 1971); on Bush, see Roth, "Bush is too horrendous to be forgotten", *Der Spiegel*, February 8, 2008; on Trump, see Judith Thurman, "Philip Roth E-mails on Trump", *The New Yorker*, January 30, 2017. In situating Roth's work within an American liberal tradition, I follow Anthony Hutchison and Andy Connolly; see Hutchison, *Writing the Republic: Liberalism and Morality in American Political Fiction* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007); Connolly, *Philip Roth and the American Liberal Tradition* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2017).

¹⁴¹ See Paul Auster, "The Accidental Rebel", *New York Times*, April 23, 2008, A21.

friendship *per se*, rather than with the relationship between friendship and liberal politics, then I may well have been drawn to other authors. Jonathan Franzen's *Freedom* (2010), for example, is often described as a 'domestic drama' in the mould of Franzen's earlier novel, *The Corrections* (2001), when in fact its narrative is driven by a kind of love triangle between Walter Berglund, his wife Patty, and Walter's friend and old college roommate, Richard Katz.¹⁴² The novel's follow-up, *Purity* (2015), meanwhile, is a globe-trotting saga of internet surveillance, leaks, and espionage centring around the Julian Assange-esque mastermind Andrea Wolf. But it is also a story of Wolf's 'old yearning' for the friendship of Tom Aberant, the journalist who will eventually expose his operation.¹⁴³ Jay McInerney's *The Last of the Savages* (1996), David Guterson's *The Other* (2008), and Ben Dolnick's *At the Bottom of Everything* (2013) are all first-person accounts of a relationship between a somewhat ordinary or under-achieving writer or reporter (the narrator) and their mercurial, enigmatic, and possibly psychologically unstable friend who goes missing, and therefore adhere to a narrative structure I explore in Roth and Auster's work and that Lawrence Buell calls 'observer-hero narratives'.¹⁴⁴ Perhaps the most-hyped contemporary novel about male friendship is Hanya Yanagihara's surprise hit, the very big *A Little Life* (2015), which chronicles the lives of a group of

¹⁴² See Matthew Spektor, "Mr. Sublimation", *Los Angeles Review of Books*, May 4, 2001. I discuss the influence of Roth's work on Franzen's in "Correcting Philip: Reading Franzen Reading Roth", *Philip Roth Studies*, 13:2 (Fall 2017), pp. 21-38.

¹⁴³ Jonathan Franzen, *Purity* (London: Fourth Estate, 2015), 494.

¹⁴⁴ See Lawrence Buell, "Observer-Hero Narrative", *Texas Studies in Literature and Language*, 21 (1979), pp. 93-111; Kelly, *American Fiction in Transition*, 2-15.

friends through post-college adulthood, and is notable as a mainstream portrayal of the families of choice that emerge through ‘queer friendships’.¹⁴⁵

But what most distinctly connects the novels discussed here is a preoccupation with the interrelation of male friendship and a broader set of political issues concerning the structure and practice of community and civic life in America. I have been exploring some of the ways in which we might want to complicate our sense of the group of authors I focus on as Jewish-American writers, and it would certainly be a mistake to pigeonhole the preoccupation with the connection between friendship, politics, and the novel that I have outlined as a particularly Jewish-American theme. Nevertheless, it’s perhaps not surprising that a group of writers whose affiliation with mainstream American literary history has been consistently problematised should be so drawn to the trope of male friendship. After all, we have seen that male friendship has long been the privileged figure through which bonds of citizenship and national identity have been imagined and forged in America and, according to Leslie Fiedler (himself of course a Jewish-American writer), male friendship represents the central, distinguishing archetype of the nation’s classic literature. This brings me finally to the third critical paradigm into which this thesis intervenes, the global turn in American Studies. The last two decades have seen the elaboration of scales of literary and historical critique that have greatly expanded the reach of American Studies, with a movement toward transatlantic, hemispheric, and global frames of analysis.¹⁴⁶ Yet for all the novelists I discuss in the chapters that follow,

¹⁴⁵ Garth Greenwell, “*A Little Life*: The Great Gay Novel Might Be Here”, *The Atlantic*, May 31, 2015.

¹⁴⁶ For an overview, see James English and Ted Underwood, “Shifting Scales: Between Literature and Social Science”, *Modern Language Quarterly*, 77:3 (September 2016), pp. 277-295.

the nation remains the defining scale of reference, and the stories of male friendship I analyse always gesture to a national context. Indeed, for all these novelists, male friendship becomes a key trope through which they not only explore their own hyphenated American identities, but also consciously place their work in dialogue with a distinctly American literary tradition.

I begin by looking at two novels from Roth's 'American Trilogy', a series of historical fictions that have been read as part of a broader 'national turn' in Roth's later work, and analyse how the novels' attempts to address the nation are also framed as attempts to address a single male friend.¹⁴⁷ Drawing on the anthropology of the gift, I then explore the relations of exchange and alliance born of generosity and obligation in Paul Auster's fiction, arguing that these often haphazard networks are part of Auster's broader investigation into the forms of community and association structuring American society. Chapter Three then turns to Jonathan Lethem's *The Fortress of Solitude* (2003) and Michael Chabon's *Telegraph Avenue* (2012), two sprawling neighbourhood novels in which the central interracial male friendships are freighted with the legacies of 1960s and 1970s radicalism.

In this study of male friendship, we see new, often surprising affinities emerging between writers of different generations who are rarely discussed together. All these authors in fact turn to the concept of male friendship to explore the question of affinity itself, whether between works of literature, between writers and their readers, or between

¹⁴⁷ Brian Cheyette, *Diasporas of the Mind: Jewish and Postcolonial Writing and the Nightmare of History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013).

citizens, and to reflect on how these different relationships might model and inform one another. For the novelists discussed in the chapters that follow, male friendship remains a crucial and evocative figure through which to scrutinise the traffic between the personal and the political, between the novel and the wider social world, and to consider the kinds of intimacies and solidarities that make and shape American life.

CHAPTER ONE

‘The Love Alternative’:

Male Friendship, Old Age, and the Making of History in Philip Roth’s *I Married a Communist* (1998) and *The Human Stain* (2000)

1. ‘the joining of the public and the private’

‘I knew the phone would be off the hook the day Kakutani’s review of IMAC [*I Married a Communist*] appeared’, Jack Miles wrote in a letter faxed to his friend, Philip Roth, on October 6th, 1998.¹ In that morning’s *New York Times*, the paper’s chief book reviewer had judged Roth’s latest novel to be lacking the ‘capacious social vision’ of his previous book, the Pulitzer-winning *American Pastoral* (1997).² *I Married a Communist* was, Michiko Kakutani wrote, a ‘smaller, less ambitious work’ that remained ‘hogtied to a narrow, personal agenda’; while the novel ‘purports to do for the cold war period what [*American Pastoral*] did for the era of Vietnam’, the book was in fact Roth’s ‘revenge on his former wife, Claire Bloom’, for her tell-all memoir of their marriage, *Leaving a Doll’s House* (1996). But what Kakutani was ‘incapable of appreciating’, according to Miles,

¹ Jack Miles, Letter to Roth dated October 6, 1998, “Jack Miles Correspondence”, Box 24, Folder 13, Philip Roth Papers, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. According to the “Chronology” included in the Library of America editions of Roth’s work, Miles – a professor of religion and author of *God: A Biography* (1995) – first wrote to Roth in 1974, after reading Roth’s essay, “Imagining Jews”. This began a long correspondence and a ‘lasting intellectual friendship’. The Library of Congress Papers include fourteen folders of letters from Miles, dating from 1974 to 1999 – among the most extensive of Roth’s correspondences. The letters also reveal that Miles is Roth’s literary executor.

² Michiko Kakutani, “Manly Giants vs. Zealots and Scheming Women”, *New York Times*, October 6, 1998, C7. Kakutani had praised *American Pastoral*; see “A Postwar Paradise Shattered From Within”, *New York Times*, April 15, 1997, C11.

was the novel's 'portrayal of male friendship': 'Friendship between men' is 'a common subject, but, as I believe I have said to you once already, friendship between the older and the oldest [...] is not a common subject at all in fiction'. Back in June of that year, Miles had written to Roth to say that he thought *I Married a Communist*'s 'picture of friendship between an ageing man and an old man' one of its great strengths.³ The intimacy between the novel's two narrators – Nathan Zuckerman, Roth's perennial 'alter brain', now in his early sixties, and his former high school English teacher, ninety-year-old Murray Ringold – reminded Miles of the father-son relationship at the centre of Roth's memoir, *Patrimony* (1991).⁴ 'But', he acknowledged, 'there are differences, obviously. The old student and the old teacher are not just looking back together. Each is looking back through the other's eyes'.⁵

Kakutani's negative appraisal of *I Married a Communist* accords with the critical consensus that has emerged around the novel, while also reflecting a curious disjuncture within the broader reception history of the American Trilogy. As Philipp Löffler observes, while the series 'became a contemporary classic within the first years after its completion [...] when critics speak about the trilogy', they in fact 'mostly mean *American Pastoral* and *The Human Stain* [2000], not knowing exactly what to do with *I Married a Communist*'.⁶ It is by now a 'critical commonplace' that Roth began a 'career resurgence'

³ Miles, Letter to Roth dated June 29, 1998, Box 24, Folder 13, Philip Roth Papers.

⁴ Charles McGrath, "Zuckerman's Alter Brain: An Interview with Philip Roth", *New York Times Book Review*, May 7, 2000, p. 8.

⁵ Miles, Letter to Roth dated June 29, 1998.

⁶ Philipp Löffler, *Pluralist Desires: Contemporary Historical Fiction and the End of the Cold War* (Rochester: Camden House, 2015), 97.

with the trilogy's publication.⁷ 'Much celebrated for Roth's turn toward social issues', the trilogy was praised for moving 'beyond the narrow psychosexual concerns' of his earlier work and instead turning 'outward (and backward) to consider America's transformation during the postwar era'.⁸ The trilogy seemed to mark 'something of a departure for Roth, because never before had his work so clearly portrayed the effects that history has on an individual's possibility for self-creation'.⁹ And although 'Roth's fiction has always been characterised by the tension between the individual capacity for self-determination and the deterministic forces of history', in the trilogy he seemed for the first time to 'write the individual into the fabric of history'.¹⁰ While David Foster Wallace had once grouped Roth with John Updike and Norman Mailer as among the 'Great Male Narcissists' of postwar fiction – dismissing them as writers who 'have little relevance to contemporary questions of how to promote a good community' – the trilogy seemed to establish Roth as a 'social novelist'.¹¹ Addressing the central 'historical moments in postwar American life', the three novels cumulatively offer a panoramic and 'intensely disenchanted view of

⁷ David Gooblar, *The Major Phases of Philip Roth* (London: Continuum, 2011), 131.

⁸ Mark Shechner, "Roth's American Trilogy", in Timothy Parrish (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Philip Roth* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp. 142-158 (142); Matthew Shipe, "Exit Ghost and the Politics of 'Late Style'", *Philip Roth Studies*, 5:2 (Fall 2009), pp. 189-204 (191).

⁹ Timothy Parrish, "Becoming Black: Zuckerman's Bifurcating Self in *The Human Stain*", in Derek Parker Royal (ed.), *Philip Roth: New Perspectives on an American Author* (Westport: Praeger, 2005), pp. 209-224 (209).

¹⁰ David Brauner, *Philip Roth* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007), 148; Derek Parker Royal, "Pastoral Dreams and National Identity in *American Pastoral* and *I Married a Communist*", in Royal (ed.), *Philip Roth: New Perspective on an American Author*, pp. 185-208 (186).

¹¹ David Foster Wallace, "John Updike, Champion Literary Phallocrat, Drops One; Is This Finally the End for Magnificent Narcissists?", *New York Observer*, October 12, 1997, p. 3; Patrick Hayes, *Philip Roth: Fiction and Power* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 218; Pia Masiero, *Philip Roth and the Zuckerman Books: The Making of a Storyworld* (Amherst: Cambria Press, 2011), 14.

the course of postwar liberalism'.¹² The trilogy has been widely read, then, as marking a significant 'historical' and 'national' turn in Roth's fiction, and Roth himself has suggested that it reveals 'something that had never been freed in my work before [...] the joining of the public and the private'.¹³

As Löffler intimates, however, the rapid canonisation of the American Trilogy has really rested on the reception of *American Pastoral* and *The Human Stain*; the 'middle' novel of the trilogy has been far from 'central' to most critical accounts.¹⁴ In this chapter, I argue that this oversight is due in part to the fact that most discussions of the novel follow Kakutani in overlooking the male friendship that structures *I Married a Communist*. Miles suggests that by missing the friendship between Nathan and Murray, Kakutani misses something important about the novel's historical imagination, for the novel's analysis of the political culture of the late 1940s and early 1950s is very deliberately shown to emerge from a conversation between friends, whose sense of the

¹² McGrath, "Zuckerman's Alter-Brain", 8; Sean McCann, *A Pinnacle of Feeling: American Literature and Presidential Government* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), 187.

¹³ David Remnick, "Philip Roth at 70" [Interview], Dir. Deborah Lee, *BBC4* (May 7, 2003). On whether the trilogy represents an historical turn in Roth's work, see Laura Tanenbaum, "Reading Roth's Sixties", *Studies in American Jewish Literature*, 23 (2004), pp. 41-54 (41-44); Gooblar, *Major Phases*, 131-134. On the 'national turn' in Roth's later fiction, see Brian Cheyette, *Diasporas of the Mind: Jewish and Postcolonial Writing and the Nightmare of History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013), 161-203 (161).

¹⁴ On Roth's canonisation, see Cheyette, *Diasporas of the Mind*, 161; David Brauner, "Essay Review: The Canonization of Philip Roth", *Studies in the Novel*, 39:4 (Winter 2007), pp. 481-488 (481-482). The way in which the novel is often excised from critical treatments of the trilogy is demonstrated by a collection of essays by leading Roth scholars edited by Debra Shostak, *Philip Roth: American Pastoral, The Human Stain, The Plot Against America* (London: Continuum, 2011). Similarly, the novel seems to be omitted from some undergraduate teaching by Roth scholars. In a syllabus for a semester-long course on Roth's work, Derek Parker Royal devotes three weeks to the trilogy: two to *American Pastoral*, and one to *The Human Stain*. See Royal, "ENG 522 – Major Figures in American Literature, Spring 2005: Philip Roth".

past and sense of themselves changes when seen ‘through the other’s eyes’. Rather than a work of straightforward historical realism, then, *I Married a Communist* is concerned with modes of historical sense-making, a preoccupation it shares with a number of historical fictions written after the so-called end of history.¹⁵ But its focus on friendship marks it as a novel of the 1990s in other ways, too. Analysing it alongside the resurgent interest in civic friendship within late twentieth-century communitarian critiques of liberal individualism, and contextualising it by contemporaneous revisionist histories of the Popular Front, I read Roth’s depiction of male friendship as intervening in his broader survey of ‘the course of postwar liberalism’, and as integral to his exploration of ‘the joining of the public and the private’. That is to say, I argue that Nathan and Murray’s friendship has a politics, a politics that complicates existing accounts of the novel’s portrayal of the sentimental civic culture of the Popular Front.¹⁶

Miles’s letter also notes that depictions of late-in-life male friendship are rare in fiction. As I suggested in my Introduction, when we think of literary portrayals of male friendship, we likely still think of Leslie Fiedler’s heroic ‘buddies’, and his sense of classic American fiction as an immature literature of ‘boys’ books’.¹⁷ But in the American Trilogy – a work clearly in dialogue with nineteenth-century American literature – friendship between men belongs to the experience of old age, rather than that of youthful

¹⁵ See Samuel Cohen, *After the End of History: American Fiction in the 1990s* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2009), 1-30; Löffler, *Pluralist Desires*, 1-19.

¹⁶ Two studies have addressed the novel’s political and historical context in detail. See Anthony Hutchison, *Writing the Republic: Liberalism and Morality in American Political Fiction* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 96-112; Andy Connolly, *Philip Roth and the American Liberal Tradition* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2017), 61-112.

¹⁷ Leslie Fiedler, *Love and Death in the American Novel* [1960] (Illinois: Dalkey Archive Press, 2003), 352.

innocence.¹⁸ The concluding volume of the trilogy, *The Human Stain*, is also the story of a friendship between two men at different stages of old age, and in the final part of this chapter, I will argue that its central relationship – between Nathan and Classics professor Coleman Silk – is similarly important to understanding the novel’s historical imagination. On the surface, Nathan’s narrative task in the novel appears to be that of an observer, piecing together the facts of Coleman’s personal history. But it quickly becomes apparent that his role extends far beyond this: often, we see Nathan imagining scenes, inventing conversations, and misconstruing events.¹⁹ His narrative position seems similar in *American Pastoral*, where he more readily admits that his portrayal of his old high-school football idol, Seymour ‘Swede’ Levov, is largely fictional: by ‘gazing into [the Swede’s] life’, Nathan writes near the book’s opening, ‘I dreamed a realistic chronicle’.²⁰ Nathan’s portraits of the Swede and Coleman respectively might seem to be further variations in his ongoing project of vicarious ‘counterliving’ – his trademark narrative art of conjuring alternate histories and fictive biographies of those around him through a high-wire combination of invention and impersonation.²¹ Versions of counterliving play out

¹⁸ ‘Placing Zuckerman in the Berkshires, home to Hawthorne, Melville and Thoreau, Roth moves himself [...] into the tradition of the American Renaissance writers’. Catherine Morley, *The Quest for Epic in Contemporary American Fiction: John Updike, Philip Roth, and Don DeLillo* (London: Routledge, 2009), 86.

¹⁹ A ‘close reading suggests that much of what transpires is just as much a matter of the narrator’s imagination as it is of recorded fact’. Derek Parker Royal, “Plotting the Frames of Subjectivity: Identity, Death, and Narrative in Philip Roth’s *The Human Stain*”, *Contemporary Literature*, 47:1 (Spring 2006), pp. 114-140 (118).

²⁰ Philip Roth, *American Pastoral* [1997] (London: Vintage, 2000), 87. On this shift of focalisation, see Gary Chase Johnson, “The Presence of Allegory: The Case of Philip Roth’s *American Pastoral*”, *Narrative*, 12:3 (October 2004), pp. 233-248 (244).

²¹ I borrow the term ‘counterliving’ from Ross Posnock; see *Philip Roth’s Rude Truth: The Art of Immaturity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), 15. Debra Shostak argues that the idea of the counterlife is integral to Roth’s ‘dialogic’ imagination; see Shostak, *Philip Roth: Countertexts, Counterlives* (Columbia: University of Southern Carolina Press, 2004), 6-19.

throughout the ‘Zuckerman Books’.²² In *The Ghost Writer* (1979), twenty-three-year-old Nathan, staying at the home of his literary idol E. I. Lonoff, imagines that the writer’s assistant, Amy Bellette, is in fact Anne Frank (and imagines himself married to her); in *The Counterlife* (1986), meanwhile, the recursive, reiterative narratives of the lives (and apparent deaths) of Nathan and his brother Henry overlap such that their stories become ‘twinnishly’ entwined.²³ ‘We are all the invention of each other’, Nathan suggests in that novel, ‘everybody a conjuration conjuring everyone else’.²⁴

But while it’s true that Nathan’s ‘manipulative and even mischievous side has carried over’ into the trilogy from the previous Zuckerman books, *The Human Stain* isn’t simply another experiment in counterliving; and this becomes clearer when we read the novel alongside *I Married a Communist*, the book that immediately precedes it in the trilogy, rather than *American Pastoral*.²⁵ It is Nathan’s friendship with Coleman, I argue, that gives the novel its particular (and peculiar) form, and it’s their relationship that comes to define the novel’s engagement with history. I suggest that we might re-read the novel not only as a ‘national epic’, but as an elegy for, and a bearing witness to, a singular, personal friendship – indeed, part of what interests Roth in the trilogy is the connection between these two very different scales of historical imagination and narrative

²² The Zuckerman books are: *The Ghost Writer* (1979) *Zuckerman Unbound* (1981), *The Anatomy Lesson* (1983), *The Prague Orgy* (1985) (collected as *Zuckerman Bound* in 1989), *The Counterlife* (1986), ‘The American Trilogy’, and *Exit Ghost* (2007). Zuckerman also appears as the creation of another of Roth’s novelist-narrators, Peter Tarnopol, in *My Life as a Man* (1974).

²³ Philip Roth, *The Counterlife* [1986] (London: Jonathan Cape, 1987), 46.

²⁴ Roth, *The Counterlife*, 145.

²⁵ Royal, “Plotting the Frames”, 118.

focus.²⁶ Thinking about the demands made by friendship in each of these novels – and by the death of the friend in particular – enables a reframing of current critical conceptions of the trilogy’s treatment of American identity and history; if these novels address the nation, I argue that they do so by first addressing the friend.

Exploring the role of male friendship in these novels also challenges much of the existing commentary on masculinity and gender in Roth’s oeuvre. While many critics might agree with Roth’s own assessment that ‘the lives of men has been my subject’, few have judged same-sex friendship to be important to his portrayal of male identity.²⁷ Roth has long been ‘caricatured as a great propagandist of patriarchy’, and most critiques of gender relations in his work have focused on his depictions of women, and the repeated charge that his fiction is misogynistic.²⁸ More recently, however, a number of critics have suggested that Roth’s work ‘can appear as much a prescient critique of misogynist attitudes as a purveyor of them’, because his novels knowingly explore and often satirise ‘the acute, even hysterical, sensitivity of the masculine self to its own insecurity and vulnerability’.²⁹ Many of Roth’s male characters in fact seem to be ensnared rather than emboldened by what Peter Tarnopol, the protagonist of *My Life as a Man* (1974), calls

²⁶ Morley, *The Quest for Epic*, 98.

²⁷ Quoted in Shostak, *Philip Roth*, 21.

²⁸ Elizabeth Moran, “‘Death, Determination and ‘the end of ends?’: Nathan Zuckerman from *My Life as a Man* to *Exit Ghost*”, *Philip Roth Studies*, 11:2 (Fall 2015), pp. 5-30 (8). For an overview, see David Gooblar, “Introduction: Roth and Women”, *Philip Roth Studies*, 8:1 (Spring 2012), pp. 7-15.

²⁹ Debra Shostak, “Roth and Gender”, in Parrish (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Philip Roth*, pp. 111-126 (112); Velichka Ivanova, “My Own Foe from the Other Gender: (Mis)representing Women in *The Dying Animal*”, *Philip Roth Studies*, 8:1 (Spring 2012), pp. 31-44 (32). See also Maggie McKinley, *Masculinity and the Paradox of Violence in American Fiction, 1950-75* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), 139-168.

‘the myth of male inviolability’.³⁰ ‘Under the terms of the myth’, Debra Shostak writes, ‘a man’s sense of power relative to other men is key’ to attaining a stable sense of male identity, because as Michael Kimmel notes, ‘masculinity in America’ is defined above all by ‘homophobia’.³¹ In this defensive conception of masculinity, ‘affection represents a threat to the male self’, leaving little room for same-sex friendship.³²

Indeed, often in Roth’s earlier work, encounters between men seem fraught with suspicion and not a little homosexual panic. This plays out in Roth’s recurrent interest in doubles, or ‘secret sharers’ – the Conradian term used in *Zuckerman Unbound* (1981) to describe the uncanny Alvin Pepler, a motormouth ex-marine and aspiring writer who claims that Nathan has stolen details from his personal life for his novels.³³ Nathan feels a certain ‘sentimental connection’ to his fellow Newarker, but set in 1969 against the backdrop of recent political assassinations, their relationship comes to seem increasingly insidious when Nathan suspects Alvin of being behind a plot to kidnap his mother.³⁴ Their

³⁰ Philip Roth, *My Life as a Man* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1974), 173.

³¹ Shostak, “Roth and Gender”, 111; Michael Kimmel, “Masculinity as Homophobia: Fear, Shame, and Silence in the Construction of Gender Identity”, in Mary Gergen and Sara Davis (eds.), *Toward a New Psychology of Gender* (New York: Routledge, 1997), pp. 223-245 (237), quoted in Shostak, “Gender and Roth”, 111.

³² Ivanova, “My Own Foe from the Other Gender”, 39.

³³ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick makes the link between doppelgängers and homosexual panic in her discussion of Henry James and the ‘paranoid Gothic’; see *Epistemology of the Closet*, [1990] (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), 186. On doubles in Roth’s work, see Josh Cohen, “Roth’s Doubles”, in Parrish (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Philip Roth*, pp. 82-93. ‘Secret sharer’ alludes to the Joseph Conrad short story of the same title, often read as being about homosexual desire; see for example Robert Hodges, “Deep Fellowship: Homosexuality and Male Bonding in the Life and Fiction of Joseph Conrad”, *Journal of Homosexuality*, 4:4 (1979), pp. 379-393 (384-387).

³⁴ Philip Roth, *Zuckerman Bound: A Trilogy and Epilogue* [1985] (London: Vintage, 1998), 144.

encounter is laced with a certain sexual threat, too, that emerges through the mock-Shakespearean motif of a handkerchief. When they first meet at a diner, Nathan offers his handkerchief to Alvin, which he takes to ‘wip[e] his mouth’.³⁵ The trope recurs during Nathan’s date with actress Caesara O’Shea, when he leafs through her copy of Kierkegaard’s *On the Life of an Actress* and reads aloud, ‘she knows that her name is on everyone’s lips, even when they wipe their mouths with their handkerchiefs!’. Later, Nathan receives a package from Alvin containing his handkerchief, now ‘damp’ and ‘matted’ with a ‘stale acrid odour he had no difficulty identifying’.³⁶

A perverse, comic love triangle of sorts emerges, then, between Nathan, Caesara, and Alvin – akin to that later staged between ‘Philip Roth’, his doppelgänger Moishe Pipik, and Pipik’s lover Jinx, in *Operation Shylock* (1993).³⁷ Roth’s use of doubles and triangles in each of these novels confirmed for some readers the commonplace criticism that his work is solipsistic.³⁸ But these intense, uneasy male relationships might also be read as forming part of a broader strain of ‘homosocial discourse’ running through Roth’s oeuvre. Drawing on Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s suggestion of the ‘potential unbrokenness of a continuum between homosocial and homosexual’ desire, David Brauner argues that ‘Roth’s representation of male sexuality is more complex, ambiguous, and ambivalent

³⁵ Roth, *Zuckerman Bound*, 152.

³⁶ Roth, *Zuckerman Bound*, 198, 258.

³⁷ ‘[T]he Zuckerman-Pepler relationship in many ways appears to be a direct precursor of the connection [between Philip and Pipik]’. Ann Basu, *States of Trial: Manhood in Philip Roth’s Postwar America* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), 21.

³⁸ See for example Robert Alter, “The Spritzer: Review of *Operation Shylock*”, *The New Republic*, April 5, 1993, p. 31. For a subtler reading of Roth’s doubles, see Mark McGurl, *The Program Era: Postwar Fiction and the Rise of Creative Writing* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009), 51-55.

than has been generally recognised'.³⁹ Brauner analyses an example of what Sedgwick, following René Girard, calls the 'triangulation' of desire, in Roth's first novel *Letting Go* (1962), between the narrator Gabe Wallach, his friend Paul Herz, and Paul's wife, Libby.⁴⁰ Gabe is writing his doctoral thesis on Henry James, and their interweaving relationships play out under the sign of 'the Master': a key symbol throughout the novel is Gabe's copy of *The Portrait of a Lady*, which passes between all three characters.⁴¹ In *The Ghost Writer* – a novel modelled in part on James's 'artist tales' – Roth offers a variation on this theme.⁴² We find Nathan reading Lonoff's copy of James's short story, "The Middle Years" (1893), which portrays a triangular relationship between the ageing novelist Dencombe, his admirer Dr. Hugh, and the doctor's patient, the Countess.⁴³ The situation parallels the emerging relationship between Nathan, Lonoff – whom, with an 'amorous impulse', Nathan has a sudden urge to kiss after their first evening together – and Amy Bellette.⁴⁴ And although the overt Jamesian influence falls away in Roth's later

³⁹ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), 1; Brauner, "Queering Philip Roth: Homosocial Discourse in 'An Actor's Life for Me,' *Letting Go*, *Sabbath's Theater*, and the 'American Trilogy'", *Studies in the Novel*, 48:1 (Spring 2016), pp. 86-106 (88).

⁴⁰ René Girard, *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel: Self and Other in Literary Structure*, trans. Yvonne Freccero (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), 1-52; Sedgwick, *Between Men*, 26. Brauner traces a strain of homosocial desire in Anglo-Jewish fiction more broadly in *Post-War Jewish Fiction: Ambivalence, Self-Explanation and Transatlantic Connections* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2001), 74-112.

⁴¹ On *Portrait's* broader significance in the novel, see Hayes, *Philip Roth*, 63-71. On the importance of James to Roth and Jewish-American intellectuals in the 1950s, see Jonathan Freedman, *The Temple of Culture: Assimilation and Anti-Semitism in Literary Anglo-America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 117-154; Gooblar, *Major Phases*, 38-44.

⁴² See Hana Wirth-Nesher, "The Artist Tales of Philip Roth", *Prooftexts*, 3:3 (September 1983), pp. 263-272 (268-269).

⁴³ On 'homosocial pleasure' in "The Middle Years", see Leland Person, *Henry James and the Suspension of Masculinity* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003), 139-149 (142).

⁴⁴ Roth, *Zuckerman Bound*, 54. See Brauner, "Queering Roth", 104, fn.7.

work, this connection between masculine intimacy and literary influence remains strong, as we shall see in *I Married a Communist*'s succession of male mentors and teachers.

Brauner's emphasis on the plurality and fluidity of male sexuality in Roth's oeuvre adds nuance to existing accounts of gender and desire in his work. In particular, viewing a relationship like Nathan and Lonoff's as homosocial counters the tendency to read any intimacy between a younger and older man in Roth's fiction as filial – a tendency that, as Norman Rush also noted, has often obscured literary representations of male friendship from critical analysis. Nathan often does this himself, of course; in *The Ghost Writer*, having fallen out with his own father – 'the first of my fathers' – he seeks 'patriarchal validation elsewhere', and hopes to prove himself worthy of being Lonoff's 'spiritual son'.⁴⁵ But as the Zuckerman books progress, we see that the father-son relationship becomes comically overdetermined, and something of a worn-out Jewish joke. 'Are you *always* fighting with your father?' asks one of Nathan's girlfriends in *The Anatomy Lesson* (1983), flipping through the books on his shelves and noticing that 'every single line about a father is underlined'.⁴⁶ In this meta-critical moment, Roth underlines that his readers shouldn't do the same with his books. There's a world of masculine intimacy in Roth's work beyond the Oedipal drama.

In this chapter, however, I also argue that if we think of the late-in-life male friendships Nathan shares with Murray and Coleman as only facets of a broader 'queering' of Roth, or as relationships along a continuum of homosocial desire in his

⁴⁵ Roth, *Zuckerman Bound*, 57, 7.

⁴⁶ Roth, *Zuckerman Bound*, 370. Emphasis in original.

novels, we miss much of what is important about these affiliations to Roth's fiction and his broader project of 'joining the public and the private'. In my Introduction, I argued that it is a mistake to subsume the history of friendship within the history of sexuality. To do so not only obscures friendship's discrete philosophical and political genealogy, but also engenders an impoverished account of the novel's capacity for exploring varieties of intimacy and attachment beyond the pull of sexual desire. And in Roth's case, ignoring the late-in-life male friendships at the centre of *I Married a Communist* and *The Human Stain* limits our understanding of the trilogy's historical and political imagination. Ross Posnock suggests that the later Zuckerman books are 'less defensively homophobic' than the earlier novels, and are instead preoccupied with the elaboration of 'modes of being that cultivate some degree of intimacy' beyond the din of what Nathan calls 'the sexual caterwaul'.⁴⁷ In the trilogy, we learn that Nathan has been left impotent and incontinent from prostate cancer surgery and, although he is keen to emphasise that his decision to retreat to a secluded cabin in the Berkshires preceded his diagnosis, the 'cancer blows' have intensified his isolation.⁴⁸ I would argue that, as sexual desire begins to flicker and fade (though it is by no means extinguished) in these later Zuckerman novels, the possibility emerges of other kinds of same-sex intimacy, and with them, other kinds of storytelling. In old age, male friendship appears, if only briefly, to offer an alternative to isolation, and to thwarted desire. *Eros* wanes in these novels, we might say, but Nathan's capacity for *philia* waxes.

⁴⁷ Posnock, *Philip Roth's Rude Truth*, 48; Philip Roth, *The Human Stain* (London: Vintage, 2000), 37.

⁴⁸ Roth, *The Human Stain*, 43.

2. 'What is it, this genealogy that isn't genetic?'

Set in the late 1940s and early 1950s, and pivoting around Henry Wallace's disastrous campaign as a third party candidate in the 1948 presidential election, *I Married a Communist* tracks the extravagant rise and fall of Ira Ringold, aka 'Iron Rinn', famed radio actor, vociferous Wallace supporter, and Communist firebrand.⁴⁹ Ira is a high-profile casualty of McCarthyism, although his downfall is precipitated more directly by his vengeful wife, the Hollywood star Eve Frame, whose ghostwritten schlock memoir, *I Married a Communist*, 'reveals' her husband to be a Communist agent – as well as a serial philanderer, the true reason for her hostility.⁵⁰ 'The most unreflective of all Roth's unreflective characters', Ira is a strident rabble-rouser, but far from the intellectually agile political tactician Frame frames him as.⁵¹ If the former ditch-digger hadn't been politicised during his time in the army – under the influence of his ideological mentor, the Irish Communist Johnny O'Day – Ira may well have fallen in with Longy Zwillman and the other local Jewish gangsters back in the working-class neighbourhood of Newark

⁴⁹ On Wallace's campaign, see Curtis McDougall, *Gideon's Army*, 3 vols. (New York: Marzani & Munsell, 1965).

⁵⁰ Daniel Leab notes that the 'absolutely awful' *I Married a Communist* – retitled *The Woman on Pier 13* for general release in 1950 – was 'among the crudest of the anti-communist films' of the Cold War era. Alfred Hornung suggests a number of similarities between the film's plot and Ira's backstory. Leab, "How Red was my Valley: Hollywood, the Cold War Film, and *I Married a Communist*", *Journal of Contemporary History*, 19 (1984), pp. 59-88 (66); Hornung, "The Personal is the Fictional: Philip Roth's Return to the 1950s in *I Married a Communist*", in Gerd Hurm and Ann Marie Fallon (eds.), *Rebels Without a Cause? Renegotiating the American 1950s* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2007), pp. 77-95.

⁵¹ Mark Shechner, *Up Society's Ass, Copper: Rereading Philip Roth* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2003), 176.

where he grew up.⁵² Instead, he becomes invested ‘heart and soul’ in the Communist project, a loyalist who uncritically ‘obey[s] every one-hundred and eighty degree shift in policy’.⁵³

Ira meets thirteen-year-old Nathan in the Fall of 1948, before Wallace’s crushing defeat, and before McCarthyism put an end to the broad, fragile coalition of postwar ‘Popular Front liberalism’ of which Wallace had become the ‘standard bearer’.⁵⁴ The novel is in part a *Bildungsroman*, charting young Nathan’s ‘initiation’ into the ‘big show’ of being a man, with Ira as his heroically flawed guide.⁵⁵ *The Ghost Writer* was also a *Bildungsroman* of masculine initiation – though not into the public sphere of politics, but rather the sequestered retreat of high art – and through Nathan’s relationship with Ira, and those he develops with Murray, O’Day, and his English tutor at the University of Chicago, Leo Glucksman, *I Married a Communist* retrospectively reveals Lonoff to be only one in a series of male mentors Nathan has sought out. Roth has suggested that the subject of the novel is ‘at bottom, education, tutelage, mentorship’, and Nathan also reflects on his predilection for teachers.⁵⁶ Thinking about ‘the men who schooled me, the

⁵² ‘Ira’s Longy Zwillman was Johnny O’Day’, Murray says. Philip Roth, *I Married a Communist* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1998), 67.

⁵³ Roth, *Communist*, 181.

⁵⁴ Thomas Devine, *Henry Wallace’s 1948 Presidential Campaign and the Future of Postwar Liberalism* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2013), 291; Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century* (London: Verso, 1996), 10.

⁵⁵ Roth, *Communist*, 32. On the theme of initiation more broadly in Roth’s work, see Claudia Franziska Brühwiler, *Political Initiation in the Novels of Philip Roth* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013).

⁵⁶ Philip Roth, “In Memory of a Friend, Teacher, and Mentor”, *New York Times*, April 20, 2013, L6.

men I came from', he asks himself, 'what is it, this genealogy that isn't genetic?'. Nathan goes on to suggest that adolescence affords the opportunity to 'choose new allegiances and affiliations', but concludes that each of these 'chosen parents' must ultimately be 'cast off [...] for the orphanhood that is total, which is manhood. When you're out in this thing all alone'.⁵⁷ But analysing Nathan's old-age friendship with Murray challenges this conception of adulthood-as-isolation. Their relationship gestures to the way in which the novel looks beyond filial bonds to consider what other kinds of 'allegiances and affiliations' might structure a life, and a political community. And through their friendship, the novel ultimately calls into question Nathan's notion of masculine independence, and his decision to live apart from the world.

As well as noting the novel's similarities to *The Ghost Writer*, critics have also pointed to the resemblance between Ira and the Swede in *American Pastoral*. Structurally, both men appear to play comparable roles within their narratives and, thematically, each seems to represent both an individualistic will to self-transformation, and the 'impossibility of transcending historical circumstances'.⁵⁸ 'Whereas a de-ethnicized immersion into white-bread America had been the Swede's pastoral', Derek Parker Royal writes, 'Ira's becomes a socially just and politically progressive America'.⁵⁹ But while it was easy to see why the 'honourable, decent, deluded' Swede was afforded the role of

⁵⁷ Roth, *Communist*, 217.

⁵⁸ Brauner, *Philip Roth*, 151.

⁵⁹ Royal, "Pastoral Dreams", 191.

tragic hero, critics struggled to appreciate the bathos in the story of a ‘hothead’ like Ira.⁶⁰ In a letter to Roth, Saul Bellow dismissed Ira as a ‘cast-iron clutz’, suggesting that he was ‘probably the least attractive of all your characters’.⁶¹ The novel’s politics, meanwhile, have often been taken to be as simplistic as Ira’s own. In contrast to the complex portrayal of the Swede’s ‘weak’ liberalism in *American Pastoral*, James Wood argued that *I Married a Communist* revealed Roth to be a writer lacking ‘a sensitive or original political imagination’; the book was less a political novel, Wood felt, than a hectoring ‘essay about politics’.⁶² More often, however, the novel’s evocation of the postwar Popular Front milieu was taken to be mere backdrop. While the book ‘purports’ to be about the fate of progressive politics at the start of the Cold War, Linda Grant suggested, its real focus is Eve’s betrayal of Ira, which, like Kakutani, Grant read as a thinly-veiled attack on Claire Bloom.⁶³ And while the trilogy’s first instalment seemed an astutely self-conscious metafictional reflection upon the epistemological uncertainties of historical sense-making after the end of history, *I Married a Communist* appeared, by contrast, to be a work of straightforward historical realism.⁶⁴

⁶⁰ Howard Jacobson, “Is *American Pastoral* Philip Roth at his best?”, *The Guardian*, November 11, 2016; ‘hothead’ is Roth’s own affectionate description for Ira – he has suggested that *Communist* is ‘a favourite among his books’. See Claudia Roth Pierpont, *Roth Unbound: A Writer and His Books* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2013), 234.

⁶¹ Saul Bellow, Letter to Roth dated January 1, 1998, in Benjamin Taylor (ed.), *Saul Bellow: Letters* (New York: Viking, 2010), 540.

⁶² Hutchison, *Writing the Republic*, 126; James Wood, “The Sentimentalist: Review of *I Married a Communist*”, *The New Republic*, October 12, 1998, pp. 38-42 (39, 42).

⁶³ Linda Grant, “The Wrath of Roth”, *The Guardian*, October 4, 1998.

⁶⁴ On *American Pastoral* as historical metafiction, see Cohen, *After the End of History*, 61-90; on *Communist*’s historical realism, see Shechner, *Up Society’s Ass, Copper*, 174-185.

Readings such as these – which, on the one hand, minimise the depth and seriousness of the novel’s engagement with politics and history, and, on the other, minimise its formal ingenuity and self-reflexiveness – largely rest upon a misperception of how the narrative’s ‘frame’ relates to the themes of its ‘main’ plot. Unlike *American Pastoral*, *I Married a Communist* is narrated not only by Nathan, but also by Murray, Ira’s less combustible older brother, and Nathan’s former high school English teacher. A former teacher, but a perpetual student, ninety-year-old Murray is taking a course for seniors on Shakespeare at the local college when he bumps into Nathan, the pair having not seen one another since their time together in the classrooms of Weequahic High. Over the course of six long summer evenings in 1997, the two sit together on the porch of Nathan’s isolated cabin high up in the Berkshires – to which Nathan has retreated from ‘the agitation of the autobiographical’ – and pool together what they know of Ira’s story, with Murray’s contributions narrated as direct speech, and sequestered in their quotation marks.⁶⁵ The novel, then, is in the form of a conversation, or dialogue, such that the ‘task of recounting’ is shown to be ‘communal’, rather than Nathan’s alone.⁶⁶ And this ‘dialogic’ form of narration is not simply ‘expositional’, nor straightforwardly realist.⁶⁷ Rather, crafted retrospectively by Nathan after Murray’s death (revealed only at the end of the novel), the narrative structure manifests a form of historical sense-making; in this unusual method of storytelling, Nathan and Murray’s friendship of the 1990s becomes

⁶⁵ Roth, *Communist*, 72.

⁶⁶ Royal, “Pastoral Dreams”, 200.

⁶⁷ Debra Shostak notes that ‘this is a literally dialogic situation, in which the meaning of the story emerges from the interaction between speaker and listener’. *Philip Roth: Countertexts, Counterlives*, 250. By contrast, Claudia Roth Pierpont suggests that ‘Murray’s side of the story consists of expositional chunks’. *Roth Unbound*, 235.

integral to, and inseparable from, the novel's portrayal of the political culture of the late 1940s and early 1950s.⁶⁸

3. 'The fate of the community'

Ira's story is not only told by Murray, but bookended by an account of his older brother's personal misfortune. The lurid tale of Ira's very public downfall is preceded and followed by Murray's own, very different experience of political persecution and 'betrayal' – a watchword throughout the novel.⁶⁹ At the beginning, we learn that 'four years after Ira was blacklisted from radio for being a communist, Murray had been dismissed from his teaching job', and forced to make his living for a number of years selling vacuum cleaners door to door.⁷⁰ But Murray isn't simply collateral damage of his brother's catastrophe – unlike Nathan, who missed out on a Fulbright as a consequence of his association with Ira. In fact, we learn that Murray's left-wing political activism far predated his brother's, and ran much deeper. Murray 'threw [him]self into organizing our union' as soon as he became a teacher at Weequahic, and was able to remain stoical about his private misfortune because of the union's enduring strength: 'now, if the *union* had

⁶⁸ Andy Connolly, by contrast, focuses on what he reads as the growing 'disunity' between the narrators, suggesting that Nathan's 'taciturnity' is indicative of the narrators' diverging political perspectives. *Philip Roth and the American Liberal Tradition*, 77-78. In his review, Stuart Burrows notes that the novel's narrative frame 'recalls the structure of William Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!* [1936]'. Burrows, "I Married a Communist - review", *New Statesman*, October 16, 1998, pp. 56-57.

⁶⁹ Roth, *Communist*, 184-185.

⁷⁰ This recalls Roth's account of the fate of literary dissidents under Soviet totalitarianism in Czechoslovakia; it also foreshadows Coleman Silk's dismissal from his job. See Philip Roth, "A Czech Education", in *Why Write?: Collected Nonfiction 1960-2013* (New York: Library of America, 2017), pp. 368-370 (369).

failed', he says, 'that would have affected me'.⁷¹ In contrast to his brother's 'inflated' revolutionary internationalism, Murray says his 'political beliefs were pretty localised', more 'sociological' than ideological, and concerned more with 'the fate of the community' than the fate of the world.⁷² Nowadays, Murray says, the union is 'a big disappointment' to him, because this localist egalitarianism had narrowed to a focus solely on pay – the union in the 1990s is 'just a money-grubbing organisation'.⁷³

Murray's historical perspective similarly has a localist orientation, apparent in his decidedly 'sociological' reminiscences about life in the old Italian First Ward of Newark where he and Ira grew up, members of the neighbourhood's only Jewish family. While Ira often talks in grand abstractions – about the 'common man', 'the Negro', and 'the capitalists' – Murray deals in details and particulars. He recalls 'the canary funeral' held for the Italian cobbler Russumanno's pet bird, and how the funeral procession went 'past Del Guericio's grocery store [...] past Mellillo's fruit and vegetable stand, past Giordano's bakery [...]'.⁷⁴ In his reminiscences, as Jack Miles suggests in his letter to Roth, Murray resembles *Patrimony's* Herman Roth, 'the great rememberer of the family's past', for whom the old stories of local life are 'a sacred text'.⁷⁵

⁷¹ Roth, *Communist*, 5, 14. Emphasis in original.

⁷² Roth, *Communist*, 12.

⁷³ Roth, *Communist*, 14.

⁷⁴ Roth, *Communist*, 61-62. Much of Murray's local knowledge is drawn from Michael Immerso, *Newark's Little Italy: The Vanished First Ward* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1997); for the canary funeral, see 107-109. Roth cites Immerso's book as a 'primary source' in the novel's front-matter.

⁷⁵ Shechner, *Up Society's Ass, Copper*, 127; Philip Roth, *Patrimony: A True Story* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1991), 190.

But Murray is much more closely based on one of Roth's own high school teachers, Bob Lowenstein. In his eulogy for Lowenstein – published in the *New York Times* as “In Memory of a Friend, Teacher, and Mentor”, a title suggestive of the different stages of their relationship – Roth not only recounts the early influence of his homeroom teacher, but the story of how, like Nathan and Murray, they became friends in the 1990s. ‘In the spirit of Bob Lowenstein’, Roth writes of their friendship, ‘I will put the matter in plain language, directly as I can: I believe we fell in love with each other’.⁷⁶ A ‘radical and intellectual’ like Murray, Lowenstein was awarded a PhD in Romance Languages from Johns Hopkins in 1933 and, after failing to secure a college teaching job, returned to his home state of New Jersey to teach high school.⁷⁷ Quickly involving himself in the nascent unionisation effort, Lowenstein became an executive board member of his local branch, and helped make Weequahic a stronghold for the radical Newark Teacher’s Union.⁷⁸ Lowenstein’s unionism was ‘shaped by his political egalitarianism’, Steve Golin suggests in his history of Newark teachers’ unions, and thus always maintained a ‘larger political perspective’.⁷⁹ The ‘Jewish-flavored version of unionism’ epitomised by Lowenstein gave way to an ‘Italian-flavored version’ as the demographics of Newark changed in the 1960s, focusing more on what Lowenstein called ‘bread and butter issues’

⁷⁶ Roth, “In Memory of a Friend, Teacher, and Mentor”, L6.

⁷⁷ Steve Golin, *The Newark Teachers Strikes: Hopes on the Line* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2002), 10-11.

⁷⁸ In *The Plot Against America* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2004), Aunt Evelyn is a ‘substitute elementary school teacher [...] who’d been active several years earlier in founding the left-wing, largely Jewish Newark Teachers Union, whose few hundred members were competing with a more staid, apolitical teachers’ association’ (86).

⁷⁹ Golin, *The Newark Teachers Strikes*, 11.

such as pay – the circumscribed kind of unionism that Murray describes as a ‘big disappointment’.⁸⁰

By beginning with a detailed account of Murray’s unionism closely based upon Lowenstein’s personal history, the novel suggests the way in which it will offer a portrayal of the period’s political culture that moves beyond the familiar narrative of McCarthyism. ‘Not simply another novel about the red scare’, *I Married a Communist* depicts a much broader Popular Front civic culture, grounded in local activism like Murray’s, and flourishing well-beyond the confines of the Communist Party.⁸¹ And in foregrounding Murray’s history, the novel also foregrounds his relationship with Nathan. Their friendship becomes part of the novel’s broader exploration of civic affiliation and political community, and it is telling in this regard that in talking to Nathan, Murray is reminded not so much of the classroom they once shared as of the union meetings he used to attend.⁸² Staging another kind of political dialogue, their friendship manifests a form of democratic engagement that comes to define the novel’s late twentieth-century perspective on the political culture of late 1940s. And, in this, there is a suggestive congruency between the novel and two revisionary political discourses that emerged in the 1990s. I discuss connections to the communitarian critique of liberal individualism later in the chapter; but firstly, I explore the similarity between the novel’s historical perspective and that of a strain of left-wing revisionist historicism that rose to prominence in the post-Cold War era.

⁸⁰ Golin, *The Newark Teachers Strikes*, 28-29.

⁸¹ Aimee Pozorski, *Roth and Trauma: The Problem of History in the Later Works (1995-2010)* (London: Continuum, 2011), 67.

⁸² Roth, *Communist*, 261.

4. *The Spirit of the Common Man*

The Popular Front was a loose alliance of the antifascist Left, anchored in the industrial collectivism of the Congress of Industrial Organizations (the CIO), that flourished in America in various guises from the mid-1930s until the start of the Cold War.⁸³ Histories of the Popular Front written from the 1950s through to the 1980s emphasised the centrality of the American Communist Party (the CPUSA) to this coalition.⁸⁴ In these histories, the Popular Front was ‘made up of Communists and fellow-travelling liberals; the centre was red, the periphery, shades of pink’.⁸⁵ This ‘traditionalist’ interpretation ‘follow[ed] the lead of cold war era scholars like Theodore Draper’, who maintained that the Popular Front was a Soviet directive adopted by the CPUSA, rather than a genuinely grassroots labor movement.⁸⁶ In this account, it was Earl Browder, the General Secretary of the CPUSA from 1934-1945, who was largely responsible for instigating the Party’s shift in political strategy, and the Popular Front has long been associated with what both conservatives and the anti-Stalinist Left dismissively called ‘Browderism’.⁸⁷ According to Draper, in fact, there was no ‘Popular Front *sui generis*’,

⁸³ See Robert Zieger, *The CIO, 1935-1955* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995), 141-212.

⁸⁴ See John Earl Haynes and Harvey Klehr, “The Historiography of American Communism: An Unsettled Field”, *Labour History Review*, 68:1 (April 2003), pp. 61-78.

⁸⁵ Denning, *The Cultural Front*, 5.

⁸⁶ John Barrett, “Rethinking the Popular Front”, *Rethinking Marxism*, 21:4 (2009), pp. 513-550 (535). See Theodore Draper, *The Roots of American Communism* (New York: Viking, 1957).

⁸⁷ Maurice Isserman, *Which Side Were You On?: The American Communist Party During the Second World War* [1982] (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993), 4-8. Browder’s slogan for the Party in the late 1930s – ‘Communism is Twentieth-Century Americanism’ – is often cited as a shorthand for the Popular Front ethos.

only 'the Popular Front of the Communist Party'.⁸⁸ These 'top-down' histories of the Popular Front emphasised the role of Party leaders, drew heavily on Comintern and Cominform cables, and, in short, searched for 'the Moscow gold that kept it all running'.⁸⁹

But beginning in the 1990s, a new understanding of the period's political culture emerged. 'After 1989', Graham Cassano notes, 'one of the ironic effects of the end of the cold war was the new space produced for rethinking Marxism, and part of this general trend was a reevaluation of the history of the CPUSA and the Popular Front'.⁹⁰ Instead of a political tactic of the Communist Party, the Popular Front was reassessed as a diverse social democratic alliance, 'a radical historical bloc uniting industrial unionists, Communists, independent socialists, community activists, and emigre anti-fascists around laborist social democracy', in which the 'categories of left and liberal, socialist and democrat became blurred'.⁹¹ Revisionists inverted the traditionalist perspective to argue that 'Popular Front history is not a subset of the history of the Communist party [...] rather, the history of the Communist party is a subset of the history of the Popular Front social movement'.⁹² This conception of the Popular Front as a 'bottom-up' movement of

⁸⁸ Theodore Draper, *American Communism and Soviet Russia* [1960] (New York: Vintage, 1986), 470-471.

⁸⁹ Denning, *The Cultural Front*, xviii.

⁹⁰ Graham Cassano, "Returning to the Popular Front", *Rethinking Marxism*, 21:4 (2009), pp. 476-479 (477).

⁹¹ Denning, *The Cultural Front*, 4; Doug Rossinow, *Visions of Progress: The Left-liberal Tradition in America* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008), 145.

⁹² Michael Denning, "Afterword: Reconsidering the Significance of the Popular Front", *Rethinking Marxism*, 21:4 (2009), pp. 551-555 (554).

interlocking projects of social democracy, in which the CPUSA was an important but not defining influence, precipitated a focus on the variety of regional and local forms of civic action and alliance that flourished in the period. Thus a number revisionist histories focused on single cities, or individual industries or unions, to tell the story of the movement.⁹³

Equally characteristic of the revisionist approach was a focus upon the wide-ranging influence of the Popular Front in mainstream American culture – what Michael Denning calls the ‘cultural front’ of the movement. In Hollywood, on Broadway, on the airwaves, and in literature, writers and performers allied or sympathetic to the Popular Front were instrumental in crafting the movement’s political style, a hybrid of populist pluralism combined with a working-class Americanism that drew on the diffuse patriotic appeal of Roosevelt’s New Deal.⁹⁴ ‘Popular Front culture’, Maurice Isserman notes, ‘offered a sentimental, egalitarian, and schematic world view’, epitomised for him by Paul Robeson’s rendition of Earl Robinson’s “Ballad for Americans”, first aired on Norman Corwin’s CBS radio programme, “The Pursuit of Happiness”, in 1939.⁹⁵ Robeson’s jaunty paean to ethnic pluralism has come to epitomise the ‘all-embracing Popular Front civic culture’ of the period, and to stand for the ‘Popular Front structure of

⁹³ See for example Bruce Nelson, *Workers on the Waterfront: Seamen, Longshoremen, and Unionism in the 1930s* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1990); Gary Gerstle, *Working-Class Americanism: The Politics of Labor in a Textile City, 1914-1960* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989).

⁹⁴ See Rossinow, *Visions of Progress*, 146; Denning, *The Cultural Front*, 125.

⁹⁵ Isserman, *Which Side Were You On?*, 22. David Eldridge notes that “Ballad for Americans” became ‘the Popular Front’s unofficial anthem’. *American Culture in the 1930s* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2008), 115.

feeling' that permeated American mass culture.⁹⁶ Postwar literary critics such as Lionel Trilling and Irving Howe – representatives of the liberal and radical anti-Stalinist Left respectively – 'scorned most of the output of the Popular Front as bathetic and simplistic', Michael Kazin notes; but 'whatever its flaws, this unashamedly demotic art did much to re-infuse the national culture with an anti-authoritarian, pluralist spirit that soon became ubiquitous'.⁹⁷

I Married a Communist offers a kind of revisionary account of the Old Left that closely correlates to this strain of 1990s historicism. It pays sustained attention to the aesthetic forms of the Popular Front, and takes seriously the idea of a popular civic culture. In foregrounding Murray's unionism and his 'sociological' political perspective, the novel also signals its interest in the kinds of local civic association that were the focus of contemporaneous revisionist histories. If this congruency seems unlikely, it's worth recalling just how widespread the 'revisionary position' had become in mainstream American intellectual culture by the mid-1990s. Roth needn't have been reading Michael Denning to be aware of the issues at stake; he could have just picked up a copy of the *New York Review of Books*, where the increasingly rancorous debate between traditionalist and revisionist historians was playing out in the letters pages. In June 1994, a number of the 'new historians' wrote in response to Draper's dismissive review of two recent revisionist histories, accusing him of a 'fixation' on the Soviet influence in the

⁹⁶ Zieger, *The CIO*, 154; Denning, *The Cultural Front*, 26.

⁹⁷ Michael Kazin, *American Dreamers: How the Left Changed a Nation* (New York: Knopf, 2011), 158.

Popular Front.⁹⁸ Among the respondents was Isserman, who noted that it wasn't only historians who had come of age politically during the heyday of the New Left who were reconsidering the legacy of the Popular Front; so too were prominent leftists of the previous generation, including Irving Howe.

Roth's turbulent relationship with Howe is well-documented, and its effects on his fiction have been far-reaching and, in some accounts at least, richly productive.⁹⁹ Indeed, some critics have read the American Trilogy as offering a final refutation to Howe's charge, made in 1972, that Roth's work evidenced the author's 'thin personal culture'.¹⁰⁰ Edward Alexander even suggests that *American Pastoral* amounts to 'the existential realization of Howe's criticism of the moral and political style of the New Left'.¹⁰¹ But there are also unexamined connections between *I Married a Communist* and Howe's changing conception of the political style of the Old Left. As Isserman intimates, like most on the anti-Stalinist Left, Howe had been suspicious of the Popular Front and

⁹⁸ Paul Lyons, Maurice Isserman, and Theodore Draper, "The Old Left: An Exchange", *New York Review of Books*, June 23, 1994, pp. 62-63 (63), in response to Draper, "The Life of the Party", *New York Review of Books*, January 13, 1994, pp. 45-51. For an earlier, more extensive version of the skirmish – again prompted by a review by Draper – see Paul Buhle, Norman Markowitz et al., "Revisiting American Communism: An Exchange", *New York Review of Books*, August 15, 1985, pp. 40-44.

⁹⁹ See R. Clifton Spargo, "How Telling: Irving Howe, Roth's Early Career, and the Dialectic of Impersonation in *The Anatomy Lesson*", *Philip Roth Studies*, 5:2 (Fall 2009), pp. 251-279. For an overview, see Gooblar, *Major Phases*, 60-63.

¹⁰⁰ Irving Howe, "Philip Roth Reconsidered", *Commentary*, December 1972, pp. 69-77 (73).

¹⁰¹ Edward Alexander, *Classical Liberalism and the Jewish Tradition* (New Brunswick: Transaction, 2003), 142.

dismissive of its 'middlebrow' intellectual culture.¹⁰² Howe's 1958 critical history of the CPUSA, co-written with his fellow *Dissent* editor, Lewis Coser, held to a traditionalist critique of the Popular Front as a 'political masquerade' orchestrated by the Soviets, even as it acknowledged that the movement's 'appeal to the emotions of anti-fascist fraternity [...] was extremely successful'.¹⁰³ But in a "Note on 'Browderism'" published in 1985, Howe reconsidered his position, and suggested that the contemporary Left might benefit from pursuing 'a policy somewhat like that of the Popular Front (call it "coalition politics")'.¹⁰⁴ 'In contrast to Draper', Isserman notes, 'Howe gave the new historians a serious reading', and consequently came to reflect upon how his initial appraisal of the Popular Front was itself a product of Cold War ideology.¹⁰⁵

5. 'the feeling for community'

I Married a Communist follows Howe and the revisionist historians in a recuperative turn toward the Popular Front. Through his relationship with Ira, Nathan becomes immersed in the movement's 'cultural front', listening to the 'high demotic poetry' of Norman Corwin's radio plays, reading the popular historical fictions of Howard Fast, and even meeting Paul Robeson at a Wallace rally.¹⁰⁶ Fifty years later, Nathan is

¹⁰² On the emergence of 'middlebrow' as a critical term among the New York Intellectuals in the 1950s, see Christian Kleine, *Cold War Orientalism: Asia in the Middlebrow Imagination, 1945-1961* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 64-67.

¹⁰³ Irving Howe and Lewis Coser, *The American Communist Party: A Critical History* [1958] (New York: Da Cape Press, 1974), 386, 325.

¹⁰⁴ Irving Howe, *Socialism and America* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1985), 103.

¹⁰⁵ Isserman, "The Old Left: An Exchange", 63.

¹⁰⁶ Roth, *Communist*, 39. 'Don't lose your courage, young man,' Robeson tells Nathan (33).

able to lightly satirise his youthful political piety and the populist fervour of the times: ‘*Rank and file* – three little words that thrilled me’.¹⁰⁷ But the novel also takes seriously the movement’s attempts to render a genuinely democratic aesthetic – indeed, the novel’s interest in the Popular Front is as much aesthetic as it is political. Of Corwin’s famous play commissioned to celebrate VE Day, Nathan writes:

I wouldn’t care to judge today if something I loved as much as I loved as *On a Note of Triumph* was or was not art; it provided me with my first sense of the conjuring *power* of art and helped me strengthen my first ideas as to what I wanted and expected a literary artist’s language to do: enshrine the struggles of the embattled. (And taught me, contrary to what my teachers insisted, that I could begin a sentence with “And”.)¹⁰⁸

Nathan’s conception of literary language and the power of art has developed well beyond these ‘first ideas’ in the intervening half-century (not least under the influence of subsequent mentors like Glucksman and Lonoff); but that playful final sentence beginning with a Corwin-esque ‘And’ suggests that the influence of the Popular Front’s demotic style remains important to the novel. Indeed, that ‘And’ connects *I Married a Communist* itself to Corwin’s ‘democratising’ project; the unusual structure of Roth’s novel, I suggest, also represents an attempt to forge a democratic aesthetic, but one fit for, and reflective of, the political culture of the 1990s.

¹⁰⁷ Roth, *Communist*, 42. Emphasis in original.

¹⁰⁸ Roth, *Communist*, 38.

As such, the novel's 1998 frame is crucial to understanding the intervention Roth is making in the broader revisionary recuperation of the Popular Front I have delineated. Arguing that Roth is a key figure in what, following Mark McGurl, he calls 'the high cultural pluralist program' of modern American fiction, Philipp Löffler suggests that 'the 1998 retrospective established [in the novel's frame] allows Roth [...] to make a powerful revisionist claim about the centrality of the individual self', in distinction to the 'obdurate universalism' of Ira's Communist ideology.¹⁰⁹ Contrary to 'Ira's totalizing view of history', Nathan and Murray don't pretend to be interested in 'historical truth', Löffler suggests, but rather in the uses to which history can be put in 'processes of individual self-fashioning'.¹¹⁰ But while Löffler is right to emphasise the novel's revisionary cultural pluralism, the dichotomy he sets up between liberal individualism and Communist universalism misses the way in which the dynamic of Murray and Nathan's conversation offers a political alternative to both of these positions.

History is made intersubjectively, the novel suggests, and the process of 'individual self-fashioning' Löffler highlights is in fact a joint venture. Murray is able to contextualise Nathan's understanding of his youthful relationship with Ira by sharing his own partial account of his brother's history; each provides details of which the other is unaware, and in so doing, each demonstrates their provisional hold on the past: 'Your life story is, in and of itself, something that you know very little about', Nathan reflects.¹¹¹ This echoes a broader scepticism concerning our capacity for self-knowledge and for

¹⁰⁹ Löffler, *Pluralist Desires*, 106, 102. See McGurl, *The Program Era*, 56-58.

¹¹⁰ Löffler, *Pluralist Desires*, 102, 107.

¹¹¹ Roth, *Communist*, 15.

knowing others that resonates throughout the trilogy. ‘Getting people right is not what living is all about anyway’, Nathan writes in *American Pastoral*, ‘It is getting them wrong that is living [...] That’s how we know we’re alive: we’re wrong’.¹¹² In that novel, it’s the Swede’s brother, Jerry, who corrects Nathan’s mistaken assumptions about his childhood hero. Initially, Murray’s role seems similar; but whereas Jerry’s revelations become the grist for Nathan’s ‘realist chronicle’, in *I Married a Communist*, we stay steadfastly rooted to Nathan and Murray’s ongoing conversation. It’s a conversation full of revelations, corrections, and digressions, but also full of feeling. As Murray reveals the death of his daughter Lorraine, Nathan tenderly considers his old teacher’s skull, the way it ‘looked so fragile and small now. Yet within it were cradled ninety years of the past’.¹¹³ The moment carries an echo of Murray’s performance, back in the classroom at Weequahic High, of the ‘scene at the end of act 4 of *Macbeth*’, in which Ross informs MacDuff that Macbeth has slaughtered his family. In particular, Nathan remembers ‘the simple line that would assert itself, in Murray Ringold’s voice, a hundred times, a thousand times, during the remainder of my life: “But I must also feel it as a man”’.¹¹⁴ Their late-in-life friendship extends and enriches this emotional education. The pair’s conversation evinces a ruminative, compassionate, and respectful form of engagement that carries an echo of the sentimental fraternal feeling of the Popular Front, but that also seems to account for the losses, personal and political, accrued in the intervening half-century.

¹¹² Roth, *American Pastoral*, 35.

¹¹³ Roth, *Communist*, 77.

¹¹⁴ Roth, *Communist*, 314-315.

Roth's association of conversation and male friendship is long-standing. In a note to *The Counterlife*, he writes that the 'greatness' of 'male friendships' is that they 'don't compel consummation' like sexual relationships, but are instead 'endless talk'.¹¹⁵ In a 1974 interview, meanwhile, he reflects that 'the best of adolescence was the intense male friendships [...] because of the opportunity they provided for uncensored talk', and suggests a link between 'the amalgam of mimicry, reporting, kibitzing, disputation, satire, and legendizing' that characterised his adolescent friendships and 'the work I do now'.¹¹⁶ The tenor of Murray and Nathan's conversation is of course very different, forming the basis of a very different kind of friendship, and producing a very different kind of story; but the connection between conversation and friendship remains important. Rather than the richly inventive comedy of adolescence, there is 'something of the Socratic dialogue' about the old men's exchange.¹¹⁷ As in Plato's dialogues, conversation becomes a form of friendship, and the relationship between friends becomes a mode of broader philosophical and political enquiry.

It is just this kind of conversation that Ira is unable to take part in. 'Extremely disinclined to lose a political argument', Ira in fact 'rarely speaks to anyone in particular', Elaine Safer notes, but instead 'pontificate[s] in long monologues, mostly in the inflated

¹¹⁵ Philip Roth, "The Counterlife: Notes" [October 5, 1985], Box 79, Folder 2, Philip Roth Papers.

¹¹⁶ Philip Roth, "Writing and the Powers that Be" (1974), in *Reading Myself and Others* [1975] (London: Vintage, 2000), pp. 3-12 (4).

¹¹⁷ Kasia Boddy, *Boxing: A Cultural History* (London: Reaktion Books, 2008), 379. Elaine Safer, however, argues that Nathan and Murray's 'lengthy endeavors to attain insight tend to parody the Socratic dialogue'. *Mocking the Age: The Later Novels of Philip Roth* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2006), 111.

language of agitprop'.¹¹⁸ Even as a boy, Nathan tires of Ira's ranting – 'I'd heard it all before, these exact words many times' – and after a week together he can't 'wait to get out of earshot'.¹¹⁹ By contrast, Nathan becomes increasingly attuned to Murray's voice – and even to his silences, the 'eloquence of an old man evenly expiring'.¹²⁰ Their conversation recognises the making of history as pluralistic, and demonstrates our reliance on others in making sense of our selves. Their friendship, that is to say, is concerned with questions of citizenship and community, and so forms a part of the novel's broader exploration of the American civic imagination. And in this, there is unexamined affinity between *I Married a Communist* and another revisionary strain of political thought that emerged in the 1980s and 1990s.

'Communitarianism', I suggested in my Introduction, became something of an umbrella term for a politically diverse range of critiques of liberalism towards the end of the century. Reasserting the importance of an active citizenship, these critiques all challenged liberalism's atomistic conception of the individual – what Michael Sandel called 'the unencumbered self' – and stressed instead 'the ways in which our selves are socially embedded and constructed within a community'.¹²¹ Quite what constituted this community varied considerably. Many conservative accounts looked to a Tocquevillian conception of civil society, founded around the ties of family, the church, and a broader

¹¹⁸ Roth, *Communist*, 177; Safer, *Mocking the Age*, 109.

¹¹⁹ Roth, *Communist*, 190.

¹²⁰ Roth, *Communist*, 75.

¹²¹ Michael Sandel, *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 182; Sandra Marshall, "The Community of Friends", in Emiliios Christodoulidis (ed.), *Communitarianism and Citizenship* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1998), pp. 208-219 (209).

network of voluntary association; these (often nostalgic) appeals to traditional ‘family values’ frequently came couched in a broader elegy for the decline of morality in contemporary culture. In contrast, many other critiques looked not to the family but to friendship to figure a new kind of revitalised civic relation. As I suggested in my Introduction, the appeal to friendship in these accounts is multifaceted. While conservative and progressive communitarian critiques both stress the primacy of local affiliation and lived experience over ideology and centralised political power, friendship figures a form of freely-chosen ethical relation whose obligations are quite distinct from the blood loyalty of family ties or the chosen affiliation of religious faith. Civic friendship, in these accounts, protects and promotes important liberal democratic values, such as individual rights, justice, and pluralism.¹²² But civic friendship also challenges the liberal dichotomy of the private and public spheres by suggesting that our political affiliations should be shaped by, rather than separate from, our personal relations.

Critics have noted that *American Pastoral*’s evocation of the decline of Newark (after the race riots of the 1960s) echoes the elegiac tone of some communitarian

¹²² See Thomas Spragens, *Civic Liberalism: Reflections on Our Democratic Ideals* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 1999), 175-212. On the overlap between friendship networks and the long American tradition of voluntarism ‘combining individual self-reliance and group belonging’, see Claude Fischer, *Made in America: A Social History of American Culture and Character* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 95-160, esp. 132-133 (96).

accounts of the ‘fragmentation’ of civil society.¹²³ The Swede’s father, Lou, is a ‘lifetime Democrat’ and a New Deal liberal, but his sense of the growing disorder in American culture chimes with popular neoconservative critiques from the 1980s and 1990s:

We grew up in an era when it was a different place, when the feeling for community, home, family, parents, work . . . well, it was different [...] The lack of feeling for places like what is going on in Newark – how does this happen? You don’t have to revere your family, you don’t have to revere your country, you don’t have to revere where you live, but you have to know you have them, you have to know that you are part of them.¹²⁴

Critiquing this ‘lack of feeling’ remains important to the political intervention made in *I Married a Communist*, where being able to ‘feel it as a man’ is central to the lesson Nathan learns from Murray. But while Lou mourns the collapse of Newark and is dismayed by the cultural politics of the New Left, *I Married a Communist* reframes the history of postwar American liberalism to imagine a point of contact between the sentimental civic culture of the Popular Front – when ‘the feeling for community’ was strong – and the communitarianism of the 1990s. Like both conservative and progressive

¹²³ See Brian McDonald, “‘The Real American Crazy Shit’: On Adamism and Democratic Individuality in *American Pastoral*”, *Studies in American Jewish Literature*, 23 (2004), pp. 27-40 (34-36). Michael Walzer argues that the ‘repeated insistence on the reality of fragmentation’ in civil society is ‘the common theme of all contemporary communitarianism’. The idea of fragmentation is literalised in *American Pastoral* through Merry’s terrorist bombing. Walzer, “The Communitarian Critique of Liberalism”, *Political Theory*, 8:1 (February 1990), pp. 6-23 (9). Walzer – among the most prominent of political theorists associated with communitarianism – was a protege of Howe, and eventually succeeded him to the editorship of *Dissent*.

¹²⁴ Roth, *American Pastoral*, 364-365.

communitarian critiques, the novel substantiates a localist perspective attuned to the particularities of place. But rather than a straightforwardly elegiac account of the loss of community, in its depiction of Nathan and Murray's friendship, *I Married a Communist* offers a portrayal of a civic relation in which a 'feeling for community' might be rethought. Tracing a link between the late 1940s and the late 1990s, the novel suggests that the contemporary Left's project of revitalising citizenship and community might learn from the sentimental politics of the Popular Front.

6. 'My only friend is the revolution'

With this connection between the civic culture of the 1940s and 1990s in mind, the novel's careful evocation of the cultural wing of the Popular Front comes to seem self-reflexive. Ira is associated with the cultural front from his first appearance in the novel, when we see him in one of his earliest theatrical roles, playing the part of Abraham Lincoln in a performance of the Lincoln-Douglas debates at the Weequahic High auditorium, with Nathan in the audience. The 1930s were marked by a 'passionate addiction to Lincoln', Alfred Kazin observed, in which the Republican president emerged as the fulfilment of the period's search for a 'useable American past', a 'champion of the needy' at a time of economic depression, and 'a symbol of the broadened responsibility of the state – in short, a hero of the left'.¹²⁵ President Roosevelt 'frequently wrapped himself in the mantle of the Civil War president', quoting Lincoln in his Fireside chats, and even

¹²⁵ Alfred Kazin, "What Have the '30s Done to Our Literature?," *New York Herald Tribune Books*, December 31, 1939, pp. 1-2 (1); Alfred Haworth Jones, *Roosevelt's Image Brokers: Poets, Playwrights, and the Use of the Lincoln Symbol* (Port Washington: Kennikat Press, 1974), 49; Barry Schwartz, *Abraham Lincoln in the Post-Heroic Era: History and Memory in Late Twentieth-Century America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 33.

hiring as one of his speechwriters Robert Sherwood, whose 1938 Broadway-hit *Abe Lincoln in Illinois* was a ‘pivotal factor in the crystallisation’ of Lincoln’s populist image.¹²⁶ In contrast to this ‘liberal Lincoln’, the CPUSA’s Earl Browder claimed in a speech delivered on Lincoln’s birthday in 1936 that, ‘If the tradition of Lincoln is to survive [...] this will be due not to the Republicans nor to the Democrats, but to the modern representatives of historical progress, the Communists’.¹²⁷

Ira’s Lincoln, then, would have been one among many left-leaning portrayals of the Republican president in the period. But as well as gesturing to the Popular Front’s predilection for historical appropriation, Ira’s Lincoln also reflects back upon the novel’s own revisionary search for a ‘useable past’. Nathan and Murray are also engaged in a kind of political dialogue, and through Ira’s participation in the Lincoln-Douglas debate, the novel ‘stages’ another conversation about civil rights, representation, and citizenship, but one that takes place at a national scale. This emphasis on dialogue reemerges when Nathan first meets Ira in person, when he cycles by Murray’s house on his way home from the library. Ira is helping Murray take down his screen doors, and Nathan is at first struck by the physical impression made by ‘the two shirtless brothers’, with Ira wearing ‘nothing more than a prizefighter’.¹²⁸ But it is also the brothers’ intellectual muscle that impresses Nathan. The Ringolds practise the kind of ‘critical thinking’ Murray espouses in his classroom, demonstrating to young Nathan a form of combative literary engagement: ‘not opening a book to worship it or be elevated by it [...] No, boxing with a

¹²⁶ Jones, *Roosevelt’s Image Brokers*, 65, 5.

¹²⁷ Jones, *Roosevelt’s Image Brokers*, 42; Earl Browder, *Lincoln and the Communists* (New York: Workers Library, 1936), 7.

¹²⁸ Roth, *Communist*, 18.

book'.¹²⁹ Kasia Boddy argues that boxing with a book suggests a kind of 'continuous socratic debate', and that Roth portrays education as a robust one-to-one exchange.¹³⁰ Patrick Hayes, meanwhile, argues that boxing with a book 'models a form of engagement in which – to borrow a Blakean phrase that Roth is fond of quoting – “opposition is true friendship”'.¹³¹ Bob Lowenstein himself suggests a similar model of pedagogy in his poem “Boxing Lessons”, which he sent to Roth in 1997, having read an earlier draft of the novel:

My father taught me the hard way
his 'do' was punitive, his 'don't'
more so. I balked, flat-footed as
a mule. When I got out from under
his control, I sought out trainers
in ring lore known for their ability
to teach.

From crafty Socrates
I learned sound footwork, how to lead,

¹²⁹ Roth, *Communist*, 27.

¹³⁰ Kasia Boddy, “Philip Roth’s Great Books: A Reading of *The Human Stain*”, *Cambridge Quarterly*, 39:1 (March 2010), pp. 39-60 (59). Boddy notes that in the *Protagoras*, Plato ‘likens the moves and countermoves of Socratic debate to a boxing match’. Boddy, *Boxing*, 7. Jerry jokingly likens Nathan to Socrates in *American Pastoral*, 64.

¹³¹ Hayes, *Philip Roth*, 19. Roth uses the phrase to describe his friendship with Bernard Malamud in *Shop Talk* (London: Vintage, 2001), 125.

to feint, and - - his special art - -
to counterpunch. I later made
the rounds of other masters of
the trade and honed my basic skills.¹³²

Shot through with a machismo reminiscent of Murray's way of speaking, Lowenstein imagines education as a series of man-to-man tussles, first with the father, and then with major figures of philosophy (next in the ring in the following stanza is 'Michel (that's Mike) Montaigne'). Citing Socrates as one of these interlocutors, Lowenstein alludes to a specific form of philosophical enquiry – the dialogue, a form with which, I have suggested, the novel also engages through Nathan and Murray's conversation. Plato's dialogues – and especially the early dialogue on friendship, the *Lysis* – conceive of 'friendship as a mode of cultural transmission that subverts the biological' and, like Lowenstein's poem, the novel delineates a network of male relationships beyond the familial that together form a 'genealogy that isn't genetic', including not only the mentorships and tutelages of Nathan's youth, but also his old-age friendship with Murray.¹³³ It's an education that never stops: 'The man who first taught me to box with a book', Nathan writes of Murray, 'is back now to demonstrate how you box with old age'.¹³⁴

¹³² Bob Lowenstein, "Boxing Lessons" [Sent to Roth 2/28/97 (?)], in "Bob Lowenstein Correspondence, 1996-99", Box 20, Folder 6, Philip Roth Papers.

¹³³ Tom MacFaul, *Male Friendship in Shakespeare and his Contemporaries* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 7.

¹³⁴ Roth, *Communist*, 78.

The classicism of this formative scene of masculine initiation looks forward to the sustained engagement with ancient Greek tragedy in *The Human Stain* – in which Coleman Silk is not only a combative Classics professor who teaches that ‘all of European literature springs from a fight’, but, in a previous life, a promising boxer and wily ‘counterpuncher’.¹³⁵ But the book with which Nathan, Ira and Murray are boxing is not some great work of classical philosophy or literature, but an example of popular historical fiction, Howard Fast’s *Citizen Tom Paine* (1943). Murray approaches Fast’s novel through the kind of close reading we might associate with mid-twentieth-century New Criticism. We see him later in the novel analysing the ‘cryptogrammatic g’s, the subtlety of their disintensification’ in a line from *Twelfth Night*, and he encourages a similar concentration from Nathan upon a line of Paine’s about George III, quoted by Fast: ‘I should suffer the misery of devils, were I to make a whore of my soul by swearing allegiance to one whose character is that of a [...] brutish man’.¹³⁶ ‘If you look at one word’, and ‘ask yourself some questions about that word’, Murray suggests, you can eventually see ‘through the word’ to reveal the ‘source’ of the writer’s ‘power’.¹³⁷ ‘Whore’ is the word they close read to get to the source of Paine’s power – which, in Ira’s reckoning, is his ‘audacity’. But we might feel that ‘allegiance’ is the operative word here, given the novel’s broader exploration of the ‘allegiances and affiliations’ of political life, and indeed the question of where one’s political allegiances lie is crucial to Fast’s interest in Paine.

¹³⁵ Roth, *The Human Stain*, 4, 100.

¹³⁶ Roth, *Communist*, 302, 27.

¹³⁷ Roth, *Communist*, 28.

In the 1940s and early 1950s, Howard Fast was among the country's 'most celebrated novelists' and, until his resignation in 1957, 'the single most important literary figure in the American Communist Party'.¹³⁸ Like Ira, Fast was Jewish and working-class, and he was similarly blacklisted for his political beliefs. In 1947 (just a year before Nathan checks out his copy from his local branch of the Newark Public Library on Chancellor Avenue), *Citizen Tom Paine* was banned from public libraries across New York State; only a few years earlier, the novel had been a bestseller 'taught to generations of high school students'.¹³⁹ Charting Paine's political career in America and France, *Citizen Tom Paine* was the most successful example of what Fast called his 'one-man reformation of the historical novel'.¹⁴⁰ As Ira points out, Fast was 'with Wallace from the start' and his politics 'inspired his novels' re-visions of U.S. history, introducing readers to a national legacy of revolt'.¹⁴¹

'*Citizen Tom Paine*', Nathan writes, 'was not so much a novel plotted in the usual manner, as a sustained linking of highly charged rhetorical flourishes tracing the contradictions of an unsavoury man'.¹⁴² As Aimee Pozorski suggests, 'what makes this

¹³⁸ Phillip Deery, *Red Apple: Communism and McCarthyism in Cold War New York* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2014), 39.

¹³⁹ Andrew MacDonald, *Howard Fast: A Critical Companion* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1996), 50. See Deery, *Red Apple*, 40; Julia Mickenberg, *Learning from the Left: Children's Literature, the Cold War, and Radical Politics in the United States* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 283, f.n. 3.

¹⁴⁰ Quoted in MacDonald, *Howard Fast*, 49.

¹⁴¹ Roth, *Communist*, 26; Priscilla Murolo, "History in the Fast Lane: Howard Fast and the Historical Novel", in Susan Porter Benson, Stephen Brier, and Roy Rosenzweig (eds.), *Presenting the Past: Essays on History and the Public* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1986), pp. 53-67 (54).

¹⁴² Roth, *Communist*, 25.

passage so striking is its self-referentiality [...] this description of Fast's novel might well be a description of [Roth's]'.¹⁴³ This self-referentiality extends to Nathan's reading of Paine's 'unsociability':

That was Paine as Fast portrayed him, savagely single-minded and unsociable, an epic folkloric belligerent [...] frequenting brothels, hunted by assassins, and friendless. He did it all alone: "My only friend is the revolution." By the time I had finished the book, there seemed to me no other way than Paine's for a man to live and die [...] *He did it all alone*.¹⁴⁴

Half a century later, Nathan can poke fun at his youthful valorisation of Paine's 'heroic suffering'; but in late middle age, he has returned to a certain idealisation of isolation summed up in that repeated phrase, 'He did it all alone'. In *The Ghost Writer*, twenty-three-year-old Nathan admires Lonoff's 'winnowing of the insatiable self' and resolves to follow his example: 'Purity. Serenity. Simplicity. Seclusion [...] I looked around me and thought, This is how I will live'.¹⁴⁵ In *I Married a Communist*, Nathan delineates a more elaborate genealogy for his reclusion. The idea of the isolated retreat in the woods 'has a history', he writes, 'It was Rousseau's. It was Thoreau's. The palliative of the primitive hut'.¹⁴⁶ But there is also a more immediate source for his solitude. Nathan wonders whether Murray will recognise his cabin as 'an upgraded replica' of Ira's shack, to which

¹⁴³ Pozorski, *Roth and Trauma*, 68.

¹⁴⁴ Roth, *Communist*, 25. Emphasis in original.

¹⁴⁵ Roth, *Zuckerman Bound*, 4.

¹⁴⁶ Roth, *Communist*, 72.

he periodically retreated, and which itself had been based upon Johnny O'Day's utilitarian Leninist 'cell'.¹⁴⁷ Ira's shack adheres to a vision of the pastoral that Nathan had sought to demythologise in *American Pastoral*. The shack is an 'antidote' to city life, a sanctuary to which Ira retreats to 'sweat out the bad vapors'; Nathan similarly suggest sthat he can 'decontaminate and absolve' himself in his cabin.¹⁴⁸ But the trilogy insists that contamination – what Roth later calls the 'human stain' – is a part of life, and we should be extremely wary of 'the fantasy of purity'.¹⁴⁹ 'Unless you're an ascetic paragon like Johnny O'Day or Jesus Christ', Murray says, 'purity is petrification [...] purity is a lie'.¹⁵⁰ 'The pastoral is not your genre', Maria tells Nathan at the end of *The Counterlife*, but in the trilogy, he seems to have succumbed to the allure of rural solitude.¹⁵¹ Nathan insists that 'my seclusion is not the story here', yet over the course of the novel, his friendship with Murray calls into question his decision to live alone. Reintroducing Nathan to 'the pleasures of companionship', Murray challenges the picture of the 'unencumbered self' Nathan has cultivated.¹⁵² Murray suggests that it is a form of escapism akin to Ira's Communist ideology: 'Beware the utopia of isolation', he warns near the novel's close, 'Beware the utopia of the shack in the woods'.¹⁵³

¹⁴⁷ Roth, *Communist*, 228.

¹⁴⁸ Roth, *Communist*, 51, 72.

¹⁴⁹ Roth, *The Human Stain*, 242.

¹⁵⁰ Roth, *Communist*, 318.

¹⁵¹ Roth, *Counterlife*, 317.

¹⁵² Roth, *Communist*, 72.

¹⁵³ Roth, *Communist*, 315.

With Murray's warning in mind, it is worth reconsidering Nathan's reading of *Citizen Tom Paine*. In the passage quoted above, Nathan draws attention to Fast's emphasis on Paine's isolation; but also repeated in the passage is the idea of friendship. Following Murray's practice of close reading, we can say that the passage develops a 'tension' between two potentially competing registers of friendship: friendship as a personal relation (Paine is 'friendless'), and friendship as a metaphor of political association ('my only friend is the revolution').¹⁵⁴ In a moment, I will consider how Paine's own work explores these registers, reflecting a broader preoccupation with civic friendship in the political culture of the new republic. But it is first worth reading Fast's novel a little more closely than Nathan does to suggest the ways in which his summary is somewhat limited. Fast's Paine is certainly the 'folkloric belligerent' described by Nathan, a defiant iconoclast sometimes depicted as 'completely alone; alone and unafraid'.¹⁵⁵ But at other times, Paine – introduced in France to his fellow revolutionaries as 'the friend of man' – is shown to seek the company and affection of others. He was 'no recluse', Fast writes, 'that was not for Paine; for Paine was the feeling of his fellow man, their nearness, their voices and their smiles and good intimacies'.¹⁵⁶ As the elderly Paine returns to America from France, he reflects that 'when he is old, a man wants a friend or two about him'; 'a man', he says, 'wants to die in a friendly place'.¹⁵⁷ Fast's picture of Paine's old age, then, is quite different from the one Nathan creates for himself, derived

¹⁵⁴ 'Tension' became a key term for the New Critics; see Allen Tate, "Tension in Poetry", *Southern Review*, 4 (Jan 1938), pp. 101-16.

¹⁵⁵ Howard Fast, *Citizen Tom Paine* [1943] (London: Bodley Head, 1945), 211.

¹⁵⁶ Fast, *Citizen Tom Paine*, 216.

¹⁵⁷ Fast, *Citizen Tom Paine*, 242.

rather from ‘those old Chinese paintings of the old man under the mountain’ who ‘goes into the woods’ and is ‘drawn down into austerity’.¹⁵⁸

As I discussed in my Introduction, friendship became important in early American efforts to imagine a ‘new kind of democratic relationship’ following the dissolution of what Paine called ‘the evil of monarchy and hereditary succession’.¹⁵⁹ Friendship ‘was a concept through which early Americans struggled to understand competing and often contradictory models of sociality and alliance’ as they sought to conceptualise their relation as citizens, and the claim of sovereignty made by the new republic.¹⁶⁰ In Paine’s work, the idea of friendship is often invoked to attempt to conceive of a new basis for association, both between citizens and between nation states. *Common Sense* (1776) is the work that Ira recommends to Nathan – unsurprisingly, given that Paine’s pamphlet was written in a ‘strikingly demotic populist voice’ that was much admired by Popular Front writers.¹⁶¹ But Paine’s title was ‘multivalent’, Richard Godbeer notes: it referred ‘not only to the basic and readily comprehensible principles on which its

¹⁵⁸ Roth, *Communist*, 72.

¹⁵⁹ Gurion Taussig, *Coleridge and the Idea of Friendship, 1789-1804* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2002), 146; Thomas Paine, *Political Writings*, ed. Bruce Kuklick (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 11.

¹⁶⁰ Christopher Castiglia, *Interior States: Institutional Consciousness and the Inner Life of Democracy in the Antebellum United States* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008), 24.

¹⁶¹ Robert Lamb, *Thomas Paine and the Idea of Human Rights* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 13; Kuklick, “Introduction”, in Paine, *Political Writings*, viii. On the Popular Front’s historical appropriation of Paine, see Harvey Kaye, *Thomas Paine and the Promise of America: A History & Biography* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2005), 218-222. Fraser Ottanelli notes that the CPUSA celebrated “Thomas Paine Day” on September 18, 1937. See *The Communist Party of the United States: From the Depression to World War II* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1991), 123.

arguments were constructed, but also to Americans' common capacity for sensation'.¹⁶² Paine's use of the phrase thus linked his work to the 'common sense school of philosophy', and its theory of natural affection and sympathy.¹⁶³ A conception of the natural equality and common rights of man derived from the common sense school underpinned Paine's republicanism, and informed his belief that 'the order of government must necessarily follow the order of nature'.¹⁶⁴ Paine goes on to argue that 'man, were he not corrupted by government, is naturally the friend of man'.¹⁶⁵ As Gurion Taussig suggests, Paine's work 'creates a space in which friendship might discover politically radical meanings through the discourse of intuitive feelings'.¹⁶⁶ Paine also offers a conception of natural justice that clearly recalls Aristotelian republicanism's precept that when men are friends, 'they have no need of justice'; Paine similarly suggests that, 'what Athens was in miniature, America will be in magnitude', and the idea of a *polis* defined by *philia* often plays a part in his thinking about civic ties and national alliances.¹⁶⁷ It is with 'the warm ardor of a friend' that, in his first *Crisis* pamphlet (1776), he addresses those who have remained loyal to the cause of independence; elsewhere, when imagining

¹⁶² Richard Godbeer, *The Overflowing of Friendship: Love Between Men and the Creation of the American Republic* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009), 151.

¹⁶³ On Paine's relation to Scottish 'common sense' moral philosophy, see Jay Fliegelman, *Prodigals and Pilgrims: The American Revolution Against Patriarchal Authority 1750-1800* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 103-108.

¹⁶⁴ Paine, *The Rights of Man, Part II* [1792] (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 26. See also Owen Aldrige, *Thomas Paine's American Ideology* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1984), 47.

¹⁶⁵ Paine, *The Rights of Man, Part II*, 76-77.

¹⁶⁶ Taussig, *Coleridge and the Idea of Friendship*, 146.

¹⁶⁷ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book VIII, 1155a, trans. Roger Crisp (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 144; Paine, *The Rights of Man, Part II*, 33.

America's relations with the rest of the world after it ceases to be a British colony, he encourages his fellow citizen to carry their 'friendship to a larger scale'.¹⁶⁸

Nathan's introduction to Paine's work via Fast's novel is part of his initiation, instigated by the Ringold brothers, into what he calls 'the big show, into my beginning to understand what it takes to be a man on the larger scale', and the novel clearly suggests a parallel between Paine's defiance of British paternalism and Nathan's developing independence from his father: 'once little Tom Paine has been let into the company of men', Nathan writes, 'the father is finished'.¹⁶⁹ But Paine's emphasis on friendship seems to get lost along the way. It takes the reappearance of Murray to remind Nathan that independence and isolation are not the same thing. Reading Paine more closely, we can see why he is a useful figure for historical appropriation for both Fast's and Roth's political novels, beyond his obvious resonance as a symbol of defiant independence. His articulation of the natural sympathy of man and the stress his political philosophy lays upon the importance of intuitive feelings to civic association chimes with the sentimental political culture of the Popular Front; but it also speaks to a wider communitarian emphasis on personal relations and civic friendship. Just as Fast had, Roth seeks to trace a political lineage from the country's founding to the present and, in its close reading of *Citizen Tom Paine, I Married a Communist* self-reflexively comments upon this ongoing search for a useable American past. In drawing a connection between Fast's historical fiction and his own, Roth thus foregrounds the role of the novel itself in the elaboration and transmission of a political culture, and in the making of national history.

¹⁶⁸ Paine, *Political Writings*, 46, 18.

¹⁶⁹ Roth, *Communist*, 32.

7. 'Take a bow, little guy'

As a boy, however, Nathan in fact doesn't aspire to write historical fictions like Fast, but patriotic radio dramas in the style of Norman Corwin's *On a Note of Triumph*, and Roth draws a parallel between the radio and the novel throughout:

The form of Corwin's play was loose, plotless [...] written in the high colloquial, alliterative style that may have derived [...] from the effort of playwrights of the twenties and thirties to forge a recognizable native idiom [...] a poeticised vernacular that, in Norman Corwin's case, combined the rhythms of ordinary speech with a faint literary stiltedness.¹⁷⁰

Later in the novel, we get to sample Nathan's own highly derivative 'dialogue play', *The Stooge of Torquemada*. Nathan isn't the first Roth character to have imitated the 'poet laureate of radio'; Alexander Portnoy also recalls attempting to write a 'prose-poetry' play 'inspired by my master, Norman Corwin', with the mock-Popular Front title, *Let Freedom Ring!*.¹⁷¹ Like Nathan, Portnoy is a 'sucker for manly intimacy' and, under the influence of his Ira-like brother-in-law Morty, he too begins to 'evangelize for Henry Wallace'.¹⁷² But the tone of Roth's evocation of the sentimental political culture of the

¹⁷⁰ Roth, *Communist*, 38.

¹⁷¹ Philip Roth, *Portnoy's Complaint* [1969] (London: Vintage, 2005), 169, 170.

¹⁷² Roth, *Communist*, 233; *Portnoy*, 168. Marshall Berman notes that 'Roth has shown, both in *Portnoy* and more elaborately in *I Married a Communist* how much the Popular Front formed his youthful sensibility'. "Dancing with America: Philip Roth, Writer on the Left", *New Labor Forum*, 9 (Winter 2001), pp. 46-56 (48).

Popular Front is quite different in the later novel.¹⁷³ Roth's isn't simply parodying Corwin anymore, but is instead suggesting a deeper affinity between the 'poeticized vernacular' of *On a Note of Triumph* and *I Married a Communist*. Nathan and Murray's 'dialogue' is a kind of updated version of Nathan's first Corwinesque 'dialogue plays'; their conversation might also be said to 'combine the rhythms of ordinary speech with a faint literary stiltedness', and like Corwin's radio dramas, their conversation is attuned to questions of national identity and community.¹⁷⁴

Corwin was the most influential of a group of progressive writers and producers who made network radio 'the site of the left's greatest success in the culture industry'.¹⁷⁵ Though never a Communist like Fast, Corwin also supported Wallace as 'the last and best bulwark against fascism in America', following the death of Roosevelt in 1947.¹⁷⁶ *On a Note of Triumph* was his grand paean to the ordinary GI – the 'little guy' – who had 'beaten the brownshirt bully boys' against the odds.¹⁷⁷ Broadcast to over 60 million listeners, the drama blended a sentimental ethnic patriotism with a celebratory, utopian internationalism to evoke 'a mystical vision of citizenship'.¹⁷⁸ Nathan quotes the play's closing 'prayer' – though notably omits its famous final line, a plea 'That man unto his

¹⁷³ Roth recalls listening to *On a Note of Triumph* as 'one of the most thrilling experiences of my childhood'. Pierpont notes that the script was 'the first book he ever bought'. *Roth Unbound*, 21.

¹⁷⁴ Pierpont describes Murray's speech as 'stiff and oddly literary'. *Roth Unbound*, 234.

¹⁷⁵ Denning, *The Cultural Front*, 91.

¹⁷⁶ Michael Keith and Mary Ann Watson (eds.), *Norman Corwin's One World Flight: The Lost Journal of Radio's Greatest Writer* (London: Bloomsbury, 2009), 193-194.

¹⁷⁷ Norman Corwin, *On a Note of Triumph* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1945), 10.

¹⁷⁸ Neil Verma, *Theater of the Mind: Imagination, Aesthetics, and American Radio Drama* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2012), 81.

fellow man shall be a friend forever’ – before reflecting on the appeal of Corwin’s work, and of the radio generally:

The power of that broadcast! There, amazingly, was *soul* coming out of the radio. The Spirit of the Common Man had inspired an immense melange of populist adoration [...] Corwin modernized Tom Paine for me by democratising the risk, making it a question not of one just wild man but a collective of all the little just men pulling together [...] A thrilling idea. And how Corwin laboured to force it, at least imaginatively, to come true.¹⁷⁹

Nathan here takes seriously the idea of a sentimental political culture, and he captures the way in which Corwin’s work epitomised the ‘pluralist promise’ of ‘radio’s unique nationalising address’.¹⁸⁰ In the 1930s and 1940s, Americans ‘looked to radio not only to reflect but to resolve some of the tensions they felt about the nature of [the country’s] institutions, the location of social power, [...] and the future of its democracy’.¹⁸¹ Radio’s ‘invisible national reach’ and ‘universal and simultaneous address’ became the ‘perfect symbol of national unity’, while the medium’s ‘preoccupation with voices, reception practices and the interests of “the people”’ seemed to ‘gesture toward a model of

¹⁷⁹ Roth, *Communist*, 41. Emphasis in original.

¹⁸⁰ David Goodman, *Radio’s Civic Ambition: American Broadcasting and Democracy in the 1930s* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 181; Michele Hilmes, *Radio Voices: American Broadcasting, 1922-1952* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 230.

¹⁸¹ Elena Razlogova, *The Listener’s Ear: Early Radio and the American Public* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011), 2.

participatory democracy – a national town meeting in the air’.¹⁸² At the same time, the ‘mobility of radio voices across the borders between the intimate world of domesticity, solitude, and one-to-one conversation, and the public world of politics, sociability and mass communication’ also seemed to ‘conjure a new social space both public and private, national and local’, located in ‘the middle distance opening up between publicity and intimacy’.¹⁸³

Of course the novel is another medium capable of a distinctive kind of national address, or interpellation, and has long been considered among the primary ‘technologies’ by which national community is imagined.¹⁸⁴ But we might think of the narrative frame of *I Married a Communist* as an attempt to forge a novelistic version of radio’s singular evocation of a middle distance between intimacy and publicity.¹⁸⁵ Nathan suggests that the ‘book of my life has been a book of voices’, but, as Robert Chodat notes, ‘which of these voices are public, which voices are private, [and] which voices evolve from one into the other’ remains an open question.¹⁸⁶ The appeal of Corwin’s dramas, and of the sentimental political culture of the time more generally, Nathan reflects, was the sense

¹⁸² Jason Loviglio, *Radio’s Intimate Public: Network Broadcasting and Mass-mediated Democracy* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005), xix.

¹⁸³ Loviglio, *Radio’s Intimate Public*, xvi.

¹⁸⁴ See Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* [1983] (London: Verso, 2006).

¹⁸⁵ This link between the radio and the novel’s narrative structure is made near-explicit when Nathan, having dropped Murray back into town for the final time, sees the ‘citronella candle’ burning on his porch, and is reminded of ‘the radio dial’ of the ‘cathedral-shaped table radio’ he had in his room as a boy. *Communist*, 320.

¹⁸⁶ Robert Chodat, “Fictions Public and Private: On Philip Roth”, *Contemporary Literature*, 46:4 (Winter 2005), pp. 688-719 (717).

that ‘history had been scaled down and personalized’, and the novel also explores the scales of civic affiliation and action that form a public.¹⁸⁷ Framing a national history through an intimate conversation between two friends, the novel looks back to the democratic aesthetics of the Popular Front, and to the radio in particular, to self-reflexively consider what role literature might play in how we address and imagine a political community.¹⁸⁸

As a freshman at Chicago, Nathan encounters some forthright opinions on just this subject, when he lets his literature tutor Leo Glucksman read his radio play. ‘Who taught you art is in the service of “*the people*”?’ Glucksman demands after reading Nathan’s ‘propagandist crap’; ‘Art is in the service of *art*’.¹⁸⁹ Dismayed by the idea of ‘the culture of the peasants and the workers’, Glucksman insists that Nathan strive for ‘aesthetic mastery over everything that drives you to write in the first place – your outrage, your politics, your grief, your love!’. Swapping Corwin for Kierkegaard, Glucksman teaches Nathan that ‘the public’ is a ‘monstrous abstraction’ to be reviled.¹⁹⁰ Glucksman may appear a much-needed Trillingite counterweight to Nathan’s infatuation

¹⁸⁷ Roth, *Communist*, 39.

¹⁸⁸ Roth develops this interest in the radio in *The Plot Against America*. Much of the novel’s political drama reaches the Roth family through the radio, while the muckraking disk jockey Walter Winchell becomes the unlikely voice of anti-fascist resistance in the book. Near the start of the novel, Roth signals his interest in the peculiar intimacies created by the radio, when nine-year-old Philip and his brother Sandy listen to the Republican Party Convention ‘being aired over our own living room radio and the radio playing in the flat downstairs and [...] the radios of our neighbors to either side and across the way [...] the broadcast blanketed the block from Keer to Chancellor’. Lindbergh’s nomination as the Republican candidate brings ‘every last family on the block out into the street [...] Entire families known to me previously only full dressed in daytime clothing were wearing pajamas and nightdresses under their bathrobes’ (15-16).

¹⁸⁹ Roth, *Communist*, 218. Emphasis in original.

¹⁹⁰ Roth, *Communist*, 218, 219.

with Ira's workingman's argot, but if Nathan's fluency in Corwin-esque corniness is inauthentic, so too is Glucksman's cultivation of a liberal imagination.¹⁹¹ Though still a PhD student, Glucksman dresses in 'a three-piece black suit and a crimson tie', recalling the observation of Ted Solotaroff – a classmate of Roth's when they were both (briefly) enrolled in the doctoral program at Chicago – that all graduate students in the 1950s 'came on as though [they] were thirty'.¹⁹² Solotaroff reflects on how Lionel Trilling acted as a 'guide' to young Jewish intellectuals into the 'Anglo-American literary tradition', a role Glucksman also plays for Nathan.¹⁹³ Through this process of cultural assimilation, Trilling and other Jewish literary critics were able to 'pass' in the WASP academy; but Glucksman is passing in another way as well.¹⁹⁴ When Nathan visits his tutor in his room late one evening, Glucksman makes a sexual advance:

“Oh, Nathan,” Leo said tenderly. “My dear friend.” It was the first time he had called me anything other than “Mr. Zuckerman.” He sat me down at his desk and, standing over me just inches away, watched while [...] I undid the

¹⁹¹ See Posnock, *Philip Roth's Rude Truth*, 52. David Rampton suggests that the novel 'represents an important revision of the Glucksman/ Trilling point of view'. "Stupidity's Progress: Philip Roth and Twentieth-Century American History", in Peter Swirski (ed.), *I Sing the Body Politic: History as Prophecy in Contemporary American Literature* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2009), pp. 12-46 (16).

¹⁹² Roth, *Communist*, 217; Theodore Solotaroff, "The Journey of Philip Roth", *Atlantic Monthly*, April 1969, pp. 64-72 (67), quoted in Gooblar, *Major Phases*, 38.

¹⁹³ Theodore Solotaroff, "The New York Publishing World", in Bernard Rosenberg and Ernest Goldstein (eds.), *Creators and Disturbers: Reminiscences by Jewish Intellectuals of New York* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), pp. 401-419 (409). Solotaroff notes that 'reading [Trilling] you felt that you hadn't betrayed your heart by abandoning your radicalism' (409).

¹⁹⁴ See Freedman, *The Temple of Culture*, 164.

buttons of a mackinaw already wet and heavy with snow. Maybe he thought I was preparing to undo everything.¹⁹⁵

The association of high culture and homosexuality is a little tired, to be sure, and Glucksman can appear at times as much a caricature as Ira sometimes does.¹⁹⁶ But this is Roth's point: both tutors, Nathan realises, are equally 'uncompromising' in their ideals.¹⁹⁷ And it's also worth pausing to consider the curious weight given to the term 'friend' here. Glucksman and Nathan aren't friends, nor does Glucksman have friendship in mind when he uses the word. For a Kierkegaardian like Glucksman, friendship is only ever a ruse, or an extended form of self-love (hence, perhaps, Roth's association of the term with homosexuality here).¹⁹⁸ And this conception of human nature underpins Glucksman's view of art, 'the public', and of politics more broadly. That is to say, thinking about how Glucksman (mis)uses the term 'friend' reveals much about his wider worldview. This is true elsewhere in the novel. When, for example, Murray suggests that the anti-union schools superintendent was 'no friend of mine', we should understand the charge as a meaningful one; and when he recalls that no city was 'friendlier' in the 1940s than

¹⁹⁵ Roth, *Communist*, 238.

¹⁹⁶ Roth repeatedly links Kierkegaard to homosexuality. I have outlined how Alvin Pepler becomes associated with the philosopher in *Zuckerman Unbound*; the connection is also made in *The Professor of Desire*, where David Kepesh discovers that his 'only male friend', and 'Kierkegaard mentor', Louis Jelinek is gay. *The Professor of Desire* [1977] (London: Vintage, 2000), 17. David Brauner also connects Jelinek and Glucksman, though not via Kierkegaard; see Brauner, "Performance Anxiety: Impotence, Queerness, and the 'Drama of Self-Disgust' in Philip Roth's *The Professor of Desire* and *The Humbling*", in David Gooblar and Aimee Pozorski (eds.), *Roth After Eighty: Philip Roth and the American Literary Imagination* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2016), pp. 61-78 (65-66).

¹⁹⁷ Roth, *Communist*, 224.

¹⁹⁸ On Kierkegaard and friendship, see Graham Smith, *Friendship and the Political: Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Schmitt* (Exeter: Imprint Academic, 2011), 79-128, esp. 95-100.

Newark, he is saying something significant about his civic values.¹⁹⁹ Similarly, when Nathan reflects that ‘telling the truth, particularly to me’ about his membership of the CPUSA ‘never occurred’ to Ira, because to do so would have ‘put our friendship at risk’, he is pointing to a fundamental flaw not only in their relationship, but in Ira’s ideological commitment.²⁰⁰

Glucksman’s dismissal of the sentimentality of the Popular Front also recalls the opinion of one of Ira’s old army buddies, once sympathetic to Communism, but now a factory boss. Goldstine tells Nathan not to believe the ‘fairy tale about people’s *brotherhood*’ pedalled by the Communists, because ‘we know what our brother is, don’t we? He’s a shit. And we know what our friend is, don’t we? He’s a semi-shit’.²⁰¹ In isolation, the distinction Goldstine draws between brothers and friends may seem odd. But as part of Roth’s foregrounding of the term ‘friend’ throughout the book – whether in the examples noted above, or in Nathan’s summary of *Citizen Tom Paine* – Goldstine’s commentary can be read as part of the novel’s broader exploration of the relationship between friendship and politics, and between the political cultures of the 1940s and 1990s. In my Introduction, I examined how the resurgent interest in civic friendship in the late twentieth century precipitated a range of critiques of the conceptual elision of friendship and fraternity in classical democratic theory. Most prominently, Derrida criticised not only the implicit androcentrism of such an elision, but the way in which it instituted a political economy of sameness rather than difference, and was therefore anti-

¹⁹⁹ Roth, *Communist*, 5, 283. Robert Chodat makes a similar point. See “Fictions Public and Private”, 708.

²⁰⁰ Roth, *Communist*, 241.

²⁰¹ Roth, *Communist*, 95.

pluralist.²⁰² I suggested that Derrida's critique can thus be historicised as one of a number of attempts emerging in the 1990s to imagine a version of civic friendship 'beyond the principle of fraternity'.²⁰³ In its recuperation of the Popular Front – the political culture of which was marked, as Irving Howe put it, by a feeling of 'anti-fascist fraternity' – *I Married a Communist* attempts something similar.²⁰⁴ Although Murray is celebrated as 'the very best of loyal brothers', the novel also warns how 'a twisted sense of loyalty' leads him to betray his principles to protect Ira after he has committed murder.²⁰⁵ Yet nor does the novel simply dismiss the Popular Front's populist idealisation of 'masculine brotherhood', whether in Fast's historical novels, or Corwin's radio dramas.²⁰⁶ Rather, through Murray and Nathan's conversations, Roth attempts to recall and recover something of this demotic cultural style, while also gesturing to another kind of political relation: in Murray and Nathan's friendship, the novel offers an alternative both to 'the fairy tale of people's brotherhood', and Goldstine's political nihilism.²⁰⁷

²⁰² See Samir Haddad, *Derrida and the Inheritance of Democracy* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013), 102-108.

²⁰³ Jacques Derrida, *The Politics of Friendship*, trans. George Collins [French, 1994; English, 1997] (London: Verso, 2005), 12.

²⁰⁴ Howe and Coser, *The American Communist Party*, 325.

²⁰⁵ Roth, *Communist*, 323, 303.

²⁰⁶ Denning, *The Cultural Front*, 117. In *Citizen Tom Paine*, Fast has Paine imagine 'a united states of Europe allied to a united states of America, a brotherhood of man' (184). *On a Note of Triumph's* closing prayer includes the imperative to 'Post proofs that brotherhood is not so wild a dream as those who profit by postponing it pretend'.

²⁰⁷ On Goldstine's nihilism, see Sorin Radu Cucu, *The Underside of Politics: Global Fictions in the Fog of the Cold War* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2013), 109.

8. 'My last task'

In my reading, then, it's Murray rather than Ira who is the more significant character in understanding the novel's political imagination, although, like the trilogy's other heroic men, not one without flaws.²⁰⁸ Late in the novel we learn that Murray's wife Doris was murdered during a mugging in Newark, where the Ringolds had remained despite the 'white flight' from the city following the race riots in the late 1960s. 'I wouldn't leave', Murray explains, 'just because it was now a poor black city full of problems', and he acknowledges that 'Doris paid the price for my civic virtue'.²⁰⁹ Doris's murder is one of the novel's darkest ironies, and one from which Jack Miles pleaded with Roth to spare Murray. In a handwritten postscript to a letter, Miles writes:

Imagine how different an effect would be created if Doris did not die – mugged maybe – but instead provided her husband a wonderful, long autumn in Arizona [where Murray eventually moves] and if, *after* that marvellous, starry [?] conclusion – Nathan received word of [Murray's] death in a letter from Doris who would, of course, remember him and who might provide a remarkable fact or two of her own.²¹⁰

²⁰⁸ Aimee Pozorski similarly argues that Murray emerges as 'the true hero of the book'. "'An ear in search of a word': Writing and the Politics of Listening in Roth's *I Married a Communist*", in Lee Trepanned and Claudia Franziska Brühwiler (eds.), *A Political Companion to Philip Roth* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2017), pp. 15-40 (32).

²⁰⁹ Roth, *Communist*, 316, 317.

²¹⁰ Jack Miles, Letter to Roth dated January 1, 1997, "Jack Miles Correspondence", Box 24, Folder 13, Philip Roth Papers. Emphasis in original.

Roth didn't heed Miles's advice – at least, not for Murray's story; we might, however, note a certain similarity between Miles's idea for Doris's role in *I Married a Communist* and the plot trajectory Roth mapped out for Coleman Silk's sister Ernestine at the end of *The Human Stain*. But although Roth doesn't spare him a tragic ending, Murray remains Nathan's most enduring influence. Miles even suggested to Roth that:

Murray is, within this book and perhaps within your oeuvre, the love alternative. You have a moment for the acknowledgment of this or wonderment at it when Nathan says [...] "I wished I had invited him to stay with me. But I didn't have the heart..." Nathan shouldn't change. He should stay that way. He shouldn't invite Murray to stay. But Murray should be allowed to be, to the end, someone who always would invite Nathan to stay with him, who would have the heart. There are such people, and there is such a way.²¹¹

It's tempting to read these comments as at least partly about Miles and Roth's own friendship, and to speculate that Miles, like many readers, sees something of Roth in Nathan, as well as something of himself in Murray. He astutely picks out an important line near the end of the novel, one which echoes back to Murray's most pressing question to Nathan: 'Why do you live up there alone like that? Why don't you have the heart for the world?'.²¹² We never quite get a full answer – although Nathan's battle with cancer, and the travails of his younger years documented in the first Zuckerman trilogy, offer

²¹¹ Miles, Letter to Roth dated January 1, 1997.

²¹² Roth, *Communist*, 315.

some indication of why he lives in isolation. But, contrary to Miles, I argue that Nathan does in fact change over the course of the American Trilogy, and that *I Married a Communist* is pivotal to this change. As Aaron Chandler suggests, Nathan undergoes a ‘sentimental education’ during the trilogy, marked by an ‘intensification of intimacy between [Nathan] and his principal subject in each book’, culminating in his ‘serious friendship’ with Coleman Silk, to which I turn in a moment.²¹³ ‘Having a “heart for the world”’, Chandler continues, ‘is precisely what Zuckerman gains as the novels progress’.²¹⁴

Having the heart for the world means having the strength to endure its challenges, and the compassion to care for other people – what Chandler calls the capacity for ‘sympathetic engagement’, and which he associates with a longer tradition of sentimentality in American literature.²¹⁵ *I Married a Communist* thematises this idea both through its revisionary recuperation of the sentimental political culture of the Popular Front, and its extended portrait of a friendship between two men at different stages of old age. Nathan, in other words, may not have the heart to let Murray stay over, but he has the heart to write a novel in which the emotional registers of civic life are scrutinised, and in which the relationship between friendship and politics is explored in the very structure of the narrative he tells. He may not invite Murray to stay over, but Nathan offers him

²¹³ Aaron Chandler, “Pursuing Unhappiness: City, Space, and Sentimentalism in Post-Cold War American Literature”, Ph.D. Thesis, University of North Carolina (2009), 68; *The Human Stain*, 43. By ‘principal subject’, Chandler means Ira, although he also argues that ‘the affective intensity of Zuckerman’s relation to Ira’s story is underscored by his continuing friendship with Murray’ (69).

²¹⁴ Chandler, “Pursuing Unhappiness”, 68.

²¹⁵ Chandler, “Pursuing Unhappiness”, 65.

something else: the novel itself is a kind of ‘gift’ of their friendship – an idea I explore in more detail in the next chapter, in relation to Paul Auster’s work.

Roth gave a eulogy for Lowenstein, and *I Married a Communist* is Nathan’s tribute to Murray. This comparison clarifies something often overlooked by critics: the fact that Murray has died before Nathan begins writing the novel. The conversational immediacy of the narrative structure suggests that the novel is inspired by Murray’s reappearance – ‘that’s how the past showed up this time’, Nathan says when they bump into each other in town, ‘in the shape of a very old man’ – and on one level this is obviously true.²¹⁶ But on another, it’s Murray’s absence, not his presence, that prompts Nathan’s narrative.²¹⁷ Near the end of the novel, Murray insists on recounting the tragic circumstances of Ira’s final years in detail, because ‘I’d like to tell it right. To the end [...] My last task. To file Ira’s story with Nathan Zuckerman’. Nathan replies that ‘I don’t know what I can do with it’, to which Murray says, ‘That’s not my responsibility. My responsibility is to tell you’.²¹⁸ The question of responsibility itself, we might feel, seems to be at stake here. Taking on the responsibility of telling Ira’s convoluted story of political fervour and betrayal, Nathan also tries to do justice Murray’s life – to his teaching, his values, and finally, to the friendship they share.

²¹⁶ Roth, *Communist*, 3.

²¹⁷ An earlier version of this idea appears in my article, “‘A Late Adventure of the Feelings’: Eulogising Male Intimacy in *I Married a Communist* and *The Human Stain*”, *Philip Roth Studies*, 12:2 (Fall 2016), pp. 83-96 (89).

²¹⁸ Roth, *Communist*, 265.

9. 'the million circumstances of the other fellow's life'

A concern with responsibility re-emerges in *The Human Stain*, another novel written by Nathan after the death of a male friend. Coleman Silk resembles both the Swede and Ira in his tragic quest for 'self-definition', and in his attempt to slip free from his historical moment and ethnic origins.²¹⁹ Only at Coleman's funeral does Nathan learn that his friend was born to African-American parents and passed his adult life as Jewish. This revelation, made by Coleman's sister Ernestine, recalls Murray's disclosure of his brother's grave secret – that Ira committed murder as a young man – but the narrative repercussions of each revelation are markedly different. While Ira's crime 'makes sense' to Nathan and comes as no 'surprise', the revelation of Coleman's secret transforms his friend into an 'uncohesive person' in his eyes: 'I couldn't have imagined anything that could have made Coleman more of a mystery to me than his unmasking. Now that I knew everything, it was as though I knew nothing'.²²⁰ Nathan's narrative task becomes not so much to 'make sense' of Coleman's life as to present his 'mystery' in all its ambivalent and confounding complexity.²²¹ To do so is to restate the trilogy's insistence on the

²¹⁹ Royal, "Plotting the Frames", 137.

²²⁰ Roth, *Communist*, 297; Roth, *The Human Stain*, 333.

²²¹ Coleman emphasises the importance of 'mystery' in literature. He complains that his students demand that every text, 'no matter how knotty, or mysterious' must fit a 'conventionalized narrative' (147). Decrying the decline of 'serious' reading in America, Roth himself similarly suggests that 'literature takes a habit of mind that has disappeared. It requires silence [. . .] in the presence of [...] a *mysterious* thing'. David Remnick, "Into the Clear", *The New Yorker*, 8 May 2000, pp. 76-89 (87; emphasis added). Ernestine tells Nathan that she has 'not read any of your books [...] I tend to lean toward mysteries these days.' (333)

‘unknowability’ of others, and to confirm ‘why our understanding of people must always be at best slightly wrong’.²²²

While critics have stressed the similarities between Coleman and the protagonists of the other novels in the trilogy, little has been made of his resemblance to Murray. Like Murray, Coleman is a dedicated teacher, a Classics professor at Athena College (where Murray took his course on Shakespeare), and like *I Married a Communist*, *The Human Stain* opens in the classroom. Just as Murray is ‘brash’, ‘natural’, and ‘clear-cut’ in his teaching style, so Coleman is ‘direct, frank, and unacademically forceful’.²²³ He too encourages a combative form of literary engagement, modelled in part on his experience as an amateur boxer, and mirrored in his physique: while Murray is ‘rangy’ and ‘athletic’, Coleman, aged seventy, retains some of ‘the bounce of the high school athlete’.²²⁴ Coleman is not politically active like Murray, but is in his own way a ‘revolutionary’ force at Athena, vigorously rehabilitating the college’s ailing academic reputation.²²⁵ And he too is forced from his job by a politically-motivated witch hunt. Having asked if two perpetually absentee (and, unbeknownst to Coleman, African-American) students really exist, or are ‘spooks’, Coleman is dismissed on a trumped-up and ironic charge of racism.²²⁶ He is a victim of the ‘censorious’ political correctness and moral hypocrisy of

²²² Alluding to Isaiah Berlin’s 1953 essay, “The Fox and the Hedgehog”, Ross Posnock describes Roth as ‘the hedgehog who knows one big thing: unknowability’. “Purity and Danger: On Philip Roth”, *Raritan*, 21:2 (2001), pp. 85-101 (101); Roth, *The Human Stain*, 22.

²²³ Roth, *Communist*, 1; Roth, *The Human Stain*, 4.

²²⁴ Roth, *Communist*, 1; Roth, *The Human Stain*, 15.

²²⁵ Roth, *The Human Stain*, 25. Earlier, Coleman is described as ‘revolutionizing the curriculum’ (5).

²²⁶ Roth, *The Human Stain*, 6.

the summer of 1998 – the summer of the Monica Lewinsky affair – which the novel portrays as another iteration of 1950s McCarthyism: ‘it is too late in the century to call him a Communist’, Nathan writes, ‘though that is the way it used to be done’.²²⁷ Murray similarly twins the two eras, charting a ‘filiation of Republican politics from the 1950s to the present-day’ in his commentary on the funeral, in 1994, of Richard Nixon, who Murray reviles for his involvement with the House of Un-American Activities Committee.²²⁸ Murray reserves particular vitriol for two of Nixon’s eulogists, Henry Kissinger and Bill Clinton. Many critics have observed that Coleman’s ‘persecution’ is paralleled with the Republicans’ attempted impeachment of Clinton, but far fewer have noted that Coleman himself also alludes to Kissinger.²²⁹ Having tried to write about his dismissal in his abandoned memoir, *Spooks*, Coleman has found he ‘can’t manoeuvre the creative remove’ to write about himself. ‘Kissinger can unload fourteen hundred pages of this stuff every other year’, he tells Nathan, ‘but it’s defeated me’.²³⁰ Coleman instead asks Nathan to chronicle his story, and, although he initially refuses the request, *The Human Stain* ultimately represents Nathan’s attempt to write ‘the book [Coleman] had asked me to write in the first place, but written not necessarily as he wanted it’.²³¹

Nathan does not share a history with Coleman as he did with Murray, though it transpires that they grew up a few miles from each other in Newark, and attended the

²²⁷ Roth, *The Human Stain*, 290.

²²⁸ Hornung, “The Personal is the Fictional”, 83.

²²⁹ Safer, *Mocking the Age*, 117-178.

²³⁰ Roth, *The Human Stain*, 19.

²³¹ Roth, *The Human Stain*, 213.

same after-school boxing club a few years apart.²³² Although the two men are closer in age, something of the teacher-student dynamic of the previous novel remains, and the narrative set-up of their friendship is strikingly similar: two older men sitting on a porch high up in Berkshires, talking about the 1940s and 1990s. While Nathan holds his marathon conversations with Murray out on his cabin porch, in *The Human Stain* he ventures over to Coleman's isolated house on the other 'side of the mountain'. Their friendship develops casually over a couple of months, Coleman inviting Nathan over 'to listen to music, or [...] to play a little gin rummy [...] and sip some cognac' out on his 'cool screened-in side porch'.²³³ While it's the Soviet Army Chorus's rendition of the Russian folksong "Dubinushka" that leads Murray to disclose the tragic death of his daughter Lorraine to Nathan, it's Sinatra's sugary rendition of "Bewitched, Bothered, and Bewildered" that moves Coleman to take Nathan into his confidence, and reveal that he is having an affair with Faunia Farley, a thirty-four-year-old janitor at Athena – a revelation sure to further scandalise the local academic community.²³⁴ His Viagra-fuelled final fling leads Coleman to do away with his *Spooks* project and even become a little sentimental, as when he reads Nathan a love letter from an old girlfriend, Steena Paulson, whom he met in 1948, the year in which much of *I Married a Communist* is set. Later in the novel, this pre-civil rights historical context becomes important to Nathan's attempt to portray Coleman's decision to pass, and indicative of the novel's – and the trilogy's – broader twinning of the late 1940s and late 1990s.²³⁵

²³² Roth, *The Human Stain*, 204.

²³³ Roth, *The Human Stain*, 3-4, 19. Nathan drinks cognac with Lonoff in *The Ghost Writer* (53); he alludes to the earlier novel a couple of pages later in *The Human Stain* (5).

²³⁴ Roth, *Communist*, 74; Roth, *The Human Stain*, 24.

²³⁵ See Hutchison, *Writing the Republic*, 149.

In thrall to his nostalgia, and buoyed by openly declaring his affair, Coleman asks Nathan to dance with him:

“I hope nobody from the volunteer fire department drives by”, I said.

“Yeah,” he said. “We don’t want anybody tapping me on the shoulder and asking, ‘May I cut in?’”

On we danced. There was nothing overtly carnal in it, but because Coleman was wearing only his denim shorts and my hand rested easily on his warm back as if it were the back of a dog or a horse, it wasn’t entirely a mocking act. There was a semi-serious sincerity in his guiding me about on the stone floor [...]²³⁶

Like boxing, dancing figures an intimate, dextrous form of one-to-one engagement that becomes ‘a central metaphor in the novel, one directly linked to the narrative act’.²³⁷ Nathan imagines Faunia dancing with Coleman to the same sentimental ‘evening-long Saturday FM program’; later, he pictures her dancing at the foot of Coleman’s bed, a

²³⁶ Roth, *The Human Stain*, 26.

²³⁷ Royal, “Plotting the Frames”, 125. Earlier, I suggested that boxing figures a kind of combative exchange analogous to Socratic debate, while I also noted that Nathan is compared to Socrates in *American Pastoral*; his dance with Coleman may be another classical allusion. In Xenophon’s *Symposium*, Socrates, despite his old age, wishes to learn to dance, so that, unlike ‘the prize fighters, who develop their shoulders but become thin-legged’, he might exercise ‘every part’ of his body. Charmides then notes that he caught Socrates dancing by himself that morning and ‘feared that you were going stark mad; but when I heard you say much the same thing as you did just now, I myself went home, and although I did not dance [...] I practiced shadow-boxing, for I knew how to do that’. *Symposium*, II:17-19 in Xenophon, *Memorabilia, Oeconomicu, Symposium, Apologia*, trans. E. C. Marchant and O. J. Todd (Cambridge: Loeb Classical Library, 1997), 551-552. As a young man, Coleman ‘liked shadow-boxing [...] for the secrecy in it’ (100).

scene that itself echoes the swaying strip-tease of Steena Paulson back in 1948, sashaying to Artie Shaw and Roy Eldridge's rendition of Gershwin's "The Man I Love".²³⁸ As Jonathan Freedman notes, Steena dances 'to a black man's version of a Jewish man's version of a black-inspired musical idiom' and, as such, her performance keys into the broader 'discursive matrix' of race, ethnicity, and identity at play in the novel.²³⁹ Nathan and Coleman's foxtrot is also a 'black and Jewish dance' in which ethnicity is problematised.²⁴⁰ Given the novel's range of allusions to both nineteenth-century U.S. literature and post-WWII Jewish-American intellectual culture, it's perhaps not too far-fetched to interpret Nathan and Coleman's friendship as Roth's version of the kind of interracial male bonding that Leslie Fiedler suggested was at the heart of classic American fiction.²⁴¹ But their friendship also forms part of the trilogy's broader exploration of Jewish and African-American relations in the second half of the twentieth century – a theme in Roth's fiction since *Goodbye, Columbus* (1959).²⁴² *American Pastoral* focuses on the 'shifting racial landscape' of Newark following the race riots of the 1960s, while perhaps the most deeply-held of Ira's political convictions is his anti-

²³⁸ Roth, *The Human Stain*, 203.

²³⁹ Jonathan Freedman, *Klezmer America: Jewishness, Ethnicity, Modernity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), 182.

²⁴⁰ Ranen Omer-Sherman, *Diaspora and Zionism in Jewish American Literature: Lazarus, Syrkin, Reznikoff, and Roth* (Hanover: Brandeis University Press, 2002), 257.

²⁴¹ As reader of 'Commentary, Midstream, and the *Partisan Review*' (131) in the late-1940s, Coleman may well have come across Fiedler's article in which he first formulated his thesis, "'Come Back to the Raft Ag'in, Huck Honey!'", *Partisan Review*, 15 (June 1948), pp. 269-276.

²⁴² Marshall Berman notes that the 'special affinity of blacks and Jews' has been a 'Rothian theme' for 'almost half a century'. "Dancing with America", 48.

racism.²⁴³ Nathan's relationship with Coleman, then, continues Roth's exploration of 'the de-ethnicising', or 'whitening of Jewish identity' in America.²⁴⁴

When they first dance, however, Nathan knows nothing of Coleman's secret; rather, the pair appear to be two Jewish men of a similar age, raised a few miles apart in New Jersey, with similar political outlooks and conceptions of literary value. But their friendship is formed not so much by these shared cultural markers as by a shared understanding of what Nathan calls 'an essential part of being a man' – sex. Surprised at Coleman's candour regarding his affair with Faunia, Nathan reflects:

I thought, He's found somebody he can talk with...and then I thought, So have I. The moment a man starts to tell you about sex, he's telling you something about the two of you. Ninety percent of the time it doesn't happen, and probably it's just as well it doesn't, though if you can't get a level of candor on sex and you choose to behave instead as if this isn't ever on your mind, the male friendship is incomplete. Most men never find such a friend. It's not common. But when it does happen, when two men find themselves in agreement about this essential part of being a man, unafraid of being judged, shamed, envied, or outdone, confident of not having the

²⁴³ Jennifer Glaser, *Borrowed Voices: Writing and Racial Ventriloquism in the Jewish American Imagination* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2016), 96. When asked by Nathan what 'Negroes [are] actually like', Ira says that the 'characteristic I was most aware of [was] their warm friendliness'. Roth, *Communist*, 93.

²⁴⁴ Emily Miller Budick, *Blacks and Jews in Literary Conversation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 1; Glaser, *Borrowed Voices*, 95, 96.

confidence betrayed, their human connection can be very strong and an unexpected intimacy results.²⁴⁵

This 'serious friendship' upends Nathan's project of 'radical seclusion'. Murray had reminded him of the 'pleasures of companionship', but it's his friendship with Coleman that brings Nathan 'out from under the stalwartness of living alone'.²⁴⁶ As in the earlier novel, a male friendship allows Nathan to regain a 'heart for the world', in all its hostility and incomprehensibility: 'I did no more than find a friend', he writes, 'and all the world's malice came rushing in'.²⁴⁷

But, as in *I Married a Communist*, Nathan only realises the true extent of his feelings for Coleman in retrospect, and, as in the earlier novel, the friend is dead before the book begins. In an interview conducted a few years after *The Human Stain*'s publication, Roth reflects on the unique process of 're-estimation' that accompanies the death of the friends:

The death of friends is a very, very difficult thing to come to grips with [...] Your friends are your friends for life, as it were. You're all in this thing together. You're equals [...] and you have a kind of feeling for friends unlike the feeling you have for family. You're quite astonished, I think, by the depth of the feeling when someone dies, what you felt for a friend. And also the re-

²⁴⁵ Roth, *The Human Stain*, 27.

²⁴⁶ Roth, *The Human Stain*, 44, 45.

²⁴⁷ Roth, *The Human Stain*, 45.

estimation which happens when someone dies happens all the time with friends, I think. I don't mean that you suddenly think, gosh, he was a wonderful fellow, and I always thought he was a son of a bitch. Not that. Nothing as crude as that. But rather, you suddenly see them clearly, vividly. And it's very strong medicine.²⁴⁸

Nathan experiences a similar sense of recognition, although he does not so much see Coleman 'clearly', as clearly see how little he ever understood his friend – a kind of 'unknowing' between friends that Paul Auster also writes about, and that I explore a little more in the next chapter. But the interrelation of death and male friendship is crucial. In my Introduction, I examined the 'elegiac tone' that characterises the philosophical and literary tradition of friendship, and noted that many of the canonical texts of friendship are also works of consolation.²⁴⁹ Continental philosophy in particular has explored how 'the experience of friendship [...] is intimately connected with the experience of loss, of mourning', and how, as Simon Critchley writes, the 'voice of the friend' always reaches us from 'beyond the grave'.²⁵⁰

The Human Stain is also a work of mourning, and one that has its moment of origin in Nathan visiting the grave of his 'utterly transformed friend', and listening for Coleman's voice: 'Out there at the grave [...] I waited and I waited for him to speak until at last I heard him asking Faunia what was the worst job she ever had [...] And that is

²⁴⁸ Terry Gross, "Fresh Air Remembers Novelist Philip Roth", May 25, 2018.

²⁴⁹ Barry Weller, "The Rhetoric of Friendship in Montaigne's *Essais*", 504.

²⁵⁰ Simon Critchley, *Ethics, Politics, Subjectivity: Essays on Derrida, Levinas and Contemporary French Thought* (London: Verso, 1999), 257.

how all this began'.²⁵¹ Nathan is 'Roth's original ghost writer', and a certain spectrality has always figured in the Zuckerman Books, from *The Ghost Writer* to *Exit Ghost* (2007).²⁵² Nathan's account of his friendship with Coleman – who insists that he used the word 'spooks' in its 'primary meaning [...] as a specter or ghost', rather than as a racial epithet – is also shadowed by death from the start.²⁵³ As Sinatra begins to sing and Coleman invites him to dance, Nathan thinks, 'What the hell [...] we'll both be dead soon enough', and flits back to the sight of Coleman, 'out of his mind with grief and rage' after the death of his wife Iris – which Coleman blames on the fallout from the racism charge: 'maybe why I gave him my hand and let him [...] push me dreamily around [...] was because I had been there that day when her corpse was still warm and seen what he'd looked like'.²⁵⁴ That deathly warmth permeates the men's dance – it's felt when Nathan rests his hand upon Coleman's 'warm back' – and there is a spectral quality to the scene that has something to it of what Nathan, in *Exit Ghost*, will describe, citing Keats's last letter, as his sense of living a 'posthumous existence'.²⁵⁵ Nathan quotes Keats to Coleman, too, when the latter waxes lyrical over the 'ignitable' Faunia: "'La Belle Dame sans Merci have thee in thrall'", Nathan says, alluding to the line spoken by the 'death pale warriors' in the knight's 'latest dream' in Keats's poem.²⁵⁶ Coleman may well dance

²⁵¹ Roth, *The Human Stain*, 334.

²⁵² David Coughlan, *Ghost Writing in Contemporary American Fiction* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 98.

²⁵³ Roth, *The Human Stain*, 6.

²⁵⁴ Roth, *The Human Stain*, 25-26.

²⁵⁵ Roth, *The Human Stain*, 26; Philip Roth, *Exit Ghost* (London: Vintage, 2007), 221; John Keats, "Letter to Charles Brown, November 30, 1820", in *Keats's Poetry and Prose*, ed. Jeffrey Cox (New York: Norton, 2009), 533.

²⁵⁶ John Keats, "La Belle Dame sans Merci", in *Keats's Poetry and Prose*, 343. Nathan also quotes "The Eve of St. Agnes" in describing Coleman and Faunia (212).

him ‘right back into life’, as Nathan says, but only by fostering within him a ‘keen awareness of the narrative implications surrounding death’.²⁵⁷

Peter Boxall finds in Roth’s most recent novels a preoccupation with ‘posthumousness’ and the development of a ‘late style’ that turns ‘obsessively around the experience of exhaustion, the dwindling, failing, or expiring of the narrative voice and of the literary talent’.²⁵⁸ Most discussions of Roth’s late style focus on his post-American Trilogy novels, but there is a preoccupation with not only the waning of artistic and sexual potency, but old age and mortality in the earlier works, too.²⁵⁹ As Kasia Boddy notes, ‘Roth’s novels have been full of funerals’ for ‘the past twenty years’, and *The Human Stain* is no exception – the final chapter begins with the sentence ‘Two funerals’, referring to Faunia’s and Coleman’s.²⁶⁰ At the latter, Nathan listens to a eulogy given by Herb Keble, Athena’s first African-American professor and Coleman’s first appointment as Dean. Having failed to defend Coleman when he was accused of racism, Keble uses his eulogy to apologise for his cowardice, and to glorify Coleman as ‘an American individualist par excellence’ in the tradition of New England’s literary forefathers, ‘Hawthorne, Melville, and Thoreau’.²⁶¹ Nathan, however, doesn’t buy Keble’s remorse,

²⁵⁷ Royal, “Plotting the Frames”, 127.

²⁵⁸ Peter Boxall, *Twenty-First-Century Fiction: A Critical Introduction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 31.

²⁵⁹ On Roth’s late style, see Shipe, “*Exit Ghost* and the Politics of Late Style”; Adam Zachary Newton, “‘I was the prosthesis’: Roth and Late Style”, in Gooblar and Pozorski (eds.), *Roth after Eighty*, pp. 127-49.

²⁶⁰ Boddy, “Philip Roth’s Great Books”, 47; Roth, *The Human Stain*, 285. Murray says that ‘two funerals’ – those of Russomanno’s canary and Nixon – have ‘more or less bracketed my conscious life’ (280).

²⁶¹ Roth, *The Human Stain*, 310.

nor his characterisation of Coleman. Strong-armed by Coleman's children in their bid to salvage their father's reputation, Nathan realises that Keble's eulogy is part of a concerted effort to, as he puts it in a nicely ironic phrase, 'kosher the record'.²⁶²

Just as I suggested we might, with Roth's eulogy for Bob Lowenstein in mind, read *I Married a Communist* as Nathan's tribute to Murray, so too can we read *The Human Stain* as Nathan's counter-eulogy for the 'counterconfessional' counterpuncher Coleman, one that complicates the neat 're-estimation' Keble attempts in his funeral address.²⁶³ Rather than simplifying Coleman's story into the kind of 'conventionalized narrative' despised by the professor – in which there must always be 'closure', and a discrete 'beginning, middle, and end' – Nathan attempts to do justice to Coleman's singular life by recognising the 'blizzard of details that constitute the confusion of a human biography'.²⁶⁴ As Ross Posnock notes, rather than 'mythologise' Coleman as an 'American individualist', Nathan 'instead inquires into the costs' of Coleman's 'oppositional individualism', a reckoning that inevitably reflects back upon Nathan's own decision to live alone.²⁶⁵ Nathan gains a clear account of some of these costs from Coleman's sister Ernestine. Their conversation near the end of the novel is recorded at some length, recalling the dialogic structure of *I Married a Communist*. Like Murray, Ernestine is a dedicated public school teacher whose talk is permeated by local history and an old-fashioned patriotic liberalism: 'In my generation, as in yours', she tells

²⁶² Roth, *The Human Stain*, 312.

²⁶³ Roth, *The Human Stain*, 100.

²⁶⁴ Roth, *The Human Stain*, 147, 22.

²⁶⁵ Posnock, *Philip Roth's Rude Truth*, 222.

Nathan, 'it was recommended that each student who graduated from high school in New Jersey get [...] a diploma and a copy of the Constitution'.²⁶⁶ Decrying the 'urban renewal' of East Orange, Ernestine sounds like Murray reminiscing about the old First Ward, and this similarity is indicative of a broader affinity of political perspective across the two novels.²⁶⁷ Listening to Ernestine, Nathan comes to see Coleman not only in the broader context of his national historical moment, but in the context of his local and family history, such that his decision to pass is 'presented not so much as a betrayal of the entire black race as a betrayal of a particular set of people'.²⁶⁸

As in *I Married a Communist*, then, male friendship becomes a prism through which Roth explores the kinds of allegiances and affiliations that might structure a life and a political community, and a key to discerning the ways in which we are embedded not only in a particular set of historical circumstances, but in a particular network of relationships. Nathan's late-in-life friendships with Murray and Coleman therefore also call into question his own decision to live apart from the world, undermining his conception of adulthood, and offering an alternative to what Posnock calls the 'frozen grown-upism' of masculine independence and isolation.²⁶⁹ But it's an alternative that can only be recognised in retrospect; both friendships are over before Nathan begins to write, and so each book represents a work of mourning. David Coughlan argues that the Zuckerman Books always 'begin with death' and are 'directly concerned with the

²⁶⁶ Roth, *The Human Stain*, 327.

²⁶⁷ Roth, *The Human Stain*, 330

²⁶⁸ Chodat, "Fictions Public and Private", 709.

²⁶⁹ Posnock, *Philip Roth's Rude Truth*, 48.

responsibility of the writer to the dead'.²⁷⁰ But in *The Human Stain*, Nathan's responsibility is also that of a friend. Invoking Chekhov's definition of the task of the writer – which Roth is also fond of quoting – Nathan captures these overlapping obligations: 'The dance that sealed our friendship was also what made his disaster my subject. And made the proper presentation of his secret my problem to solve'.²⁷¹ Quoting this line, Andy Connolly concludes that 'Zuckerman thus finds in Coleman's history a suitable canvas for once again exploring the relationship between personal acts of self-transformation and authorial models for reinventing life'.²⁷² This may be so, but Coleman isn't only a 'canvas' to Nathan, and his story is 'not merely a mental exercise': 'His difficulties mattered to me, and this despite my determination [...] to have not even a life of my own to care about, let alone somebody else's'.²⁷³ In properly presenting Coleman's secret, then, Nathan will have to do justice to their 'human connection'; and if, as Connolly intimates, this represents a narrative opportunity, it might also represent a haunting responsibility to a friend, a dubious gift.

²⁷⁰ Coughlan, *Ghost Writing in Contemporary American Fiction*, 98.

²⁷¹ Roth quotes Chekhov's distinction between 'the solution of the problem and a correct presentation of the problem' in *Reading Myself and Others*, 16.

²⁷² Connolly, *Philip Roth and the American Liberal Tradition*, 176.

²⁷³ Roth, *The Human Stain*, 43.

CHAPTER TWO

The Gift of Friendship:

Correspondence, Exchange, and the Ethics of Generosity in Paul Auster's Fiction

1. 'I keep wanting to give you things'

In the final section of the previous chapter, I began to think about the relationship between the work of friendship and the work of mourning and, more broadly, to consider the kinds of obligations and responsibilities that structure a friendship and a political community. In the first half of this chapter, I turn to three novels by Paul Auster in which these issues are also at stake, and in which one male friend is tasked with accounting for the life of another. I approach these novels, and Auster's other works, by way of the gift, a concept that, like friendship, became the focus of renewed critical attention across a range of disciplines towards the end of the twentieth century, and that ever since has enjoyed a particular vogue among literary critics – and novelists – thanks to Lewis Hyde's bestselling book, *The Gift* (1983).¹ Hyde argues that unlike a commodity, a gift fosters a 'feeling-bond' between people and 'creates a community', rather than a set of market relations.² Articulating an ethics of generosity, Hyde argues that the gift substantiates a

¹ See, for example, Jacques Derrida, *The Gift of Death*, trans. David Wills (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996); Christopher Johnson, "Mauss's Gift: The Persistence of a Paradigm", *Modern and Contemporary France*, 4:3 (1996), pp. 307-317; Alan Schrift (ed.), *The Logic of the Gift: Toward an Ethic of Generosity* (New York: Routledge, 1997); John Caputo and Michael Scanlon, *God, the Gift, and Postmodernism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999). For a good overview, see Mark Osteen (ed.), *The Question of the Gift: Essays Across Disciplines* (New York: Routledge, 2002).

² Lewis Hyde, *The Gift: Creativity and the Artist in the Modern World* [1983] (New York: Vintage, 2007), 58, 154. Hyde's conception of the gift shares an affinity with Robert Putnam's theorisation for 'social capital', discussed in the Introduction.

kind of sociability beyond the logic of economic self-interest, one in which a pattern of reciprocity sutures ties between citizens. Yet, as Derrida cautions, distinguishing between a ‘gift economy’ and a ‘market economy’ might be less straightforward than Hyde suggests.³ Even well-intentioned acts of generosity and self-sacrifice might imbricate both donor and donee in a dynamic of restricting indebtedness – like other economic relations, the gift might only be a form of proprietorial social control. In the second half of this chapter, I continue to think through the equivocal promise of the gift by considering the circulation of money in Auster’s work. For Auster, money focalises the issues of value, reciprocity, and debt that trouble the idea of the gift. Yet, paradoxically, I argue that his work also holds to the possibility that the movement of money might nonetheless elaborate forms of haphazard solidarity and community between people, in which the working up and off of debts indexes emotional ties as well as financial obligations. Money, however, isn’t the only currency of friendship in Auster’s work, and throughout the chapter I consider how the concept of the gift becomes a model for thinking about the relationship between authors, texts, and readers in his fiction, and about the circulation of literature within the wider culture.

In analysing these forms of reciprocity, I turn first to another kind of exchange: correspondence. As in the previous chapter, I begin with letters passing between two male friends, but whereas before I drew on the private correspondence of Jack Miles and Philip Roth – whose friendship was for forty years mostly epistolary – in this chapter I draw on *Here and Now* (2013), the published correspondence of Auster and J. M. Coetzee,

³ See Jacques Derrida, *Given Time: 1. Counterfeit Money*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 17-18, fn. 8.

beginning in 2008 – shortly after the pair first met – and ending in 2011. ‘Reading a writer’s letters can sometimes be embarrassing’, Auster notes in a review of Kafka’s *Letters to Friends, Family, and Editors* (1977). ‘We feel we are intruding on a private realm, seeing things that were never meant for our eyes’.⁴ This is not the case with *Here and Now*, however, where readers are left to guess quite where the private realm ends and the public realm begins, because Auster and Coetzee leave the question of whether the letters were written for publication unanswered.⁵ In one exchange, Coetzee notes that he writes ‘books in which people write (and mail) paper letters’, hinting that *Here and Now* might even be a kind of collaborative postmodern fiction, in which Paul Auster and J. M. Coetzee write an epistolary novel of a correspondence between ‘Paul Auster’ and ‘J. M. Coetzee’.⁶ Discussing a new edition of Samuel Beckett’s correspondence that Coetzee is reviewing, Auster complains that the volume’s ‘cumbersome editorial apparatus’ carves a ‘distinction between “work” and “life”’.⁷ It’s a distinction neither writer observes in their own work, and as a public performance of a private correspondence, *Here and Now* continues to blur the line between the two.

⁴ Paul Auster, “Kafka’s Letters” (1977), in *The Art of Hunger: Essays, Prefaces, Interviews* [1992] (New York: Penguin, 1997), pp. 134-139 (135-136).

⁵ Auster and Coetzee wrote a preface clarifying the origin and intention of their correspondence, but ultimately decided to omit and destroy it. Michael Kalisch, Personal Interview with Paul Auster, September 20, 2016.

⁶ Paul Auster and J. M. Coetzee, *Here and Now: Letters, 2008-2011* (London: Faber and Faber, 2013), 219. Both writers have included their own names in their novels: see, for example, Auster’s *The New York Trilogy* (1987) and Coetzee’s *Boyhood* (1997). Auster has explored the epistolary form before, in *In The Country of Last Things* (London: Faber and Faber, 1987). On postmodern experimentations with epistolarity, see Sunka Simon, *Mail-Orders: The Fiction of Letters in Postmodern Culture* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2002).

⁷ Auster and Coetzee, *Here and Now*, 48.

In other ways, however, their correspondence is quite quaintly old-fashioned, and mainly takes the form of a series of exchanges on a variety of literary, political, and philosophical topics.⁸ The first of these is friendship, and Coetzee's opening letter begins:

I have been thinking about friendships, how they arise, why they last – some of them – so long, longer than the passional attachments of which they are sometimes (wrongly) considered to be pale imitations. I was about to write a letter to you about all this, starting with the observation that, considering how important friendships are in social life [...] it is surprising how little has been written on the subject.

But then I asked myself whether this was really true. So before I sat down to write I went off to the library to [...] check. And, lo and behold, I could not have been more wrong. The library catalog listed whole books on the subject [...] But when I took a step further [...] I recovered my self-respect somewhat [...] what these books had to say about friendship was of little interest [...] Friendship, it would seem, remains a bit of a riddle.⁹

In its false starts, befuddled negations, and convoluted syntax, Coetzee's letter also remains a bit of a riddle. He wonders whether he discovered little of interest during his library trip because, 'unlike love or politics, which are never what they seem to be,

⁸ Despite this range of topics, Martin Riker notes that 'friendship is the book's overarching subject, and the various topics that come and go are before all else attempts at finding that common ground upon which friendship can flourish'. Riker, "Pen Pals", *New York Times*, March 17, 2013, BR22.

⁹ Auster and Coetzee, *Here and Now*, 1.

friendship is what it seems to be. Friendship is transparent'.¹⁰ But his own rumination on friendship – which also of course marks the start of his epistolary friendship with Auster – is anything but transparent. In his reply, Auster also challenges Coetzee's characterisation, suggesting that men's friendships in fact often occupy what he calls 'an ambiguous zone of not-knowing'. 'At least three of my novels deal directly with male friendship, are in a sense stories *about* male friendship', Auster writes, observing that each novel – *The Locked Room* (1986), *Leviathan* (1992), and *Oracle Night* (2004) – dramatises 'this no-man's land of not-knowing that stands between friends'.¹¹ These three novels are the focus of the first half of this chapter, and we will see that in each, male friendship is far from a 'transparent' relation. Despite his scepticism, however, in the same letter Auster also expounds a broader, more positive vision of male friendship, imagining a series of 'concentric circles' of different kinds of sociability – from 'core intimates' stretching out to 'pleasant acquaintances' – as structuring our social world. And he offers an idealised portrait of the 'absolute equality' of the 'best and most lasting friendships': 'you are both giving more than you receive, both receiving more than you give, and in the reciprocity of this exchange, friendship blooms'.¹² Imagining friendship as a practice of generosity – as a kind of gift – Auster seems to also comment on the reciprocal exchange he is beginning with Coetzee. In a later letter he writes, 'For reasons I can't quite grasp, I keep wanting to *give you things*'.¹³

¹⁰ Auster and Coetzee, *Here and Now*, 3.

¹¹ Auster and Coetzee, *Here and Now*, 4.

¹² Auster and Coetzee, *Here and Now*, 6.

¹³ Auster and Coetzee, *Here and Now*, 128. Emphasis in original.

This association of friendship, epistolarity, and the gift has a long history. In classical Rome, Amanda Wilcox writes, correspondence was ‘self-consciously wielded as both the medium for friendship and the means of its display’, and familiar letters represented ‘gifts of friendship’ between correspondents, offered as a way of fostering affection at a distance.¹⁴ Humanism developed this connection between letter-writing and friendship into what Kathy Eden calls a ‘hermeneutics of intimacy’, in which the ‘familiar letter constructs a fiction of the affective presence of the absent individual’, a fiction made compelling by the rhetorical ingenuity of the correspondents, and by the symbolic exchange of the texts themselves as gifts.¹⁵ In humanism’s conception of epistolary friendship, absence brings forth an emotional and imaginative fluency not afforded by proximity, and writing well becomes a way of eliding the distance between friends. As such, letters ‘simultaneously articulate union (by connecting us to another) *and* disunion (the letter is sent in lieu of presence)’, and so correspondence ‘confirms even as it would mitigate separation’.¹⁶ Letters, we might say, cultivate a kind of intimate distance.

¹⁴ Amanda Wilcox, *The Gift of Correspondence in Classical Rome: Friendship in Cicero’s Ad Familiares and Seneca’s Moral Epistles* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2012), 14, 8.

¹⁵ Kathy Eden, *The Renaissance Rediscovery of Intimacy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012), 50; Lisa Jardine, *Reading Shakespeare Historically* (London: Routledge, 1996), 80. See also Lorna Hutson, *The Usurer’s Daughter: Male Friendship and Fictions of Women in Sixteenth-Century England* (London: Routledge, 1994), 1-15, 52-87; Alan Bray, *The Friend* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 159-164.

¹⁶ Elizabeth Hewitt, *Correspondence and American Literature, 1770-1865* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 189, f.n. 8. Emphasis in original; William Decker, *Epistolary Practices: Letter-Writing in America Before Telecommunications* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 47.

In his essay on “Friendship” (1841), Emerson develops a comparable conception of intimacy *in absentia*, and similarly connects friendship, epistolarity, and the gift. Elizabeth Hewitt argues that a dialectic between ‘absolute intimacy’ and ‘radical solitude’ represents a ‘kind of deep structure in Emerson’s work’, and that ‘correspondence, which likewise theorizes social relations as pure absence [...] and presence’ provided him an ‘analogue’ for ‘the alternation between these two extremes of sociability’.¹⁷ William Decker also notes that correspondence and friendship are ‘inextricably bound’ in Emerson’s thought, and that letter-writing represents ‘the one true occasion of friendship’ in the essay.¹⁸ Indeed, Emerson’s primary portrayal of friendship is of the solitary ‘scholar who sits down to write’ and who, despite his ‘years of meditation’, cannot come up with ‘one good thought’ until he ‘write[s] a letter to a friend – and forthwith troops of gentle thoughts invest themselves [...] with chosen words’.¹⁹ For Emerson, epistolary friendship figures a form of ‘social reciprocity’, to use Hewitt’s phrase, that transcends earthly embodiment while guarding the self-reliant individual’s sovereignty. ‘To my friend I write a letter and from him I receive a letter’, Emerson’s essay continues, ‘It is a spiritual gift worthy of him to give and of me to receive’.²⁰

Friendship appears to function in Emerson’s essay as a structure of thought as well as a personal relation, and in his first letter to Auster, Coetzee quotes Charles Lamb saying something similar a little more curtly: ‘One can have friends without wanting to

¹⁷ Hewitt, *Correspondence and American Literature*, 56-57.

¹⁸ Decker, *Epistolary Practices*, 116.

¹⁹ Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Friendship” (1841), in *The Essential Writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. Brooks Atkinson (New York: Modern Library Classics, 2000), pp. 201-215 (202).

²⁰ Hewitt, *Correspondence and American Literature*, 3; Emerson, “Friendship”, 211.

see them'.²¹ And Emerson's conception of epistolary friendship might also help us think more broadly about the possibilities of textually-mediated intimacy, and to imagine the epistolary moment as a kind of *mise-en-abyme* of the broader scene of reading and writing; that is, to imagine the epistle, as Derrida does, as 'not a genre, but all genres, literature itself'.²² The reciprocal relation of address and reply inherent to letter-writing between correspondents might also be at work in all texts between authors and readers. Every text might be a letter from a friend, or a kind of 'spiritual gift'. Versions of this intersubjective model of literary encounter were elaborated in the 1980s and 1990s within what became known as 'ethical criticism'. In *The Company We Keep* (1988), Wayne Booth suggests that 'all books are gifts from would-be friends', though only a few will offer the kind of 'perfect' friendship esteemed by Aristotle.²³ Considering the 'consequences of saying that I have a positive obligation to an implied author', Booth's study draws on the twinned critical metaphors of friendship and the gift to articulate a neo-Aristotelian, humanist account of the novel's social value – of how, as Martha Nussbaum, another advocate of ethical criticism, puts it, novels render readers more

²¹ Auster and Coetzee, *Here and Now*, 2. On Lamb and Coleridge's textually-mediated friendship, see Felicity James, *Charles Lamb, Coleridge and Wordsworth: Reading Friendship in the 1790s* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 43-47.

²² Jacques Derrida, *The Post Card: From Socrates to Freud and Beyond*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 48. See also Janet Altman, *Epistolarity: Approaches to a Form* (Ohio: Ohio State University Press, 1982), 193-194.

²³ Wayne Booth, *The Company We Keep: An Ethics of Reading* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 173.

‘finely aware and richly responsible’, facilitating a ‘new freshness of sympathy’ to the ‘social world around them’.²⁴

Dorothy Hale notes that Booth and Nussbaum’s ethical criticism owes much to the liberal pluralism of Lionel Trilling, for whom novel reading similarly fosters a humanist appreciation of social ‘variety and modulation’.²⁵ Hale observes that ‘Trilling’s defence of the social value of literature is rooted in a pre-structuralist sense of the liberal individual’, while Booth and Nussbaum’s ethical criticism explicitly pits itself against post-structuralism – what Nussbaum calls ‘the fashionable recent dogma that literary texts refer only to other texts and not to the world’.²⁶ In recent years, however, a ‘new ethical criticism’ has emerged that attempts to ‘retain the post-structuralist’s skepticism about knowledge [...] while bestowing upon epistemological uncertainty a positive ethical content’.²⁷ The new ethical criticism continues to draw upon an interpersonal metaphor of literary encounter, but whereas Booth and Nussbaum envisage texts as engaging readers in a form of friendship, the new ethical criticism imagines a confrontation with alterity

²⁴ Booth, *The Company We Keep*, 163; Martha Nussbaum, *Love’s Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), 148, 230. See also Nussbaum, “Reading for Life”, *Yale Journal of Law & the Humanities*, 1:1 (1989), pp. 165-180; “Exactly and Responsibly: A Defence of Ethical Criticism”, *Philosophy and Literature*, 22:2 (1998), pp. 343-365; Wayne Booth, “Why Banning Ethical Criticism is a Serious Mistake”, *Philosophy and Literature*, 22:2 (1998), pp. 366-393.

²⁵ Dorothy Hale, “Fiction as Restriction: Self-Binding in New Ethical Theories of the Novel”, *Narrative*, 15:2 (2007), pp. 187-206 (195). See Lionel Trilling, “Manners, Morals, and the Novel”, *Kenyon Review*, 10 (1948), pp. 11-27 (22).

²⁶ Dorothy Hale, “Aesthetics and the New Ethics: Theorizing the Novel in the Twenty-First Century”, *PMLA*, 124:3 (2009), pp. 896-905 (897); Nussbaum, *Love’s Knowledge*, 231.

²⁷ Hale, “Fiction as Restriction”, 190.

that focalises a sense of uncertainty, and problematises the process of judgement.²⁸ Rather than figuring a ‘positive obligation’ to an implied author, in the new ethical criticism, literature elaborates a Levinasian sense of our ‘infinite responsibility’ to the Other.²⁹

Nevertheless, Booth’s sense of novels as gifts whose circulation substantiates ethical relationships has remained evocative to critics and novelists. Booth punningly acknowledges that he has ‘profited from’ Lewis Hyde’s book, *The Gift*, and, as I suggested at the start of this chapter, Hyde’s work has been important to the broader popularisation of gift theory.³⁰ Like Booth, Hyde draws on Marcel Mauss’s anthropological account of ‘the gift economy’ and his analysis of the ‘threefold obligation to give, to receive and to reciprocate’.³¹ Hyde argues that works of art ‘exist simultaneously’ within this kind of gift economy as well as a market economy, but maintains that while ‘the work of art can survive without the market [...] where there is no gift there is no art’.³² As in the Trillingite liberal humanism of Booth and Nussbaum, then, for Hyde the work of art is central to the cultivation of a set of social values distinct from market principles.

²⁸ See Lawrence Buell, “In Pursuit of Ethics”, *PMLA*, 114:1 (1999), pp. 7-19 (13-15). Hale writes that ‘the reader’s apprehension through literature of an alterity that exceeds comprehension is connected in new ethical theory to the positioning of the reader not as friend but as judge’. “Fiction as Restriction”, 195.

²⁹ See Hale, “Aesthetics and the New Ethics”, 899.

³⁰ Booth, *The Company We Keep*, 175, f.n. 8.

³¹ Marcel Mauss, *The Gift: The Form and Reason for Exchange in Archaic Societies* [1925], trans. W. D. Halls (London: Routledge, 1990), 59; Gerald Moore, *Politics of the Gift: Exchanges in Poststructuralism* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011), 3.

³² Hyde, *The Gift*, xiv.

Reissued in 1999 and 2007, *The Gift* continued to find ‘an enthusiastic audience among contemporary authors’, Lee Konstantinou writes, ‘hoping to overcome [...] the debilitating legacy of postmodernism’ and fearing that ‘commodification might now be an inescapable condition’.³³ David Foster Wallace, Zadie Smith, and Jonathan Lethem, among others, read and extensively engaged with Hyde’s thesis.³⁴ Konstantinou understands this enthusiasm for Hyde’s ‘ethic of generosity’ as paradigmatic of a ‘post-postmodern mode’ in contemporary fiction that has sought to move beyond ‘the cynical disposition of postmodern self-awareness’.³⁵ As I noted in my Introduction, Adam Kelly’s term for this mode of contemporary fiction is ‘new sincerity’ – another concept that owes a debt to Trilling – and he too traces Wallace’s thorough reading of Hyde, and his work’s subsequent engagement with the idea of the gift.³⁶ But Kelly also draws on Derrida’s *Given Time* (1992) to argue that Wallace’s conception of the gift is more ‘double-edged’ than Hyde’s.³⁷ Pushing ‘Mauss’s thesis to its logical extreme’, Derrida argues that ‘the very fact that exchange is predicated on a structure of reciprocity and hence calculation

³³ Lee Konstantinou, “Lewis Hyde’s Double Economy”, *ASAP/ Journal*, 1:1 (January 2016), pp. 123-149 (127-8).

³⁴ On Wallace, Hyde, and the gift, see Jeffrey Severs, *David Foster Wallace’s Balancing Books: Fictions of Value* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017), 88-123; Zadie Smith, “The Difficult Gifts of David Foster Wallace”, in Smith, *Changing My Mind: Occasional Essays* (London: Penguin, 2009), pp. 257-300. Jonathan Lethem cites Hyde extensively in his essay on plagiarism and the intellectual commons, “The Ecstasy of Influence” (2007), in *The Ecstasy of Influence: Nonfictions, etc.* (New York: Vintage, 2012), pp. 93-120.

³⁵ Konstantinou, “Lewis Hyde’s Double Economy”, 134, 139.

³⁶ See Adam Kelly, “David Foster Wallace and the New Sincerity in American Fiction”, in David Hering (ed.), *Consider David Foster Wallace: Critical Essays* (Austin: Sideshow Media Group Press, 2010), pp. 131-146.

³⁷ Adam Kelly, “David Foster Wallace and New Sincerity Aesthetics: A Reply to Edward Jackson and Joel Nicholson-Roberts”, *Orbit: A Journal of American Literature*, 5:4 (2017), pp. 1-32 (17).

render [the gift] an impossibility'.³⁸ In Derrida's conception, therefore, the gift 'ought not to appear as gift: either to the donee or to the donor' if it is to avoid recapitulating the logic of economic exchange: 'secrecy is the last word of the gift'.³⁹ Kelly similarly argues that for Wallace, 'reading is a transaction, an economy like any other', while 'at the same time', his fiction holds to the Derridean possibility that the work of art might circulate 'beyond the economic, into the realm of the gift of sincerity', but that this gift 'must remain a secret beyond representation'.⁴⁰

In this idea of the gift as secret, Derrida is in fact expanding upon a long-held anxiety about the gift captured in its double etymology, meaning both 'present' and 'poison'.⁴¹ If ideally the gift substantiates an ethics of generosity and creates community, then it might also implicate the receiver in a deleterious debt relation. 'By giving someone something you unilaterally bound that person to make repayment', William Miller suggests, 'You make the recipient your debtor'.⁴² Derrida similarly warns that 'the gift puts the other in debt, with the result that giving amounts to [...] doing harm'.⁴³ 'We do not quite forgive the giver', Emerson writes in "Gifts" (1844), because receiving a gift upsets our sense of being 'self-sustained'.⁴⁴ Attending more closely to the logic of the

³⁸ Vanessa Smith, *Intimate Strangers: Friendship, Exchange and Pacific Encounters* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 113.

³⁹ Jacques Derrida, *Given Time*, 12, 14.

⁴⁰ Kelly, "David Foster Wallace and the New Sincerity in American Fiction", 146.

⁴¹ See Mauss, *The Gift*, 28-32.

⁴² William Miller, *Humiliation and Other Essays on Honor, Social Discomfort, and Violence* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993), 17.

⁴³ Derrida, *Given Time*, 12.

⁴⁴ Emerson, "Gifts" (1844), in *The Essential Writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, pp. 360-364 (361).

gift, then, problematises rather than clarifies what for Mauss and Hyde is its structuring principle of reciprocity; the gift might trace a ‘feeling bond’, but it might also articulate a restrictive obligation.

I have set down the convoluted and overlapping critical histories of ethical reading, friendship, and the gift in some detail in part because these preoccupations are similarly intertwined in the texts I will discuss. In Auster’s work, the responsibility the gift bestows upon its recipient is often ambiguous, and the relationship formed between donor and donee is frequently ambivalent – that is, when the gift is in fact recognised as such, because Auster also explores the Derridean idea of the secrecy of the gift. Complex patterns of generosity and reciprocity crisscross his fictions, as money, letters, and works of literature are lent, borrowed, stolen, lost, and given away. At times, these circulations seem to substantiate the kinds of ethical bonds imagined by Booth, Nussbaum, and Hyde, friendships in which we recognise a mutuality and social interconnectedness, and in which an ethics of generosity is established akin to that described by Auster in his letter to Coetzee: ‘you are both giving more than you receive, both receiving more than you give, and in the reciprocity of this exchange, friendship blooms’. But the near-tautology of this model of exchange hints at the more ambivalent role the gift plays in Auster’s work. Often, giving and receiving seem to incur unaccountable or incalculable obligations, articulating something closer to the new ethical criticism’s conception of alterity and ‘infinite’ responsibility than to the old ethical criticism’s model of friendship.

More speculatively, I have also set down these overlapping critical histories because the main movements and transitions within them reflect, to a degree, some of the

major disjunctures within the critical reception of Auster's fiction. Schematically, we might say that for a long time Auster's work was read as representative of a kind of postmodernism that Booth and Nussbaum would not much have cared for – more interested in textuality than the 'social world'. This reputation largely rested on the somewhat mistaken association of Auster with continental deconstructive philosophy – in part because of his early work as a translator of Maurice Blanchot's short fiction, and his popularity in France – and the formal ingenuity of his early novels, especially *The New York Trilogy* (1987).⁴⁵ Sven Birkerts, for example, suggests that Auster's early work is 'resoundingly French', demonstrating that he is 'closer to European existentialism' than any American literary tradition.⁴⁶ In her 'pioneer Derridean reading' of the *Trilogy*, meanwhile, Alison Russell argues that Auster 'deconstruct[s] the conventional elements of the detective story, resulting in a recursive linguistic investigation of the nature, function, and meaning of language'.⁴⁷ Russell reads the trilogy as an extended experiment in the genre of 'the anti-detective story', which William Spanos characterises as 'the

⁴⁵ See Maurice Blanchot, *Vicious Circles: Two Fictions and After the Facts*, trans. Paul Auster (Barrytown: Station Hill Press, 1985); *The Station Hill Blanchot Reader: Fiction & Literary Essays*, trans. Lydia Davis, Paul Auster, and Robert Lamberton (Barrytown: Station Hill Press, 1999). On Blanchot's broader influence, see Maria Laura Arce, *Paul Auster and the Influence of Maurice Blanchot* (Jefferson: McFarland, 2016). On Auster's popularity in France, see Adam Begley, "Case of the Brooklyn Symbolist", *New York Times Magazine*, August 30, 1993, pp. 41, 52-54.

⁴⁶ Sven Birkerts, "Postmodern Picaresque", *The New Republic*, March 27, 1989, pp. 36-40 (38).

⁴⁷ Alex Segal, "Secrecy and the Gift: Paul Auster's *The Locked Room*", *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*, 39:3 (1998), pp. 239-257 (240); Alison Russell, "Deconstructing *The New York Trilogy*: Paul Auster's Anti-Detective Fiction", *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*, 31:2 (1990), pp. 71-84 (71). Auster was sent Russell's essay and says in an interview that his 'only reaction was to laugh [...] Because the fact is I've never read a word of Jacques Derrida'. Chris Pace, "Interview with Paul Auster", February 21, 1993.

paradigmatic archetype of the postmodern literary imagination'.⁴⁸ In these and other early critical readings, Auster is lauded for his philosophical 'postmodern ironies' and a linguistic dexterity that delights in 'the infinite possibility of free play'.⁴⁹

Jeffrey Nealon was perhaps the first to suggest the limitations of this kind of deconstructive reading, and to argue that Auster's work in fact constructs a 'confrontation not so much with a reading space of play and possibility – the dominant concepts in American postmodernism of the 1970s – but rather with a writing space of (im)possibility, hesitation and response to alterity', watchwords of what Nealon characterises as the 'second wave' of postmodernism, and that, as I have suggested, remain important to the new ethical criticism.⁵⁰ Subsequently, a number of critics have insisted that 'Auster cannot be categorized simply as a definitive postmodernist', and have analysed how 'the ethical is effaced' in such readings.⁵¹ If this reappraisal is in part the result of changing critical methodologies and tastes, then some critics have suggested it might equally reflect a change in Auster's work itself.⁵² Thorsten Carstensen, for example, discerns an 'ethical turn' in Auster's later work, while James Peacock suggests

⁴⁸ William Spanos, "The Detective and the Boundary: Some Notes on the Postmodern Literary Imagination", *Boundary 2*, 1:1 (Autumn 1972), pp. 147-168 (154).

⁴⁹ Dennis Barone, "Introduction: Paul Auster and the Postmodern American Novel", in Barone (ed.), *Beyond the Red Notebook: Essays on Paul Auster* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1995), pp. 1-26 (5); Spanos, "The Detective and the Boundary", 156.

⁵⁰ Jeffrey Nealon, "Work of the Detective, Work of the Writer: Paul Auster's *City of Glass*", *Modern Fiction Studies*, 42:1 (Spring 1996), pp. 90-107 (95).

⁵¹ Brendan Martin, *Paul Auster's Postmodernity* (London: Routledge, 2008), x; Segal, "Secrecy and the Gift", 240.

⁵² For his part, Auster says that 'I have a feeling that, as the years go by and as French theory diminishes in importance, people will stop reading my books in that way. At least I hope they will'. Auster and I. B. Siegmundfeldt, *A Life in Words* (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2017), 90.

that Auster's tenth novel, *The Brooklyn Follies* (2005), represents his 'first avowedly post-postmodern' book.⁵³

I'm interested not so much in claiming Auster as a postmodernist or a post-postmodernist, however, but in the extent to which his work exhibits a pull between the accounts of the novel's social value offered in the old and new ethical criticism, and between their distinctive accounts of the relationship between authors, texts, and readers. In this thesis, Auster is in a different way a kind of transitional figure: half a generation younger than Roth, Auster's long career begins over a decade before the writers considered in the next chapter, Michael Chabon and Jonathan Lethem. In reading Auster alongside these authors, I counter the claim made by Birkerts and others that Auster's true affinity is with a European avant-garde, and instead situate his work firmly within a particular American literary history. Indeed, as with Roth, Chabon, and Lethem, I argue that Auster turns to the figure of male friendship to think through and dramatise this very question of affinity, and to consider structures of allegiance and affiliation more broadly, whether between authors and readers, within literary traditions, or out in the wider social world.

⁵³ Thorsten Carstensen, "Skepticism and Responsibility: Paul Auster's *The Book of Illusions*", *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*, 58:4 (2017), pp. 411-425 (415); James Peacock, "Faking it or Making it? Forgery, Real Lives and the True Fake in *The Brooklyn Follies*", in Stefania Ciocia and Jesús González (eds.), *The Invention of Illusions: International Perspectives on Paul Auster* (Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Press, 2011), pp. 75-96 (91). See also Kanae Uchiyama, "Narrating the Other Between Ethics and Violence: Friendship and Politics in Paul Auster's *The Locked Room* and *Leviathan*", *English Society of Japan*, 51 (2010), pp. 60-78.

2. 'a memorial in the shape of a book'

As an example of the 'not-knowing' that he feels characterises friendship between men, Auster tells Coetzee an anecdote about his 'closest male friend', whom he resembles: 'both writers, both idiotically obsessed by sport'. When this friend finished writing a new book, he sent a copy to Auster, who was deeply moved to find that the novel was dedicated to him: 'my friend never said a word about it'.⁵⁴ The friend was Don DeLillo and the novel was *Cosmopolis* (2003).⁵⁵ DeLillo's gesture of friendship reciprocated Auster dedicating *Leviathan* to him a little over a decade earlier. The anecdote speaks of the closeness of their friendship, Auster suggests, but also of something else: 'that I know this man and don't know him'.⁵⁶ DeLillo's gesture threw into doubt even as it confirmed their relationship, exposing the limits of their intimacy. So in his first letter addressed to a potential new friend, Auster tells an anecdote about another, more elaborate textual exchange between old friends, in which each addresses their novel to the other as a curious gift of friendship.⁵⁷ And in the telling of this anecdote, Auster also draws us back to *Leviathan*, and to its preoccupation with the difficulties of writing to, and of, the absent friend.

⁵⁴ Auster and Coetzee, *Here and Now*, 5.

⁵⁵ Peter Ferry argues that the narrative of *Cosmopolis* 'featuring Benno Levin is conspicuously Austeresque'. *Masculinity in Contemporary New York Fiction* (London: Routledge, 2015), 144.

⁵⁶ Auster and Coetzee, *Here and Now*, 5.

⁵⁷ 'Dedicating the work is a public act that the reader is [...] called on to witness [...] and this proclamation [serves] as a theme or commentary [...] The dedicatee is always in some way responsible for the work that is dedicated to him and to which he brings [...] a little of his support and therefore participation'. Gérard Genette, *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation*, trans. Jane Lewin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 136.

Leviathan is structured around the fifteen-year friendship of author-turned-terrorist Benjamin Sachs and fellow-writer Peter Aaron, the novel's narrator. Aaron begins writing the story of Sachs's life immediately after reading a news item in the *New York Times* about a man blowing himself up in a car on a road in Wisconsin, his body 'bursting into a thousand pieces'.⁵⁸ Instinctively, Aaron knows that the unidentified man is Sachs, and the FBI are on their way to the same conclusion. When two federal agents come calling, Aaron tries to 'give away' as little as possible of what he knows about Sachs, while in the novel he has just started writing, he promises to 'give the true story'. As *Leviathan* unfolds, however, Aaron's attempts to at once conceal and reveal the truth become conjoined, and what we are 'given' instead is a 'tangled and complicated' narrative in which 'everything is connected to everything else'.⁵⁹ There were 'no witnesses' to the explosion in Wisconsin, the *Times* reports, but Aaron will try to bear witness to Sachs's life, 'picking up the pieces and gluing them back together again'. At the same time, he stresses how little he really knows about his 'closest friend': 'I don't want to present this book as something it's not [...] even though Sachs confided a great deal to me [during] our friendship, I don't claim to have more than a partial understanding'.⁶⁰ Like Nathan in the American Trilogy, Aaron acknowledges his limited capacity for knowing the lives of others, and just as Nathan's mistaken assumptions about the Swede, Ira, and Coleman gather an epistemological significance over the course of the

⁵⁸ Auster, *Leviathan* (London: Faber and Faber, 1992), 1.

⁵⁹ Auster, *Leviathan*, 3, 51.

⁶⁰ Auster, *Leviathan*, 22.

trilogy, so too does Sachs come to resemble ‘an emblem of the unknowable itself’ in the eyes of his friend.⁶¹

Like *The Human Stain*, *Leviathan* is told in five chapters, as Aaron charts Sachs’s tragic transformation from promising young novelist into the ‘Phantom of Liberty’, the Unabomber-esque vigilante notorious for blowing up scale models of the Statue of Liberty in public parks across small-town America. Published shortly after DeLillo’s *Mao II* (1991), *Leviathan* is similarly concerned with the relationship between literature and terrorism, and with the prospect of the novel’s waning capacity to speak to the wider culture.⁶² But while DeLillo is ‘preoccupied with postmodern consumerist culture’, Auster is more interested in a longer history of the intersection of literature and civil disobedience.⁶³ In one sense, however, Sachs’s turn to terrorism results from a concatenation of coincidences typical of Auster’s fiction.⁶⁴ After losing his way on a woodland walk, Sachs is hitching a ride back to his Vermont summerhouse with local farmhand Dwight when they come across a car blocking their way on a back road. The driver shoots Dwight and Sachs then kills the driver in self-defence, stealing his car to escape the scene. In the trunk, Sachs discovers bomb-making equipment, \$165,000 in cash, and a passport in the name of Reed Dimaggio. It transpires that Dimaggio was also a writer – not of fiction, but of a history of American radicalism, and of a ‘reappraisal’ of

⁶¹ Auster, *Leviathan*, 146.

⁶² See Ryan Simmons, “What is a Terrorist? Contemporary Authorship, the Unabomber, and *Mao II*”, *Modern Fiction Studies*, 45:3 (Fall 1999), pp. 675-695.

⁶³ Aliko Varvogli, *The World that is the Book: Paul Auster’s Fiction* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2001), 145.

⁶⁴ See Steven Alford, “Chance in Contemporary Narrative: The Example of Paul Auster”, *Lit: Literature Interpretation Theory*, 11:1 (2000), pp. 59-82.

the communist-anarchist Alexander Berkman which argued for ‘a moral justification for certain forms of political violence’.⁶⁵ When he learns that Dimaggio subsequently turned from writing to ecological activism and was planning a series of violent protests, Sachs comes to sense a ‘cosmic attraction’ between them, speculating that in different circumstances they ‘could even have been friends’.⁶⁶ His initial impulse, however, is not to carry out Dimaggio’s political campaign, but to write a book of his life: ‘I planned it as an elegy’, he tells Aaron, ‘a memorial in the shape of a book. As long as I was devoting myself to Dimaggio, I would be keeping him alive. I would give him my life [...] and in exchange he would give my life back to me’.⁶⁷

But of course it’s Aaron who ends up writing ‘a memorial in the shape of a book’; *Leviathan* is his ‘elegy’ for his friend, and writing it imbricates him in the kind of ‘exchange’ Sachs describes, in which life and death are mysteriously entwined. In the previous chapter, I suggested that we might think of *I Married a Communist* as Nathan’s tribute to the memory of Murray, and that *The Human Stain* was also a memorial in the shape of a book. And just as there was something ‘ghostly’ about Nathan and Coleman’s friendship, Aaron and Sachs’s friendship seems to similarly belong to the dimension of the spectral; in both novels, to write about the friend is to arrange a haunting. Having been in hiding during his Phantom campaign, Sachs reappears at his Vermont house,

⁶⁵ *Leviathan*, 224. James Patrick Brown notes that ‘The republication [...] in 1969 and 1970’ of Berkman’s *Prison Memoirs of an Anarchist* (1912), ‘could be read as signalling a cultural moment in which political violence was an issue of immediate importance’. Brown, “The Disobedience of John William Ward: Myth, Symbol, and Political Praxis in the Vietnam Era”, *American Studies*, 47:2 (Summer 2006), pp. 5-22 (15).

⁶⁶ Auster, *Leviathan*, 224.

⁶⁷ Auster, *Leviathan*, 225.

where Aaron happens to be staying while working on a novel, sitting ‘in the same chair Sachs used to sit in’, and feeling Sachs’s presence as that of a ‘welcoming ghost’.⁶⁸ They settle down to talk in a scene reminiscent of the narrative set-ups of *I Married a Communist* and *The Human Stain*, wherein Nathan listens to Murray and Coleman out under the Berkshire stars: ‘we stayed up late again that night [...] two disembodied voices in the dark, invisible to each other [...] I remember the glowing ends of cigars [...] an enormous sky overhead’.⁶⁹

But Sachs soon disappears again, leaving a letter atop the manuscript of Aaron’s novel. He apologises for ‘sneak[ing] out’, but writes that, ‘when the time comes, you’ll know how to tell [his story] to others’.⁷⁰ Aaron reflects that Sachs wrote the letter because ‘he had wanted our friendship to survive’; letters, after all, invite reply and, placed on top of Aaron’s manuscript, Sachs positions *Leviathan* itself as Aaron’s response, his side of the correspondence. *Leviathan* is in fact the title of Sachs’s abandoned second novel, adopted by Aaron to ‘mark what will never exist’, while at the same time the novel stands metonymically for Sachs’s physical absence; Aaron attempts to ‘to fill in the gap left by his best friend’s death by telling his story’.⁷¹ Earlier, Aaron recalls that when they were

⁶⁸ Auster, *Leviathan*, 218-219.

⁶⁹ Auster, *Leviathan*, 231. Given *Leviathan*’s titular allusion to *Moby-Dick*, this scene also brings to mind Melville’s friendship with Nathaniel Hawthorne, and the latter’s recollection of their ‘talk about time and eternity [...] that lasted pretty deep into the night [...] we smoked cigars even within the sacred precincts of the sitting room’. Hawthorne, *The American Notebooks*, ed. Claude Simpson (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1972), 448. Auster wrote an introduction to Hawthorne’s *Twenty Days With Julian And Little Bunny By Papa* (New York: NYRB Classics, 2003), and frequently alludes to his work. See William Marling, “Paul Auster and the American Romantics”, *Lit: Literature Interpretation Theory*, 7:4 (1997), pp. 301-310.

⁷⁰ Auster, *Leviathan*, 236.

⁷¹ Varvogli, *The World that is the Book*, 123.

separated during their friendship, ‘postcards and letters took the place of late-night talks’, and a similar textual exchange frames the narrative.⁷² Aaron tells the FBI agents that someone has been ‘impersonating’ him, ‘answering letters in my name, walking into bookstores and autographing my books’. At the end of the novel, the agents reveal that the impostor was Sachs. ‘Now why would a friend do something like that?’ one of them asks. ‘Because he missed me’, Aaron replies, ‘He went away on a long trip and forgot to buy postcards. It was his way of staying in touch’.⁷³ Turning an author book-signing into a familiar correspondence, Sachs’s impersonation gestures to the peculiar kinds of intimacy the novel can create. ‘A book is a mysterious object’, Aaron reflects, observing how his own readers often identify with him through his work. ‘All of a sudden, they imagine that you belong to them’.⁷⁴

A similarly mysterious textual exchange between male friends is the focus of *The Locked Room*, the final volume of *The New York Trilogy*. An unnamed narrator tells the story of the disappearance of his friend Fanshawe, a promising young writer like Sachs, and the novel also initially appears to be a work of mourning. The narrator has not stayed in touch with Fanshawe since childhood – although in the intervening years he continues to feel his presence like ‘a ghost [...] inside me’ – and so is surprised to discover that he is named as his friend’s literary executor.⁷⁵ Publishing Fanshawe’s work provides the narrator with a steady income and a literary fame that had eluded him in his own career as

⁷² Auster, *Leviathan*, 52.

⁷³ Auster, *Leviathan*, 4, 244.

⁷⁴ Auster, *Leviathan*, 4.

⁷⁵ Paul Auster, *The New York Trilogy* [1987] (London: Faber and Faber, 2005), 202.

a hack writer. Echoing Sachs's description of his exchange with DiMaggio, the narrator writes, 'The thought flickered through me that I could one day be resurrected in my own eyes, and I felt a sudden burst of friendship for Fanshawe across the years'.⁷⁶ But Fanshawe is alive after all, and so the bequest of his work is transformed from an act of generosity into one of concealment and manipulation. The narrator is 'haunted' by the knowledge of Fanshawe's survival, which threatens not only his literary career, but his blossoming romantic relationship with Fanshawe's widow, Sophie.⁷⁷ The narrator and Sophie had resolved 'not to feel indebted to Fanshawe', but instead to see the windfall from his work as 'an unlikely gift'.⁷⁸ But in this intricate, claustrophobic narrative of writerly rivalry, the gift of friendship turns poisonous; the narrator remains in Fanshawe's debt, and, he realises, he has no 'chance to pay [him] back'.⁷⁹

Near the novella's start, the narrator recounts a story from his childhood with Fanshawe that speaks to this uneasy dynamic of generosity and indebtedness at play between the friends. In the second-grade, the pair are walking to a birthday party with a schoolmate, Dennis, a poor kid from a tough background who has no present to give. 'Without any explanation', the narrator recalls, Fanshawe 'turned to Dennis and handed him his present'. Rather than feel affronted, Dennis nods his head, 'as if acknowledging the wisdom of what Fanshawe had done'. Giving Dennis the present, the narrator suggests, 'was not an act of charity so much as an act of justice [...] the one thing had

⁷⁶ Auster, *New York Trilogy*, 210.

⁷⁷ Auster, *New York Trilogy*, 244.

⁷⁸ Auster, *New York Trilogy*, 234.

⁷⁹ Auster, *New York Trilogy*, 236.

been turned into another. It was a piece of magic'.⁸⁰ Fanshawe's mother sees it differently: 'The present had cost her money, and by giving it away Fanshawe had in some sense stolen that money from her'.⁸¹ Mrs. Fanshawe confirms 'the logic of contract', Alex Segal notes, rather than the logic of the gift; by contrast, the narrator feels that Fanshawe's generosity constituted 'the first truly moral act I had witnessed'.⁸² Segal argues that Fanshawe's actions adhere to Derrida's conception of the gift – in which the gift only exists if it is not recognised as such by either party – and so this scene speaks to the novel's broader 'thematization of responsibility'.⁸³ When he learns that he is Fanshawe's literary executor, the narrator asks, 'How could I be expected to take on such a responsibility, to stand in judgement of a man and say whether his life had been worth living?'.⁸⁴ The 'magic' of the gift, the novel suggests, is a dark magic: Fanshawe demonstrates the gift's capacity to constitute a 'truly moral act', but the narrator's experience shows how it can also implicate the donee in a deadly relation of obligation.

While *The Locked Room* remains a tightly-wound psychological tale of the anxiety of literary influence – replete with allusions not only to Hawthorne's apprentice novel, *Fanshawe* (1828), but to Poe's stories of entrapped doubles – *Leviathan* is set against a much broader political backdrop.⁸⁵ If the patterns of textual exchange between

⁸⁰ Auster, *New York Trilogy*, 212-213.

⁸¹ Auster, *New York Trilogy*, 214.

⁸² Segal, "Secrecy and the Gift", 241; Auster, *New York Trilogy*, 214.

⁸³ Segal, "Secrecy and the Gift", 240.

⁸⁴ Auster, *New York Trilogy*, 208.

⁸⁵ Varvogli notes that like *The Locked Room*, *Fanshawe* 'involves the antagonistic relationship that develops between two close friends' (52).

Aaron and Sachs recall those between the narrator and Fanshawe, then *Leviathan's* interest in forms of generosity, reciprocity, and indebtedness develops far beyond the earlier novella. Mark Osteen neatly captures something of the contrast between the books:

The narrator of *The Locked Room* claims that 'No one can cross the boundary into another – for the simple reason that no one can gain access to himself'. *Leviathan* revises that perception by suggesting that only through others can one gain access to the locked room of the self.⁸⁶

While *The Locked Room* might thus be said to speak to the exploration of solitude that is a keynote of Auster's early work, *Leviathan* is 'poised halfway between the personal and the political', and so speaks to the exploration of 'community' that Mark Brown suggests equally becomes a keynote of Auster's later work.⁸⁷

Like the novels of the American Trilogy, *Leviathan* is an historical fiction that analyses the course of postwar liberalism through a central male friendship, and like Roth's protagonists, Sachs is a representative historical figure.⁸⁸ Sachs 'embodies American Cold War history', Dustin Iler notes: 'he finds purpose in the New Left of the 1960s, becomes disillusioned with leftist politics in the post-Vietnam period, and after the

⁸⁶ Mark Osteen, "Phantoms of Liberty: The Secret Lives of *Leviathan*", *Review of Contemporary Fiction*, 14:1 (Spring 1994), p. 87.

⁸⁷ Varvogli, *The World that is the Book*, 123; Mark Brown, *Paul Auster* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007), 160.

⁸⁸ For a similar comparison, see Adam Kelly, *American Fiction in Transition: Observer-hero Narrative, the 1990s, and Postmodernism* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 53.

Cold War's end is unable to imagine a future for himself or the nation'.⁸⁹ Born on the day of the bombing of Hiroshima, Sachs is proud of his 'father's socialist politics in the thirties, which [...] involved union organizing'.⁹⁰ He meets his future wife, Fanny, at a peace rally in New York in 1966, and two years later is imprisoned for seventeen months for refusing the draft. His first novel, *The New Colossus*, is an historical fiction 'set in America between 1876 and 1890' – precisely a century before the period covered in *Leviathan* – and while Aaron initially suggests that the work 'had nothing to do with the sixties, nothing to do with Vietnam', he later recognises that 'the anti-war moment' was the 'engine that pushed the book forward'.⁹¹ Something similar might be said of *Leviathan*. In 'the Ronald Reagan era', Sachs comes to be 'seen as a throwback, out of step with the spirit of the times'.⁹² He 'holds fast to the ideals of the 1960s' even in 'the new American order of the 1980s', defined by 'selfishness' and 'chest-pounding Americanism'.⁹³

This is the 'anti-federal but patriotic nationalism of Reagan Republicanism' described by Lauren Berlant as seeking to 'shrink the state while intensifying identification with the utopian symbolic "nation"'.⁹⁴ Berlant argues that Reaganism

⁸⁹ Dustin Iler, "Suicide and the Afterlife of the Cold War: Accident, Intentionality, and Periodicity in Paul Auster's *Leviathan* and Jeffrey Eugenides's *The Virgin Suicides*", *Modern Fiction Studies*, 63:4 (Winter 2017), pp. 737-758 (740).

⁹⁰ Auster, *Leviathan*, 26-27.

⁹¹ Auster, *Leviathan*, 40.

⁹² Auster, *Leviathan*, 104.

⁹³ Iler, "Suicide and the Afterlife of the Cold War", 741; Auster, *Leviathan*, 104.

⁹⁴ Lauren Berlant, *The Queen of America Goes to Washington City: Essays on Sex and Citizenship* (Durham Duke University Press, 1997), 3.

‘convinced a citizenry that the core context of politics should be the sphere of private life’, resulting in what she calls ‘the privatisation of U.S. citizenship’.⁹⁵ Auster, reflecting in an interview on the political context of *Leviathan*, suggests that 1980s conservatism represented ‘the dismantling of everything we had fought for in the sixties’, while Berlant similarly frames Reaganite ‘family values’ as a reversal of the 1960s leftist-feminist maxim ‘the personal is the political’ into ‘the political is the personal’ – a transformation I return to in the next chapter.⁹⁶

Leviathan is also concerned with the shrinking scale of public life in 1980s America, and the political mobilisation of citizenly symbolic identification with the nation state, preoccupations aptly captured in Sachs’s choice of target for his vigilante campaign: scale models of the Statue of Liberty. Berlant elsewhere analyses ‘Lady Liberty’ as a ‘popular site of collective fantasy that “solves” the problem of staging collective life’ by facilitating ‘the translation of subjects in time and history into an unmarked place [...] a whole body, indivisible although clearly divided, that represents the promise of the nation’.⁹⁷ Exploding the scale model statues, Sachs attempts to blow apart this fantasy of national identity, and to insist instead on a kind of revitalised civic culture that responds to the ‘rugged individualism’ of Reaganism: in a message sent to the

⁹⁵ Berlant, *The Queen of America Goes to Washington City*, 3.

⁹⁶ Auster and Siegumfeldt, *A Life in Words*, 167-168; Berlant *The Queen of America Goes to Washington City*, 177-178.

⁹⁷ Lauren Berlant, *The Anatomy of National Fantasy: Hawthorne, Utopia, and Everyday Life* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1991), 23.

press following the Phantom's latest attack, Sachs writes, 'Each person is alone and therefore we have nowhere to turn but to each other'.⁹⁸

As in *I Married a Communist*, however, this critique of contemporary liberalism is connected to a longer trajectory of political philosophy, albeit more schematically than in Roth's novel. Aaron suggests that if he had to summarise Sachs's political beliefs, he 'would begin by mentioning the Transcendentalists', and just as Nathan traces the idea for his Berkshire hideaway back to Thoreau, Sachs takes inspiration from "Civil Disobedience" (1849).⁹⁹ Like the American Trilogy, then, *Leviathan* is very deliberately in dialogue with American Renaissance literature, and the novel's epigraph is drawn from Emerson's essay, "Politics" (1844): 'Every actual State is corrupt'.¹⁰⁰ Emerson's essay concludes by asking whether 'thousands of human beings might exercise towards each other the grandest and simplest sentiments, as well as a knot of friends, or a pair of lovers'.¹⁰¹ Elizabeth Hewitt interprets the essay as offering a 'conception of intimate sociability' that 'becomes a model by which to interrogate the possibilities of sociability

⁹⁸ Auster, *Leviathan*, 217. For a broader survey of fictional responses to Reaganism, without reference to *Leviathan*, see Colin Hutchison, *Reaganism, Thatcherism and the Social Novel* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 65-112.

⁹⁹ Auster, *Leviathan*, 26.

¹⁰⁰ Emerson, "Politics" (1844), in *The Essential Writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, pp. 378-389 (382).

¹⁰¹ Emerson, "Politics", 389.

more largely'.¹⁰² Indeed, elsewhere in "Politics", Emerson asks, given the inherent corruption of governments, 'could not a nation of friends even devise better ways?'.¹⁰³

The novel's title, meanwhile, is not only an allusion to *Moby-Dick*, but 'a direct reference to Hobbes's notion of the state'.¹⁰⁴ In *Leviathan* (1651), Hobbes proposes a theory of the ambiguation of the individual subject in a collective fantasy of representation via the figure of an authoritarian sovereign. As Danielle Allen summarises, 'Hobbes believes it is possible to stabilize the idea of "the people's will" only by severing it from any individual's subjectivity', and when 'individual wills and demands' exist 'only virtually in the sovereign'.¹⁰⁵ Like Reaganism, then, Hobbes's theory of political representation 'implies that as long as citizens trust their institutions they need not trust one another'.¹⁰⁶ Hobbesian political philosophy thus forecloses 'the possibility of cultivating within citizens a culture of reciprocity', Allen argues, by basing its contractual definition of political bonds 'only on self-interest and fear, and not more broadly on practices like friendship'.¹⁰⁷ Indeed, a version of Aristotelian civic friendship is Allen's solution to Hobbes's derogation of citizenship. In the *Nicomachean Ethics*, she notes,

¹⁰² Hewitt, *Correspondence and American Literature*, 53.

¹⁰³ This question inspires Jason Scorza's recent communitarian critique of liberal individualism, in which he explicates a form of Emersonian civic friendship that, he suggests, 'could help to enrich the contemporary practice of citizenship'. See Scorza, *Strong Liberalism: Habits of Mind for Democratic Citizenship* (Medford: Tufts University Press, 2008), 100.

¹⁰⁴ Auster and Siegumfeldt, *A Life in Words*, 169.

¹⁰⁵ Danielle Allen, *Talking to Strangers: Anxieties of Citizenship since Brown v. Board of Education* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 78.

¹⁰⁶ Allen, *Talking to Strangers*, 82. On connections between Hobbes's *Leviathan* and Reaganism, see Michael Rogin, *Ronald Reagan, the Movie: and Other Episodes in Political Demonology* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), 283-300.

¹⁰⁷ Allen, *Talking to Strangers*, 97, 138.

‘practices of reciprocity coalesce in politics in the form of law and contract’, but it is ‘friendship’s ability to achieve ethical, and not merely legal, exchange that outpaces justice’. Involving practices of ‘self-sacrifice’, ‘generosity’, and a ‘willing[ness] to be in debt to one another’, friendship elaborates a relation of ‘ethical reciprocity’ that ‘limits’ agency and yet ‘generates consent and the experience of autonomy’, a relation that becomes Aristotle’s ‘model for how political freedom [...] works’.¹⁰⁸ Only such a revitalised code of ‘equitable exchange’, Allen argues, can forestall a Hobbesian corrosion of citizenship.

Leviathan explores the practices of exchange and reciprocity that might articulate a version of political community that is less like those envisioned by Hobbes or Reagan, based on a conception of negative liberty, and more like that theorised by Allen. On the one hand, Mark Brown is right to suggest that the novel portrays Sachs’s ‘abandonment of social contacts’ as he transforms into the Phantom; ‘ultimately’, Brown writes, Sachs’s project of political activism fails because he ‘is no longer able to recover the social connections that had formed the basis for his earlier self’.¹⁰⁹ But on the other hand, Mark Osteen notes, ‘ironically, in dropping out of the commonwealth [...] Sachs more firmly attaches himself to the leviathans of personal and political affiliation’.¹¹⁰ When Sachs entrusts his secret first to Aaron and then to their mutual friend Maria, a performance artist, it’s as if the the novel’s core characters ‘comprise a kind of secret society’ in which

¹⁰⁸ Allen, *Talking to Strangers*, 132-133.

¹⁰⁹ Brown, *Paul Auster*, 90, 87.

¹¹⁰ Osteen, “Phantoms of Liberty”, 87.

‘shared confidences yield a measure of freedom from the larger state’.¹¹¹ Osteen goes on to argue – in terms that closely echo Allen’s definition of ‘ethical reciprocity’ – that ‘the intertwined lives in Auster’s *Leviathan* [...] establish bonds that limit individual autonomy and give it meaning’. Like the American Trilogy, then, *Leviathan* explores the kinds of affiliation that endure even as we attempt to throw off the ‘agitating entanglements’ of our social world.

Throughout the novel, these bonds are gestured at through often oblique acts of generosity. Aaron forms a close friendship with Sachs’s wife, Fanny, and when Sachs is away in California for a few months – conducting a secret affair, Fanny suspects – they sleep together. On one level, Aaron recognises that Fanny is using him to get back at Sachs, ‘part of the quid pro quo that turns the victim into the one who victimizes, that act that puts the scales back in balance’.¹¹² But on another, he wonders whether a different ‘economy of justice’ might be at work. After a joyless marriage, Aaron is separated from his wife, Delia, but is considering reconciling for the sake of their son. His love affair with Fanny, however, allows him to recognise that this would be a terrible mistake, and he comes to believe that Fanny ‘did what she did to prevent me from going back to Delia’. If so, Fanny’s actions were not vengeful, but a ‘pure and luminous gesture of self-sacrifice’. ‘Is such a thing possible?’, Aaron wonders, ‘Can a person actually go that far for the sake of someone else?’.¹¹³

¹¹¹ Osteen, “Phantoms of Liberty”, 87.

¹¹² Auster, *Leviathan*, 86.

¹¹³ Auster, *Leviathan*, 89.

What are the limits of our generosity towards each other, and how will we know a gift when we see it? Critics sometimes point to the similarity between Aaron's narrative task in *Leviathan* – in which he tries to 'pick up the pieces' of Sachs's life – and one of Maria's performance projects, in which she attempts to create a 'portrait *in absentia*' of a stranger through the contacts in his 'little black address book' which she finds on the pavement, a portrait 'pieced together from everything he was not'.¹¹⁴ But another of Maria's projects seems to speak more mysteriously to Aaron's narrative, and to the novel's broader exploration of exchange and generosity. 'Since the age of fourteen', Aaron writes, Maria 'had saved all the birthday presents that had ever been given to her', and this gives her the idea for 'the long-term project of dressing Mr L. [...] a stranger she had once met at a party':

[...] without announcing her intentions to anyone, she took it upon herself to improve his wardrobe. Every year at Christmas she would send him an anonymous gift – a tie, a sweater, an elegant shirt – and because Mr L. moved in roughly the same social circles that she did, she would run into him every now and again, noting with pleasure the dramatic changes [...] For the fact was that Mr L. always wore the clothes Maria sent him [...] he never caught on that she was responsible for those Christmas packages.¹¹⁵

'Maria wasn't hungry for the sorts of attachment most people seem to want', Aaron notes, and her performance pieces all explore the interstice between intimacy and

¹¹⁴ Auster, *Leviathan*, 67.

¹¹⁵ Auster, *Leviathan*, 60-61.

surveillance.¹¹⁶ Her project with Mr L. seems to be another version of Fanny's ambiguous generosity, and to recall Fanshawe's 'truly moral act' in *The Locked Room*, in which the gift and secrecy are similarly entwined. It's these 'sorts of attachments', the novel suggests, these odd alliances of obscure beneficence and obligation, that finally define our social world.

Maria's artworks, of course, also resemble Sachs's Phantom project, which, as Auster suggests in an interview, amounts to a kind of 'political performance art'; his incognito bombing might be thought of as another version of Maria's 'anonymous gift[s]'.¹¹⁷ But before he turns to terror, and before he considers writing an 'elegy' for Dimaggio, Sachs hopes to atone for the murder in another way: by giving Dimaggio's widow, Lillian Stern, the money he found in Dimaggio's car.

'Not just the money – but the money as a token of everything he had to give, his entire soul. The alchemy of retribution demanded it [...] That was the inner law [...] By handing over the money to Lilian Stern, he would be putting himself in her hands'.¹¹⁸

¹¹⁶ Maria is closely based on the performance artist Sophie Calle, with whom Auster has collaborated. See Sophie Calle, *Double Game* [1999] (London: Violette Editions, 2007); *The Address Book* [1983] (Los Angeles: Giglio Press, 2012); Auster and Calle, "Gotham Handbook" (1994), in Auster, *Collected Prose* (London: Faber and Faber, 2003), pp. 283-292. Maria's birthday project is a version of Calle's "The Birthday Ceremony" (1980-1993).

¹¹⁷ Auster and Siegfumfeldt, *A Life in Words*, 170.

¹¹⁸ Auster, *Leviathan*, 167.

Fanshawe's gift had been 'a piece of magic', in which 'the one thing had been turned into another', and Sachs hopes for a similar alchemical transformation: the money, he says, 'isn't about goodness, it's about justice'.¹¹⁹ Just as in writing his elegy for Dimaggio he hopes to 'give him my life', here Sachs imagines another form of sacrifice. Although he is dismissive of Lillian's pop-philosophy books on 'reincarnation' that he finds scattered on the coffee table, Sachs longs for a similar kind of redemption.¹²⁰ But Lillian – who, as a former sex worker, is used to men paying her off – is sceptical: 'no one gives away money for nothing', she says, 'I'll be in your debt, won't I? [...] Once I take your money, you'll feel that you own me'.¹²¹ Sachs insists that Lillian will get the money 'free and clear'; but although he always imagined 'giving the money to her in one go [...] a quick, dream-like gesture', when he sees the squalor in which Lillian lives, and her neglect for her daughter, he reconsiders. Instead, he decides to give her the money in thousand dollar instalments, an arrangement that leads them into a brief and disastrous affair, and seals Sachs's own transformation into the Phantom. Not for the first or last time in his fiction, Auster is drawn to money's promise of crystallising the vicissitudes of generosity and indebtedness that underpin all personal and social relations, and here as elsewhere in his work, he explores the possibilities and dangers of imagining money as a kind of gift, one that might redistribute justice, but just as easily entrench inequality.

¹¹⁹ Auster, *Leviathan*, 207.

¹²⁰ Auster, *Leviathan*, 209.

¹²¹ Auster, *Leviathan*, 177.

Like *The Locked Room*, the novel follows the contours of a detective plot, but it is ‘the disintegration of liberalism in American culture during the Reagan era’, Dustin Iler notes, that ‘emerges as the mystery at the heart of *Leviathan*’:

In attempting to imagine the future of the U.S. after the Cold War [...] the novel fixates on a fear of relentless conservatism while yearning for the production of an alternative politics, one encompassing the spectrum from nostalgia for the New Left to radical anarchism.¹²²

In *The Locked Room*, the narrator is tasked with writing Fanshawe’s biography, and Sophie wonders whether he might write something ‘more personal [...] The story of your friendship. It could be as much about you as about him’.¹²³ *Leviathan* is also the story of a friendship, and Aaron recognises that his attempt to write about Sachs will inevitably also be about the web of social relations of which he was a part. ‘One thing leads to another’, Aaron writes, ‘every story overlaps with every other story [...] As much as Sachs himself, I’m the place where everything begins’.¹²⁴ Alike Varvogli notes that Aaron’s ‘search for his friend’ represents a ‘quest for meaning: not a universal, all-encompassing pattern, but something on a smaller and more personal scale’.¹²⁵ But as in Roth’s American Trilogy, this ‘personal scale’ is inevitably connected to a larger quest for political meaning in the novel. ‘Everything is connected’, Aaron writes, a phrase DeLillo picked up on in

¹²² Iler, “Suicide and the Afterlife of the Cold War”, 242.

¹²³ Auster, *New York Trilogy*, 248.

¹²⁴ Auster, *Leviathan*, 51.

¹²⁵ Varvogli, *The World that is the Book*, 147.

Underworld (1997), and if it's an insight that resonates with the logic of postmodern paranoia, it might also gesture to a conception of sociality articulating the 'yearning for the production of an alternative politics'.¹²⁶ The 'concentric circles' and 'weird networks' of solidarities and affiliations between the group of friends at the centre of *Leviathan* does not amount to a vision of citizenship that might counter Reaganite 'selfishness', but it does speak of the desire for one, and the novel's exploration of exchange and generosity also speaks of an effort to imagine, to recall Allen's phrase, a form of 'ethical reciprocity'.¹²⁷ As such, Aaron's narrative of his friendship with Sachs refutes even as it explores the postmodern nihilism which surrenders the novel's ability to imagine national community and critique society to terrorism. Aaron's own novels 'strike a deep chord' in the 'souls' of his readers, he notes – recalling Mauss's definition of the gift as a 'tie between souls'.¹²⁸ 'All of a sudden', he writes, 'they imagine [...] that you're the only friend they have in the world'.¹²⁹

3. *The Blue Team*

Oracle Night (2004) – the most recent of the 'stories about male friendship' Auster identifies in his letter to Coetzee – develops this exploration of the ethics of generosity, and of the novel's ability to forge intimacies and imagine community. In an interview, Auster observes that an 'edginess' characterises the relationship between the

¹²⁶ See Peter Knight, "Everything is Connected: *Underworld's* Secret History of Paranoia", *Modern Fiction Studies*, 45:3 (Fall 1999), pp. 811-832.

¹²⁷ Auster, *Leviathan*, 73. Auster also uses the phrase 'concentric circles' in *Here and Now*, 6.

¹²⁸ Mauss, *The Gift*, 59.

¹²⁹ Auster, *Leviathan*, 4.

narrator Sidney Orr and the older, more successful John Trause and that, because of their difference in age, there is something of the ‘master-apprentice’ dynamic to the friendship between the two writers.¹³⁰ Mark Brown notes that *Oracle Night* explores ‘the destructive power of families, but also the redemptive power of friendship’, and that ‘Sidney’s friendship with Trause is one of genuine kindness and mutual benefit’.¹³¹ Auster, however, notes that there is also an element of ‘competition’ to their relationship, centred around the blue Portuguese notebooks they both use.¹³² Like *The Locked Room*, then, the novel is about a writerly rivalry, and the blue notebooks clearly allude to the red notebook that Fanshawe gives to the narrator at the end of the earlier novel.¹³³ But *Oracle Night* is not as narrowly about literary influence. It is rarely noted that the novel is an historical fiction, set in the early 1980s, and while its political context is more opaque than *Leviathan*’s, the novel is similarly concerned with the connection between friendship and citizenship.

After realising that he and John have both been drawn to the same blue notebooks, Sidney thinks back to his childhood summers spent at Camp Pontiac, ‘named after the Indian chief’.¹³⁴ The kids are divided into two groups – the Red Team and the White Team – and compete against each other in a range of sports. ‘After a while’, Sidney tells his wife, Grace, ‘a third team was formed [...] the Blue Team’:

¹³⁰ Auster and Siegmundfeldt, *A Life in Words*, 224.

¹³¹ Brown, *Paul Auster*, 96.

¹³² Auster and Siegmundfeldt, *A Life in Words*, 224.

¹³³ Auster, *New York Trilogy*, 294.

¹³⁴ Paul Auster, *Oracle Night* (London: Faber and Faber, 2004), 43.

[It was] a kind of secret society, a brotherhood of kindred souls [...] [It] represented a human ideal, a tight-knit association of tolerant and sympathetic individuals, the dream of a perfect society [...] A Blue team member had to be curious, a lover of books [...] a lover of justice. A Blue Team member would give you the shirt off his back [...] but he would much rather slip a ten-dollar bill into your pocket when you weren't looking.¹³⁵

Overcoming America's historical racial divide symbolised by the Red and the White teams, Sidney's Blue Team resembles a mythic, romantic frontier vision of community defined by an ethics of generosity and liberal values.¹³⁶ Understandably, Grace mocks the Blue Team as 'silly boy's stuff' – 'I'll bet you and your friends had a secret handshake', she teases – but Sidney is not so quick to dismiss it: 'When I think about it now, I don't find it silly at all'.¹³⁷ Ruth Levitas also takes Sidney's evocation of the Blue Team seriously in her analysis of 'the presence in contemporary culture of an existential quest for utopia'.¹³⁸ Partly inspired by *Oracle Night*, Levitas calls this quest 'looking for the blue', because the colour evokes a mixture of hope and despair that she associates with the contemporary utopian imagination.¹³⁹ I examine this utopian impulse in detail in the

¹³⁵ Auster, *Oracle Night*, 43-46.

¹³⁶ On the presence of Native Americans in Auster's fiction, and the influence of the myth-and-symbol school on his early work, see Alys Moody, "Eden of Exiles: The Ethnicities of Paul Auster's Aesthetics".

¹³⁷ Auster, *Oracle Night*, 46, 43.

¹³⁸ Ruth Levitas, "Looking for the blue: The necessity of utopia", *Journal of Political Ideologies*, 12:3 (2007), pp. 289-306 (290).

¹³⁹ Levitas, "Looking for the blue", 292, 296.

next chapter, but here, I want only to note that Auster connects male friendship to a broader (and vaguer) ‘dream of a perfect society’, one defined by a code of generosity in which money might be a kind of gift.

In early draft material for the novel, Auster makes repeated reference to the ‘Hotel Existence’, an idea that would end up in another novel he was working on at the time, and that represents another version of the ideal of the Blue Team.¹⁴⁰ *The Brooklyn Follies* (2005) centres around the elderly Nathan Glass and his nephew Tom Wood.¹⁴¹ Their friendship isn’t easily classifiable; as Nathan says, they belong to the ‘post-family, post-student, post-post age of Glass and Wood’, and they gather around them an eclectic group of misfits and oddballs.¹⁴² The Hotel Existence is Tom’s name for an imagined community where they might all live together, ‘a place where a man goes to when life in the real world is no longer possible’ – a ‘little utopia’.¹⁴³ As Mark Brown notes, this exact phrase is used earlier in the novel to describe works by Poe and Thoreau, and ‘the implication’, Brown suggests, ‘is that literature and society can create spaces of “community” and “utopia”’.¹⁴⁴ Indeed, we may go further and suggest that the implication is that *only* through literature can such a community be imagined – the Blue

¹⁴⁰ See Paul Auster, “Oracle Night Drafts”, Box 23, Folder 1, The Paul Auster Collection of Papers, 1999-2006, (bulk 2000-2005), The Henry W. and Albert A. Berg Collection, The New York Public Library.

¹⁴¹ ‘It is hard not to think of Roth when we read Auster’, Michael Schmidt notes, observing that Nathan Glass ‘calls to mind Roth’s Nathan Zuckerman’. *The Novel: A Biography* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2014), 1099.

¹⁴² Paul Auster, *The Brooklyn Follies* (London: Faber and Faber, 2005), 22.

¹⁴³ Auster, *Brooklyn Follies*, 106.

¹⁴⁴ Brown, *Paul Auster*, 96.

Team, after all, is formed of ‘lovers of justice’ and ‘lovers of books’, and Auster suggests that these two passions are interconnected.

Central to the appeal that the Blue Team holds for Sidney is the idea that ‘you don’t have to explain your principles. They’re immediately understood by how you act’. But as Grace points out, ‘People don’t always act the same way [...] Good people do bad things, Sid’.¹⁴⁵ As my discussion of the gift has suggested, distinguishing between a good and a bad act might not be so straightforward, and Sidney’s own relationship with John bears this out. Recovering from a near-fatal illness, Sidney is struggling to pay his medical bills. He tries to earn a quick buck selling a film treatment, but it doesn’t pan out. To help, John offers him one of his own early unfinished stories that he suggests Sidney might work up into something sellable:

It’s an odd piece, not at all like my other work [...] I guess I’d call it a political parable. It’s set in an imaginary country in the eighteen thirties, but it’s really about the early nineteen fifties. McCarthy, HUAC, the Red Scare – all the sinister things that were going on then. The idea is that governments always need enemies.¹⁴⁶

Sidney is ‘tongue-tied with gratitude’, and marvels at John’s readiness to ‘go beyond the normal bounds of friendship [...] selflessly, without any thought of profiting from what

¹⁴⁵ Auster, *Oracle Night*, 46.

¹⁴⁶ Auster, *Oracle Night*, 143.

he'd done'.¹⁴⁷ But when he reads it, Sidney suspects that 'Trause gave me that story for highly complex reasons'.¹⁴⁸ It is a political parable, but it's also 'a story about a marital triangle (a wife running off with her husband's best friend)'. Indeed, these two narratives similarly overlap in *Leviathan*, and more so than in Roth's fiction, friendship between men in Auster's novels is often complicated by and triangulated through relationships with women. John and Grace have always been close, and, despite the story having been written thirty years earlier, Sidney reads it as 'about the woman we both loved – my wife'. John is telling him something about their friendship and his own marriage, Sidney suggests, 'in the finely nuanced codes and metaphors of fiction'.¹⁴⁹

John's story cautions of the duplicity of fiction, of how it can contain a 'veiled and critic form of revenge', as Sidney puts it, even as it appears to offer friendship; or how it can turn members of the Blue Team into Cold War enemies.¹⁵⁰ As in *The Locked Room* and *Leviathan*, then, Auster portrays an ambiguous textual exchange between male friends (and their wives) in which generosity and retribution seem to coalesce. Near the end of the novel, however, John sends Sidney something else: a letter. He writes that offering the story had simply been a way 'to earn you some money, so I've cut to the chase and written you this check'.¹⁵¹ The enclosed cheque is for the exact sum of Sidney's medical bills. John offers Sidney another currency in which to conduct their

¹⁴⁷ Auster, *Oracle Night*, 145.

¹⁴⁸ Auster, *Oracle Night*, 193.

¹⁴⁹ Auster, *Oracle Night*, 193.

¹⁵⁰ Auster, *Oracle Night*, 195.

¹⁵¹ Auster, *Oracle Night*, 195.

friendship. Money, unlike fiction, cuts to the chase. And unlike the story, the money can stand, John writes, as ‘a gift, free and clear’.¹⁵²

4. Counterfeit Money

Sidney never has the chance to thank John for his ‘supreme generosity’ because the older writer dies suddenly from a pulmonary embolism: ‘the little bomb had finally gone off inside him, and my friend was dead at fifty-six’.¹⁵³ *Oracle Night*, then, is also a work of mourning for a deceased friend, and the ‘little bomb’ in John confirms a connection back to *Leviathan* and to Sachs – who had also hoped that he might offer Lillian money as a gift, ‘free and clear’. Like Sachs, John’s aim in switching fiction for money is to clarify the intent and value of his gift; but one of the implications of the substitution is that money might be more similar to language than either man would like. This, in fact, has become a commonplace of literary-economic criticism. The breach between sign and signified theorised by poststructuralist linguistic theory, the argument goes, is akin to that of the disassociation of money’s face-value from its material worth. The separation of the credit system from the gold standard, and the advent of paper (and electronic) money has meant that the market economy ‘float[s] on financial simulacra, subordinating “intrinsic” value to speculation, opinion, imagination’.¹⁵⁴ Money, in other

¹⁵² Auster, *Oracle Night*, 195.

¹⁵³ Auster, *Oracle Night*, 196.

¹⁵⁴ Sandra Sherman, “Book Review: *Writing and the Rise of Finance: Capital Satires of the Early Eighteenth Century*”, *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, 31:1 (Fall 1997), pp. 144-145 (144).

words, became fictitious, and so (like texts) forgeable.¹⁵⁵ As Marc Shell explains, in the nineteenth century, ‘understanding the relationship between substance and sign was complicated by the known existence of counterfeit notes’, which divided into two kinds: illegal copies of legitimate so-called ‘ghost moneys’, and the fabrication of ‘phantom bank notes’.¹⁵⁶ ‘Ghosts, counterfeit ghosts, and phantoms [...] passed all alike’, Shell writes, haunting the market economy and undermining the primacy and verifiability of ‘real’ money.¹⁵⁷

In *Here and Now*, Auster and Coetzee’s discussion also moves from friendship to money, and Coetzee looks to poststructuralism for an analogy for the arbitrary nature of financial markets. Discussing the 2008 credit crash, he suggests that ‘the numbers [...] are mere signs, no less than the letter a, b, c [...] the numbers reflect no reality’.¹⁵⁸ As in their exchange on friendship, Auster’s qualification of Coetzee’s argument is subtle but significant. He begins by agreeing that ‘the supreme fiction of our world is money. What is money but worthless pieces of paper?’. But he goes on to point out that, despite its abstract nature, the crash ‘is producing tangible results’. Money might be a ‘fiction’, Auster writes, but fictions ‘affect reality’. He recognises along with Coetzee that the

¹⁵⁵ Nicky Marsh, *Money, Speculation and Finance in Contemporary British Fiction* (London: Continuum, 2007), 1-24.

¹⁵⁶ Marc Shell, *Money, Language and Thought* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982), 14-21. See also John Chown, *A History of Money: From AD 800* (London: Routledge, 1994), 17-22.

¹⁵⁷ Shell, *Money, Language and Thought*, 7.

¹⁵⁸ Auster and Coetzee, *Here and Now*, 19.

economy operates on ‘collective belief’, but he is not quite so willing to dismiss the power of that ‘faith’.¹⁵⁹

Auster’s letter closely recalls his reflections on his ‘flawed, enigmatic’, and ‘contradictory’ ‘relationship with money’ in his memoir *Hand to Mouth* (1997).¹⁶⁰ He suggests that this ambivalence is the product of his parents’ opposing perspectives on money, their views representing ‘two moral philosophies [...] in eternal conflict’. ‘Like so many Americans before her and since’, his mother ‘cultivated shopping as a means of self-expression [...] to enter a store was to engage in an alchemical process [...] with magical, transformative powers’. His father, meanwhile, was ‘tight’, and resented his wife’s extravagant spending.¹⁶¹ But in an earlier memoir, *The Invention of Solitude* (1982), Auster notes that his father also ‘dreamed all his life of becoming a millionaire’:

It was not so much the money itself he wanted, but what it represented: [...] a way of making himself untouchable. Having money means more than being able to buy things: it means that the world need never affect you. Money in the sense of protection, then, not pleasure.¹⁶²

¹⁵⁹ Auster and Coetzee, *Here and Now*, 22. *Cosmopolis* – the novel DeLillo dedicated to Auster – is concerned with money losing its ‘narrative quality the way painting did once upon a time. Money is talking to itself’. *Cosmopolis* (New York: Scribner, 2003), 77.

¹⁶⁰ Paul Auster, *Hand to Mouth* (1997), in *Collected Prose*, pp. 151-240 (153).

¹⁶¹ Auster, *Hand to Mouth*, 155.

¹⁶² Paul Auster, *The Invention of Solitude* (1982), in *Collected Prose*, pp. 1-150 (47).

In his fiction, Auster develops a third ‘moral philosophy’ of capital that’s closer though not identical to his mother’s; if money is ‘protection’ for the father, for the son it will be a means of opening himself to the risk and responsibility of other people. In *Hand to Mouth*, Auster portrays his political education as beginning in a rejection of the ‘orthodox view’ of ‘American capitalism’ that money was a ‘good to be valued above all others’ – what he describes elsewhere as the ‘dark side of the American dream’.¹⁶³ Yet he also notes that ‘money talked, and to the degree that you listened to it and followed its argument, you would learn to speak the language of life’.¹⁶⁴ Money, then, provides a compelling vocabulary that the novelist can hardly ignore. Auster’s fictions listen out for the ways in which money might be made to speak of forms of generosity and indebtedness that are not simply financial, and how it might form social ties whose ‘value’ is of a different order to that accounted for in the market.

A number of critics have noted that the motif of receiving an inheritance features prominently in Auster’s work, and have connected this to the author’s own description of how his literary career was made possible by some money left to him when his father died.¹⁶⁵ Pascal Bruckner writes of Auster’s inheritance that ‘the son would never stop repaying the debt, would never finish reimbursing the deceased, in prose, for this

¹⁶³ Auster, *Hand to Mouth*, 156. ‘The American dream is also about money and the freedom to make as much money as one can. And I think that any society which is so completely overwhelmed by the notion of dollars is going to run into contradictions’. Chris Pace, “Q & A with Paul Auster”, 1999.

¹⁶⁴ Auster, *Hand to Mouth*, 157.

¹⁶⁵ See Martin, *Paul Auster’s Postmodernity*, 41; Carsten Springer, *A Paul Auster Sourcebook* (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 2001), 16.

fearsome gift'.¹⁶⁶ It's been a short step to connect this motif to literary influence, and to read the numerous filial relations involving an inheritance in his work as part of Auster's negotiation with his literary forefathers.¹⁶⁷ But as Mark Brown notes, 'conventions of genealogy' are frequently 'usurped' in Auster's fiction, while 'paternity [...] and the privileges it conventionally confers, such as inheritance, are lost as soon as they are acquired'.¹⁶⁸ Instead of filial relationships, Auster's fiction often imagines friendships between men by elaborating alternative circulations of money, imbued not with the burden of inheritance, but with something like his mother's understanding of money's 'alchemical' potential.

Lewis Hyde argues that the gift must be kept in constant circulation, and that this movement traces an 'anarchic' and 'decentralised cohesiveness' antithetical to capitalism's substantiation of property rights and economic self-interest.¹⁶⁹ In *Hand to Mouth*, Auster tells an anecdote about the recirculation of an inheritance that captures something of this anarchic spirit. The novelist H. L. Humes – who helped found the *Paris Review* – was one of the 'bevy of friends' Auster gathered around him in New York in the late 1960s.¹⁷⁰ Humes inherited \$15,000 upon the death of his father and, 'rather than

¹⁶⁶ Pascal Bruckner, "Paul Auster, or The Heir Intestate", in Barone (ed.), *Beyond the Red Notebook*, pp. 27-33 (27).

¹⁶⁷ See Julie Campbell, "Beckett and Auster: Father and Sons and the Creativity of Misreading", in Linda Ben-Zvi and Angela Moorjani (eds.), *Beckett at 100: Revolving it All* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), pp. 299-311.

¹⁶⁸ Brown, *Paul Auster*, 80.

¹⁶⁹ Lewis Hyde, *The Gift*, xvii.

¹⁷⁰ William Marling, *Gatekeepers: The Emergence of World Literature and the 1960s* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 75.

squander the money on himself’, decided to ‘give it away’ with the instruction to ‘get it circulating’.¹⁷¹ Through this random exchange of money, Humes hoped to ‘bring down the system’ and ‘strike a blow to capitalism’; Humes’s actions, then, amounted to a kind of political performance art akin to Sachs’s.¹⁷² And Auster has subsequently kept the story circulating in his fiction. In *The Locked Room*, the narrator thinks of Humes while reading Fanshawe’s notebooks, and a version of the experiment crops up in *Moon Palace* (1989). The narrator Fogg is working as a manservant to the elderly eccentric Offing, who proposes they carry out Humes’s scheme in order to ‘repay an outstanding debt’.¹⁷³ In each of its iterations, the anecdote tells the story of the redistribution of a father’s wealth into a different set of relationships: the inheritance is turned into a kind of gift.

The recirculation of an inheritance is also at the centre of *The Music of Chance* (1990), described by Auster in an interview as a ‘parable about political power’ – recalling Trause’s description of the story he gives to Sidney as a ‘political parable’.¹⁷⁴ The protagonist, Jim Nashe, receives an unexpected windfall after the death of his long-absent father, and heads out on an aimless cross-country road trip. Disillusioned and directionless, he has already torn through most of his inheritance when he comes across Pozzi, a Beckettian drifter-gambler ambling forlornly along the roadside. Pozzi recalls

¹⁷¹ Auster, *Hand to Mouth*, 178. On the metaphor of circulation in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century fiction, see David Trotter, *Circulation: Defoe, Dickens, and the Economies of the Novel* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1988), 3-17.

¹⁷² Auster, *Hand to Mouth*, 179.

¹⁷³ Paul Auster, *Moon Palace* (London: Faber and Faber, 1989), 198.

¹⁷⁴ Mary Morris, “A Conversation with Paul Auster”, in James Hutchison (ed.), *Conversations with Paul Auster* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2013), pp. 163-179 (166). Trause is an anagram of Auster.

how, after being told as a boy by his mother that his dad had died in Vietnam, he was incredulous when, aged eight, a Cadillac rolled up to his house and the driver introduced himself as his father. Little Pozzi is taken for a ride and handed a hundred-dollar bill by the man. ‘After six months’, Pozzi tells Nashe, ‘I got it into my head that the money was fake, that it was a counterfeit bill [...] I remember thinking that if the money was fake, then the guy who gave it to me couldn’t be my father’.¹⁷⁵ But the banknote is genuine, and Pozzi accepts that the man is his father, although this conflicts with his understanding that ‘fathers don’t go away. They live with their families’. So what has the banknote’s authenticity guaranteed? By the little boy’s logic, it has confirmed the man’s claim to paternity, and yet it has also revealed him to be a ‘fake’ father in the sorts of ways that matter most. ‘If this guy is really my father’, Pozzi wonders, ‘then why doesn’t he come back and see me? At least he could write a letter or something’.¹⁷⁶ For both Pozzi and Nashe, the money given to them by their fathers has been a kind of counterfeit gift – an exchange emptied of its affective value and yet imposing a relation of indebtedness. They know their fathers have tried to buy them off.

Nashe acknowledges a ‘certain softening’ in his feeling towards his travel companion after hearing Pozzi’s story. He is struck by ‘the curious correspondence’ in their circumstances: ‘the early abandonment, the unexpected gift of money, the abiding anger’.¹⁷⁷ ‘Once a man begins to recognise himself in another’, Nashe notes, ‘he can no longer look on that person as a stranger. Like it or not, a bond is formed’. The

¹⁷⁵ Paul Auster, *The Music of Chance* (London: Faber and Faber, 1990), 41.

¹⁷⁶ Auster, *Music of Chance*, 41.

¹⁷⁷ Auster, *Music of Chance*, 45.

‘unexpected gift’ has created an equally unexpected friendship, and as the novel progresses, the relationship between the two men will continue to be articulated via a redistribution of inheritance, and through a very different circulation of money. Nashe agrees to stump up the rest of his cash as a stake for Pozzi in a poker match with the millionaire odd-couple Flower and Stone. Pozzi will lose Nashe’s money, but the bet – a speculative circulation of money that is the antithesis of inheritance – brings them together. Nashe goes the ‘full distance for Pozzi [...] pushing past any reasonable limit’, and in the process gains ‘a friend’: ‘That friend now seemed prepared to do anything for him’.¹⁷⁸

But the novel is also concerned with ‘the extent to which money controls and coerces’.¹⁷⁹ Flower and Stone’s wealth is also the product of an ‘unexpected gift of money’ – a lottery win – but they use their fortune to exert authority and impinge on the freedom of others. In the course of the poker match, Pozzi not only loses Nashe’s stake, but accrues an additional debt that they are unable to pay. To recompense Flower and Stone, the four come to an agreement that Nashe and Pozzi will work for the millionaires as employees to build a vast (and seemingly purposeless) stone wall within the grounds of their mansion, and, as Mark Brown notes, their relationship ‘as employees is formalised in contract’.¹⁸⁰ The central chapters, wherein Nashe and Pozzi are set to work, are based on Auster’s early play, *Laurel and Hardy Go to Heaven* which, like *The Music of Chance*,

¹⁷⁸ Auster, *Music of Chance*, 115.

¹⁷⁹ Tom Woods, “*The Music of Chance*: Aleatorical (Dis)harmonies Within “The City of the World”, in Barone (ed.), *Beyond the Red Notebook*, pp. 143-162 (145).

¹⁸⁰ Brown, *Paul Auster*, 137.

owes much to *Waiting for Godot*.¹⁸¹ But Beckett's influence is also felt in the kind of double-act dynamic that develops between Nashe and Pozzi, who fit the mould of the Beckettian 'pseudo-couple' as defined by Frederic Jameson:

The pseudo-couple is masculine [...and] might be understood as a kind of compensation formation, a curious structural halfway house in the history of the subject, between its construction in bourgeois individualism and its destruction in late capitalism. The partners of the pseudo-couple [are not] independent subjects in their own right [...] and find themselves thereby obliged to lean on one another in a simulation of psychic unity.¹⁸²

There's much here that speaks to Nashe and Pozzi's relationship, and we might note that Jameson's image of the 'curious structural halfway house' is oddly literalised in the useless wall the pair are building across Flower and Stone's meadow; and we might dwell on the full resonance of 'compensation formation' in regard to a relationship formed through money. Jameson of course also makes this link to financial economy by suggesting that the pseudo-couple relationship is, as Sarah Cole puts it, 'a way to ward off the centrifugal spin into late-capitalist monadism'.¹⁸³ Paradoxically, then, Auster's

¹⁸¹ See Varvogli, *The World that is the Book*, 112.

¹⁸² Frederic Jameson, *Fables of Aggression: Wyndham Lewis, the Modernist as Fascist* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979), 59. Reviewing Beckett's *Mercier and Camier* (1970), Auster writes, 'Like Flaubert's Bouvard and Pécuchet, like Laurel and Hardy, like the other "pseudo couples" in Beckett's work, [Mercier and Camier] are not so much separate characters as two elements of a tandem reality, and neither one could exist without the other. The purpose of their journey is never stated, and their destination is unclear'. "From Cakes to Stones: A note on Beckett's French", in *Collected Prose*, pp. 346-350 (346).

¹⁸³ Sarah Cole, *Modernism, Male Friendship, and the First World War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 5.

‘parable of political power’ suggests that if the pseudo-couple only offers a ‘simulation of psychic unity’ – if it is in effect a kind of counterfeit friendship – such relationships might nonetheless retain a ‘true value’ in a culture in which practices of citizenship and democratic participation have themselves been reduced to mere simulacra.

The indeterminacy of the authentic and the counterfeit, the real and the fake, is also at the heart of *Smoke*, the 1995 film Auster wrote and co-directed with Wayne Wang. The film centres around a group of men who gather in Auggie’s humdrum corner store tobacconist, the Brooklyn Cigar Company.¹⁸⁴ As Mark Brown notes, Auster expresses the ‘solidarity’ and ‘friendship’ between the men ‘through money’:

On the face of it this seems like a restatement of the values and ethos of the system of international finance capital, as encoded in the Manhattan skyline across the East River. However, Auster treats the circulation of money as an act that contradicts the ‘money relations’ of New York’s global finance center, by suspending the accrual of profit.¹⁸⁵

As in Auster’s fiction, the movement of money in *Smoke* traces a structure of feeling in which informal, often haphazard forms of affiliation and community manifest. As opposed to the rule of profit in mercantile Manhattan, what emerges in Brooklyn is what Karin van Marle describes in her discussion of *Smoke* as a ‘jurisprudence of

¹⁸⁴ Paul Auster, *Smoke* (1995), in *Collected Screenplays* (London: Faber and Faber, 2010), pp. 21-140.

¹⁸⁵ Brown, *Paul Auster*, 176.

generosity'.¹⁸⁶ In the next chapter, I explore Auster's localist politics further, but here, I want to focus on the way, as Chris Darke argues, 'money becomes the material symbol of the growing affinity between the characters' in *Smoke*, 'as bad money is made good, and a theft is transformed into a gift'.¹⁸⁷ As a favour to his loyal customer Paul – a novelist and the film's protagonist – Auggie gives a job to Rashid, an African-American kid from Harlem looking for work and a place to live. While Rashid is minding the store, the backroom floods, destroying \$5000 of Cuban cigars Auggie has illegally imported. Rashid is fired. Later, in a conversation with Paul, it transpires that he left Harlem after getting mixed up in a robbery gone wrong in which he accidentally went off with the heist money – also \$5000. Paul suggests that he can 'use it to make things right with Auggie [...] Better to keep your friends than worry about your enemies'. When Rashid wonders what he'll do without the money, Paul reassures him, 'You've got friends now, remember?'.¹⁸⁸

Within this network of friendship, cultural divisions seem to dissolve like smoke: Auggie's store is a classless, race-blind, male clubhouse, another version of the Blue Team, or the Hotel Existence. But *Smoke* is aware that it risks offering an idealised portrait of neighbourhood life, and crucially complicates its own patterning of debt and repayment in a way that undermines its apparent sentimentality. At the start of the film, Paul begins to tell an anecdote about Sir Walter Raleigh to the guys hanging out at Auggie's counter. 'I used to smoke Raleigh cigarettes', Jerry, one of the regulars, pipes

¹⁸⁶ Karin van Marle, "Laughter, Refusal, Friendship: Thoughts on a 'Jurisprudence of Generosity'", *Stellenbosch Law Review*, 18 (2007), pp. 194-206 (204-205).

¹⁸⁷ Chris Darke, *Light Readings: Film Criticism and Screen Arts* (London: Wallflower, 2000), 40.

¹⁸⁸ Auster, *Smoke*, 103.

up, ‘they came with a free gift coupon in every pack’.¹⁸⁹ ‘That’s the man’, Paul says, before telling them how Raleigh made a bet with Queen Elizabeth that he could weigh the smoke in a cigar. ‘I admit it’s strange’, Paul says, as Jerry and the guys express puzzlement, ‘almost like weighing someone’s soul’. He explains how Raleigh took an unsmoked cigar and weighed it, then smoked it, carefully tapping the ash into a ‘balance pan’. The difference between the two, Paul says with a smile, was ‘the weight of the smoke’.¹⁹⁰

The anecdote is the story of a bet and the calculation of the apparently inestimable. Raleigh’s method is clever, but it misses something of the essence of smoking – hence the apt comparison to weighing a soul.¹⁹¹ Like Pozzi’s story of the authentic banknote given to him by his fake father, Raleigh seems to value the wrong thing. His attempt to ‘balance’ the scale does little justice to tobacco’s real worth – and anyway, what mattered most to Jerry about his Raleigh cigarettes was the ‘free gift’. In the next scene, Paul is walking absent-mindedly into the road and Rashid saves him from an oncoming truck. ‘I owe you something’, Paul tells him, afterwards insisting that ‘It’s a law of the universe [...] You have to let me do something for you to put the scales back in

¹⁸⁹ Auster, *Smoke*, 26. Walter Raleigh is alluded to throughout Auster’s fiction, and as far back as his student days at Columbia in the late 1960s, he was planning a novel called *The Death of Sir Walter Raleigh*, which was to feature a fictionalised version of H. L. Humes. An essay of the same title appeared in 1975. See Marling, *Gatekeepers*, 81-86. As in *Smoke*, Raleigh is associated with interracial male friendship in *Mr. Vertigo* (London: Faber and Faber, 1994), through the protagonist Walt’s relationship with Aesop. Walt describes how Aesop transformed his life: ‘I’m not just referring to my prejudices, the old witchcraft of never looking past the color of a person’s skin, but to the fact of friendship itself’ (37). Unsurprisingly given his name, Aesop has a rich store of magical tales, and Walt’s favourites are those ‘about my namesake, Sir Walter Raleigh’ (43).

¹⁹⁰ Auster, *Smoke*, 27.

¹⁹¹ The comparison also recalls Sachs’s effort to give Lillian money ‘as a token of everything he had to give, his entire soul’. *Leviathan*, 167.

balance'.¹⁹² Paul here echoes Sachs's desperate effort to follow the 'the inner law' demanding he repay his 'debt' to Lillian.¹⁹³ More immediately, Paul recalls the image of Raleigh's balancing pan and the idea of weighing a soul, and so raises the question of what he could offer that would adequately recompense Rashid for saving his life. Mark Brown is right to suggest that friendships form in the film through a series of 'mutual obligations'. But, in this opening sequence, *Smoke* also elaborates a more complex conception of exchange in which forms of excess and surplus unsettle the 'balance' of reciprocity.¹⁹⁴

As Michael Kaplan notes, *Smoke* shares much of its central imagery with Baudelaire's short story "Counterfeit Money" (1869): in both, male friendship is linked to smoking, to money, and to the idea of the gift.¹⁹⁵ In Baudelaire's tale, two male friends are walking back from the tobacconist, when one gives a coin to a beggar. The friend tells his companion that he gave away a counterfeit coin.¹⁹⁶ In his reading of the story, Derrida asks how the fact of the money being fake changes the act of the gift, before wondering whether the friend's confession, rather than his coin, is the 'real' counterfeit. If this were so, Derrida suggests, the story might reflexively be a commentary on Baudelaire's text

¹⁹² Auster, *Smoke*, 31.

¹⁹³ Auster, *Leviathan*, 167, 179.

¹⁹⁴ Brown, *Paul Auster*, 176.

¹⁹⁵ Michael Kaplan, *Friendship Fictions: The Rhetoric of Citizenship in the Liberal Imaginary* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2010), 183. Mark Brown suggests that 'Auster's urban representations have been richly influenced by [...] Baudelaire'. Brown, *Paul Auster*, 8.

¹⁹⁶ Charles Baudelaire, "Counterfeit Money" (1869), in Jacques Derrida, *Given Time 1*, pp. 72-78.

itself – dedicated to a friend – and of the confidence game between authors and readers inherent to fiction.¹⁹⁷

Smoke is a free-form adaptation of Auster's short story "Auggie Wren's Christmas Story", commissioned and published by the *New York Times* on Christmas day, 1990 – the year of *The Music of Chance*'s publication and of Auster's first full draft of *Leviathan*.¹⁹⁸ *Smoke*'s co-director Wayne Wang says that he was drawn to the story's 'complex world of reality and fiction, truth and lies, giving and taking', while Auster comments in an interview that 'Everything gets turned upside down in "Auggie Wren". What's stealing? What's giving? What's lying? What's telling the truth?'.¹⁹⁹ The main thread of the tale is a story told by Auggie to Paul, who is in search of a Christmas story free from the 'unpleasant associations [...] of hypocritical mush and treacle'.²⁰⁰ Auggie offers to tell him a good story if Paul buys him lunch, guaranteeing that 'every word is true'. The story Auggie tells is a convoluted one of good deeds and deception which has at its centre a scene in which he takes a camera – that was likely already stolen – from the house of an elderly blind woman who mistakes him – or pretends to mistake him – for her grandson, and with whom Auggie ends up having Christmas lunch. Auggie tells a version

¹⁹⁷ Derrida, *Given Time 1*, 116.

¹⁹⁸ See Auster, "Leviathan: Drafts", Box 3, Folder 3, The Paul Auster Collection of Papers, 1987-2001 (bulk 1995-1999). In an early treatment of *Smoke*, Paul is also given this assignment by the *New York Times*, and asks the editor, 'What does a Jew know about Christmas?'. Auster, "Smoke: Film Treatment by Paul Auster and Siri Hustvedt", Box 43, Folder 2, The Paul Auster Collection of Papers, 1987-2001 (bulk 1995-1999).

¹⁹⁹ John Blades, "City of Smoke and Dreams", *Chicago Tribune*, November 5, 1995; Auster, "The Making of *Smoke*" (1995), in *Collected Screenplays*, pp. 3-17 (3).

²⁰⁰ Paul Auster, "Auggie Wren's Christmas Story" (1990), in *Collected Screenplays*, pp. 141-147 (143).

of the story to Paul in the final sequence of *Smoke* and, like the Walter Raleigh anecdote at the start, it offers a commentary on the film's broader exploration of forms of morally ambiguous exchange. When Auggie finishes telling his story, a 'wicked grin' spreads across his face, and Paul wonders whether he's been had, and whether Auggie was just blowing smoke:

Paul: Bullshit is a real talent, Auggie [...] I'd say you were among the masters.

Auggie: What do you mean?

Paul: I mean, it's a good story.

Auggie: Shit. If you can't share your secrets with your friends, what kind of friend are you?²⁰¹

But what exactly is the secret being shared? The confession of the theft that is the subject of the story, or that the story itself is a 'fake', a fiction? The question is akin to that posed by the 'confession' of the friend in Baudelaire's story: if Auggie's story is a counterfeit like the friend's coin, is it any less valuable? What has Auggie given to Paul, in other words, and what has he given away about their friendship? The secret of Auggie's story – and, he suggests, the secret of friendship – might lie in this very indeterminacy. In *Smoke*, then, we're back in the 'zone of not-knowing' that Auster suggested to Coetzee defines male friendship. Rather than a 'transparent' relation, as Coetzee argues, friendship here is obscured in a cloud of smoke, as mysterious as Sachs's relationship with Aaron – who, like Auggie, promises to 'give [a] true story', and who,

²⁰¹ Auster, *Smoke*, 139.

like Paul, shares a cigar with a friend telling a very tall tale of stolen money and assumed identities. Throughout his first letter to Coetzee, Auster quotes from his own translation of the notebooks of the French essayist Joseph Joubert, picking out Joubert's gobbets on friendship: 'He must not only cultivate his friends, but cultivate his friendships within himself [...] We always lose the friendship of those who lose our esteem'.²⁰² But there is one line of Joubert's on friendship that Auster translates but does not quote back to Coetzee: 'A person who is never duped cannot be a friend'.²⁰³ 'Getting people right is not what life is about anyway', Nathan writes in *American Pastoral*, 'It's getting them wrong that is living'.²⁰⁴ In Auster's fiction, getting one another wrong is similarly part of living, even if his work also entertains Sidney's utopian fantasy, in *Oracle Night*, of a more 'transparent' form of social exchange, in which 'you don't have to explain your principles. They're immediately understood by how you act'. One of money's allures is that it speaks to just this fantasy of transparency. It can provide an objective index of value that rationalises exchange; you know what you're getting with money, and what its owed to whom, even if prices fluctuate – it cuts to the chase. But in imagining money as a gift, Auster not only reveals this fantasy to be a counterfeit, but explores how all social relations, all projects of community, are 'haunted' by the phantom spectres of value, indebtedness, and authenticity. Mauss writes that much of 'our morality and our lives themselves are [...] permeated with [the] atmosphere of the gift, where obligation and liberty intermingle', and Auster shows that even our closest relationships are imbricated

²⁰² Auster and Coetzee, *Here and Now*, 6; Joseph Joubert, *The Notebooks of Joseph Joubert*, trans. Paul Auster (New York: New York Review of Books, 2005), 132.

²⁰³ Joubert, *The Notebooks of Joseph Joubert*, 113.

²⁰⁴ Roth, *American Pastoral*, 35.

in this ambivalent exchange of freedom and control.²⁰⁵ The paper trail I've traced between friends in Auster's work – the letters, the manuscripts, the novels, the postcards, the cheques, the cash – reproduce this quandary of reciprocity, of corresponding with another, and show generosity to be an act of ultimately unaccountable risk. Friendships for Auster are, we could say, in a phrase he might like, chance encounters: speculative relations, freighted with the potential of the unforeseen.

²⁰⁵ Mauss, *The Gift*, 65.

CHAPTER THREE

Broken Utopias:

Race, Place, and Temporality in Michael Chabon's *Telegraph Avenue* (2012) and Jonathan Lethem's *The Fortress of Solitude* (2003)

1. 'You'll never get it if you don't slow down'

In *Smoke*, the 'Brooklyn Cigar Company' is portrayed as a focal point for a model of community. Auggie's corner store is the block's local spot where men go to 'shoot the breeze', engendering a loose network of overlapping neighbourhood affinities that cohere into a ramshackle sociality.¹ In the previous chapter, I explored how money moves differently around Auggie's store than it does in Manhattan, its flow tracing a structure of feeling in which the working up and off of debts indexes emotional ties as well as financial obligations. From its opening shot of a Brooklyn-bound subway train crossing the East River, with the downtown Manhattan skyline behind, the film suggests how the two boroughs constitute one another spatially and temporally. Imagined as local and rooted, and as a 'place' characterised by face-to-face relations, neighbourhood Brooklyn defines itself in relation and distinction to the globalised, corporatised 'space' of the financial centre looming large across the water.² While time is money in the city, in

¹ Paul Auster, *Smoke* (1995), in *Collected Screenplays* (London: Faber and Faber, 2010), pp. 21-140 (21).

² On the interwoven literary histories of Brooklyn and Manhattan, see James Peacock, *Brooklyn Fictions: The Contemporary Urban Community in a Global Age* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), 12-40. My argument here about New York's boroughs maps onto Miranda Joseph's broader analysis of how the concepts of community and capital are symbiotically constituted in the liberal imaginary. See Joseph, *Against the Romance of Community* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), 1-29.

Brooklyn, at least during the ‘slow hours’ at Auggie’s, it’s spent a little differently – savoured like a good smoke, or wasted just ‘hanging out’.³

Smoke is wary, however, of the tendency to idealise neighbourhood life. Paul starts dating a woman whose doctoral thesis is entitled “Visions of Utopia in Nineteenth-Century American Fiction”, and the film consciously situates its narrative in this tradition, while also acknowledging the proximity of a certain naïve optimism to its depiction of Brooklyn bonhomie.⁴ *Smoke* in fact conjures its own, partial vision of an alternative way of life, and to glimpse it, one has to follow Auggie’s advice to Paul as they view his collection of photographs (Figure 1). Taken at the same time each morning from the same position across the street, the four thousand photos all depict Auggie’s storefront. As Paul leafs through the albums, Auggie cautions that, ‘You’ll never get it if you don’t slow down, my friend’. ‘But they’re all the same’, Paul laughs. ‘They’re all the same’, Auggie says, ‘but each one is different from every other one’.⁵ As a ‘record of [his] little spot’, Auggie’s photos constitute the history of a sense of place unfolding day by day, and *Smoke* is similarly attuned to the gradual, uneven ways in which neighbourhood life takes shape. The slow work of negotiating difference in similitude might be another name for the work of friendship; it is no coincidence that as we watch Auggie and Paul looking through the photographs, we are also watching the formation of their relationship.

³ Auster, *Smoke*, 21.

⁴ Auster suggests that *Smoke* is ‘the most optimistic thing I have ever written’. “The Making of *Smoke*” (1995), in *Collected Screenplays*, pp. 3-17 (14). For a different reading of *Smoke*’s utopianism, see Anita Duneer, “Brooklyn in the Making: Reading the Existential Utopian Vision in Paul Auster’s *Smoke* through *The Wizard of Oz*”, *Midwest Quarterly*, 50:1 (Autumn 2009), pp. 57-73.

⁵ Auster, *Smoke*, 43-44.



Figure 1: Auggie’s Photographs. Photo Credit: K. C. Bailey (still photographer), *Smoke*, Dir. Wayne Wang, Pers. Harvey Keitel, William Hurt (New York: Miramax Films, 1995).

Smoke’s evocation of the leisurely pace of life on the block has an air of nostalgia to it. There is an affinity between the film’s portrayal of the loose solidarities that form in Auggie’s corner store hangout, and the raft of popular social commentary from the 1980s and 1990s that mourned the disappearance of local forms of community. Auggie’s store in fact resembles the kind of ‘third place’ – beyond the home and the workplace – that Ray Oldenburg’s 1989 bestseller *The Great Good Place* celebrated as ‘central to the political processes of a democracy’.⁶ Christopher Lasch similarly suggested that ‘the decline of participatory democracy may be directly related to the disappearance of third places’, while Robert Putnam famously took the decline of another form of third place sociality –

⁶ Ray Oldenburg, *The Great Good Place: Cafes, Coffee Shops, Community Centers, Beauty Parlours, General Stores, Bars, Hangouts, and How They Get You Through the Day* (New York: Paragon House, 1989), 67.

the bowling league – as emblematic of a wider crisis in American civil society.⁷ Decrying the decline of civic life, many of these elegiac critiques were socially conservative in their emphasis on religion, morality, and ‘family values’.⁸ But their attention to small-scale social networks was contiguous with a broader, more politically diverse analysis of liberal individualism. As I argued in my Introduction, many of these critiques looked to forms of friendship to model the kinds of revitalised civic affiliations they had in mind. In his communitarian analysis of Rawlsian deontology, for example, Michael Sandel evokes an Aristotelian conception of civic friendship to stress the importance of ‘constituent attachments’ in civic life.⁹ In Chantal Mouffe’s very different ‘project of radical and plural democracy’, meanwhile, a conception of the ‘friend/ enemy divide’ derived from the work of Carl Schmitt, coupled with Michael Oakeshott’s notion of *societas*, provides a ‘grammar’ for an iteration of citizenship that combines liberal pluralism and participatory democracy.¹⁰ As I suggested in my discussion of communitarianism in Roth’s work, the appeal to friendship in these accounts is multifaceted. On the one hand, civic friendship protects and promotes important liberal democratic values, such as individual rights, justice, and pluralism. But on the other, civic friendship challenges the liberal dichotomy of the private and public spheres by suggesting that our political

⁷ Christopher Lasch, *The Revolt of the Elites and the Betrayal of Democracy* (New York: Norton, 1996), 122-123; Robert Putnam, *Bowling Alone*. Starbucks marketed itself as ‘America’s third place’ in the 1990s, demonstrating the constitutive relation between community and capital analysed by Joseph. See Bryant Simon, *Everything but the Coffee: Learning about America from Starbucks*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009), 82-122.

⁸ See Joseph, *Against the Romance of Community*, 5-13.

⁹ Michael Sandel, *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 182. See John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971).

¹⁰ Chantal Mouffe, “Democratic Citizenship and the Political Community”, in Chantal Mouffe (ed.), *Dimensions of Radical Democracy: Pluralism, Citizenship, and Community* (London: Verso, 1992), pp. 225-239 (234).

affiliations should be shaped by, rather than separate from, our personal relations. The kinds of political community imagined in these critiques varies considerably but, in each, friendship is the privileged figure of democratic affiliation, the tie that might solve the crisis of citizenship plaguing late twentieth-century liberalism.

The rough-and-ready local community that takes shape in and around Auggie's store may appear to offer a version of 'third place' sociability, while the film's portrayal of the easy camaraderie between the store's 'counter guys' seems to be in dialogue with communitarian descriptions of civil society. But in the central relationship between Paul and Rashid, *Smoke* also suggests a more complex politics of friendship, one attuned to broader anxieties about race and representation in 1990s America. Their relationship recalls the archetype of interracial male bonding in nineteenth-century American literature analysed by Leslie Fiedler, which I explored in my Introduction, but also the kind of black-white 'bromance' that had become a Hollywood trope by the 1990s.¹¹ In a book that came out in the same year as *Smoke*, Benjamin DeMott argues that the 'friendship orthodoxy' of the interracial buddy film 'miniaturizes, personalizes, and moralizes the large and complex dilemmas of race, removing them from the public sphere' and reducing them to a matter of personal relations.¹² Such a diminution and displacement is indicative of what Lauren Berlant calls the 'downsizing' and

¹¹ Christopher Looby notes 'the subsequent reinvention' of Fiedler's archetype 'in countless artefacts of American popular culture', listing a number of 1990s 'buddy narratives'. Looby, "'Innocent Homosexuality': The Fiedler Thesis in Retrospect", in Gerald Graff and James Phelan (eds.), *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn: A Case Study in Critical Controversy* (Boston: Bedford Books, 1995), pp. 535-550 (536). See also Robyn Wiegman, *American Anatomies: Theorizing Race and Gender* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1995), 115-179.

¹² Benjamin DeMott, *The Trouble with Friendship: Why Americans Can't Think Straight About Race* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 27.

‘privatization of citizenship’ in late twentieth-century liberalism, wherein the 1960s leftist-feminist principle, ‘the personal is the political’, is contorted into ‘the political is the personal’ – a transformation I began to explore in the previous chapter.¹³ In this schema, Berlant suggests, the ‘political public sphere’ is reduced to an ‘intimate public sphere’, and citizenship to a ‘scene of private acts’.¹⁴ DeMott similarly argues that the friendship orthodoxy pervasive in popular culture renders racism ‘one dimensional – lacking, that is, in institutional, historical, or political ramifications’, a problem solved at the level of ‘private attitudes and emotions’.¹⁵ DeMott’s and Berlant’s critiques are something of a corrective to more hopeful 1990s evocations of civic friendship: they caution that friendship might not so much inform the political as displace it altogether, and that friendship’s mediation of the private and public spheres might be more ambiguous than communitarian readings acknowledge.

Smoke is attuned to this vexed politics. During a discussion of the racial divide between neighbourhood Brooklyn and the Projects, Rashid concludes that ‘Black is black and white is white and never the twain shall meet’. Paul counters that, ‘It looks like they’ve met in this apartment’, to which Rashid, deadpan, replies, ‘Let’s not get too idealistic’.¹⁶ While DeMott cautions that Hollywood’s sentimental friendships dehistoricise the complexities of race relations, Rashid’s allusion to Rudyard Kipling inserts

¹³ Lauren Berlant, *The Queen of America Goes to Washington City: Essays on Sex and Citizenship* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997), 4-5, 177-178.

¹⁴ Berlant, *The Queen of America Goes to Washington City*, 4, 178.

¹⁵ DeMott, *The Trouble with Friendship*, 22.

¹⁶ Auster, *Smoke*, 79.

an awareness of the legacies of imperialism and racism into his relationship with Paul.¹⁷ Rashid's real name – Thomas Jefferson Cole – also at once raises and problematises the prospect of their friendship being read as neatly symbolic of post-Civil Rights interracial harmony.¹⁸ The film thus reflexively critiques and distances itself from the popular Hollywood bromance while not, I suggest, entirely disavowing the political possibilities of friendship *per se*. If, in eschewing what DeMott calls the 'moral fantasy' of the friendship orthodoxy, *Smoke* cautions against becoming 'too idealistic', the film also, in its portrayal of the local community formed around Auggie's store, gestures toward the idea that a more *unorthodox* conception of friendship might yet yield a different register of political potentiality.

¹⁷ Rashid's allusion is to "The Ballad of East and West" (1889). The ballad's opening line, 'Oh, East is East, and West is West, and never the twain shall meet', has, Peter Howarth notes, 'become a shorthand summary of the imperial racism that Kipling's poetics supposedly promote' (607). However, the stanza continues, 'But there is neither East nor West, Border, nor Breed, nor Birth/ When two strong men stand face to face, though they come from the ends of the earth!'. The poem tells the story of the mutual respect between the brigand-chief Kamal and the Colonel's son following a horse chase, and offers their heroic friendship as an example of racial equality. The parallel to Rashid and Paul's relationship is thus in one sense comic; but it also links Paul to a troubling colonial history and a suspect romanticisation of interracial friendship. See Howarth, "Rudyard Kipling Plays the Empire", in Matthew Bevis (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Victorian Poetry* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), pp. 605-617 (606-607); Harry Ricketts, "'Nine and sixty ways': Kipling, ventriloquist poet", in Howard Booth (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Rudyard Kipling* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), pp. 111-125 (114-115).

¹⁸ Michael Kaplan notes that Rashid's real name 'invokes the highly conflicted entry of African people into the colonial and national history of America and eventually into U.S. citizenship' (157-158). One of the authors of the Declaration of Independence, Jefferson was a slaveholder who worked to ban the importing of slaves to Virginia, even as he continued to use slave labor to run his estate. See Kaplan, *Friendship Fictions: The Rhetoric of Citizenship in the Liberal Imaginary* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2010), 157-158, 172-173.

2. Post-utopian utopianism

In elucidating this different register, we might think back to Derrida's *The Politics of Friendship* (1997). In my Introduction, I outlined Derrida's critique of friendship's role in classical democratic theory, and his suggestion that Aristotelian civic republicanism renders citizenship a militaristic form of fraternity, resulting in an exclusionary and repressive kind of political community.¹⁹ In this regard, Derrida's analysis shares an affinity with the work of Jean-Luc Nancy and Maurice Blanchot, who also sought to defamiliarise the idea of an 'organic' or 'natural' community constituted by a universalised brotherhood, and who instead outlined a conception of community as 'inoperative' and 'unavowable'.²⁰ We might expect Derrida to do away with the idea of friendship altogether in his theorisation of 'democratic subjectivity'. But in fact, in tracing the integral yet contested role friendship plays within the history of democratic thought, Derrida gestures toward what he calls a 'democracy to come' – a precarious form of political community akin to those imagined by Nancy and Blanchot.²¹ Derrida suggests that the elegiac apostrophe that frames his study – 'O my friends, there is no friend' – encapsulates the simultaneity of friendship's political possibility and

¹⁹ Jacques Derrida, *The Politics of Friendship*, trans. George Collins [French, 1994; English, 1997] (London: Verso, 2005), 1-26, 75-112. See also Leela Gandhi, *Affective Communities: Anticolonial Thought, Fin-de-Siècle Radicalism, and the Politics of Friendship* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 13-34.

²⁰ Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, trans. Peter Connor, Lisa Garbus, Michael Holland, and Simona Sawhney (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991); Maurice Blanchot, *The Unavowable Community*, trans. Pierre Joris (Barrytown: Station Hill Press, 1988). For a useful overview of their arguments, see Irving Goh, *The Reject: Community, Politics, and Religion after the Subject* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2014), 24-97.

²¹ Derrida, *The Politics of Friendship*, 104.

impossibility, and so marks an opening into thinking of friendship as ‘never a given of the present’, but as instead belonging to the ‘future anterior’, a temporality of ‘waiting, promise’, but also of loss.²² After all, as I have already suggested, the time of friendship is ineluctably linked to the time of mourning. Consequently, this temporality of friendship becomes a way for Derrida to figure the oddly retrospective futurity of democracy, a tentative future that is always conditional, precarious, and shadowed by failure.

In placing *The Politics of Friendship* alongside communitarian accounts of civic friendship, I suggested in my Introduction that we might read Derrida’s critique as yet another 1990s commentary on the transformation of citizenship. But we can further historicise Derrida’s conception of a ‘democracy to come’ as one among a number of attempts in the last four decades, by a range of thinkers on the Left, to re-conceive of a valency of hope for contemporary progressive politics – that is to say, to imagine a kind of idealism that isn’t, in Rashid’s phrase, ‘too idealistic’. Ash Amin and Nigel Thrift have diagnosed a dwindling ‘capacity to visualise the future’ in contemporary leftist thought, arguing that ‘the utopian impulse has all but disappeared’ from progressive politics.²³ This ‘waning of the utopian’, Frederic Jameson suggests, can be traced back to ‘the sixties and [...] their political failures’, an historicisation that also informs Marianne DeKoven’s understanding of the ‘postmodern moment’ as ‘post-sixties and post-utopian’, and that I had begun to think about in my discussion of Sachs’ politics in *Leviathan*, and

²² Derrida, *The Politics of Friendship*, 236. See also Antonio Calcagno, *Badiou and Derrida: Politics, Events and their Time* (London: Continuum, 2007), 11-60.

²³ Ash Amin and Nigel Thrift, *Arts of the Political: New Openings for the Left* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013), 80.

in my reading of *Subtle Bodies*.²⁴ And yet DeKoven also discerns a kind of recalcitrant or ‘residual’ utopianism stretching into the late twentieth century.²⁵ She writes that ‘the intensely utopian sixties structure of feeling’ does ‘persist in postmodernity’, but is now ‘in every way “limited”’: muted, partial, local’ – a ‘qualified hope’, in Mitchum Huehls’ phrase, checked and marked by the failures and disappointments of an earlier era.²⁶

In her essay, “‘68, or Something” (1994), Lauren Berlant elaborates a version of this structure of feeling – what DeKoven calls ‘post-utopian utopianism’ – and imagines it informing a certain kind of historicism. Asking ‘What does it mean to be accused of being ‘68 in the 1990s?’, she suggests that ‘refusing to learn the lessons of history, refusing to relinquish utopian practice’ might enable the theorisation of ‘social change in the present tense, but a present tense different from what we can now imagine for pragmatic [...] politics’. And part of the task of ‘embracing utopian logics’, she writes, is to recognise the ‘centrality of waste, failure, loss’ to the project of imagining transformation itself.²⁷ Berlant’s ‘utopian historicity’ thus responds to Jameson’s argument that the attenuation of utopian thinking in postmodernity is a result of a ‘weakening of historicity’; here, Berlant proposes a form of historical inquiry that might

²⁴ Frederic Jameson, *Valences of the Dialectic* (New York: Verso, 2009), 413; Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991), xvi; Marianne DeKoven, *Utopia Limited: The Sixties and the Emergence of the Postmodern* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), 25.

²⁵ On the idea of the ‘residual cultural element’, see Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 121-127.

²⁶ DeKoven, *Utopia Limited*, 290, 25; Mitchum Huehls, *Qualified Hope: A Postmodern Politics of Time* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2009).

²⁷ Lauren Berlant, “‘68, or Something”, *Critical Inquiry*, 21:1 (1994), pp. 124-155 (126-127).

recapture a sense of the future from the ruins of the past.²⁸ And there is an affinity, I suggest, between the complex temporal order of Berlant's 'politics of futurity' and the 'future anterior' – the strange time of friendship defining Derrida's 'democracy to come'.

Imagining a future steeped in the past, Berlant's historicism envisions what we might call a politics of anachronism.²⁹ Put another way, what emerges in her essay – as in much recent work on 'queer time' – is a form of historical imagination characterised by a kind of emancipatory waywardness.³⁰ As Pamela Thurschwell suggests:

Queer theorists have set themselves the task of uncovering historical alternatives to the teleological stories of heteropatriarchy which dominate our understanding of history, engaging with a 'not yet' approach to the history of sexuality and culture that looks backwards, and sideways, to imagine different, more utopian [...] presents than the [...] ones we currently inhabit.³¹

²⁸ Berlant, "'68, or Something", 132, 128; Jameson, *Valences of the Dialectic*, 214.

²⁹ This formulation is inspired by a question posed by Pamela Thurschwell: 'can anachronism signify a politics, or is [the] desire for an impossibly different world, one which is past, simply a capitulation to the impossibility of a politics?'. Thurschwell, "The Ghost Worlds of Modern Adolescence", in Maria del Pilar Blanco and Esther Peeren (eds.), *Popular Ghosts: The Haunted Spaces of Everyday Culture* (London: Continuum, 2010), 239-250 (246).

³⁰ On queer time, see Carolyn Dinshaw et al, "Theorizing Queer Temporalities: A Roundtable Discussion", *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, 13:2-3 (2007), pp. 177-195.

³¹ Pamela Thurschwell, "Bringing Nanda forward, or acting your age in *The Awkward Age*", *Critical Quarterly*, 58:2 (2016), pp. 72-90 (73).

Thurschwell's summary is helpful in situating the 'temporal turn' in queer theory within a broader tradition of Marxist utopian historicism. Indeed, much recent work on queer time is indebted to Ernst Bloch's critical idealism, which sought to 'reintroduce the openness of the future into the past [...] restoring the dimension of potentiality to mere actuality'.³² For example, Bloch's theorisation of the 'not-yet-conscious' – a 'futurity embedded in the past and present, which may or may not emerge' – informs Jose Esteban Muñoz's recent account of 'critical utopianism'.³³ Understanding 'hope as a hermeneutic', Muñoz describes a practice of reading texts for their 'anticipatory illuminations' of the utopian, for 'a mode of being and feeling that was then not quite there but is nonetheless an opening'.³⁴ It's also Muñoz who unpacks a concept I've been borrowing from Giorgio Agamben, and which also sutures Berlant's Blochian historicism – 'potentiality':

Unlike a possibility, a thing that simply might happen, a potentiality is a certain mode of nonbeing that is eminent, a thing that is present but not actually existing in the present tense [...] Bloch would posit that such utopian feelings can and regularly will be disappointed. They are nonetheless indispensable to the act of imagining transformation.³⁵

³² Slavoj Žižek, "Preface: Bloch's Ontology of Not-Yet-Being", in Peter Thompson and Slavoj Žižek (eds.), *The Privatisation of Hope: Ernst Bloch and the Future of Utopia* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013), pp. xv-xx (xviii). See Ernst Bloch, *The Utopian Function of Art and Literature: Selected Essays*, trans. Jack Zipes and Frank Mecklenburg (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1988).

³³ Thurschwell, "Bringing Nanda forward", 87, f.n. 6; Jose Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York: New York University Press, 2009).

³⁴ Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 4, 9.

³⁵ Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 9; Giorgio Agamben, *Potentialities: Collected Essays in Philosophy*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), 177-184.

Attuned to potentialities, the forms of utopian historicity that I've been detailing hazard not only anachronism, but nostalgia, too – they risk resembling a romance of what might have been. And yet in entwining past and future in such uncanny configurations, and in being open to what Leela Gandhi calls 'the risky arrival of the not quite, not yet', they also adumbrate a complex and conflicted form of political affect at once knowing and naive, elegiac and optimistic, one which tries to re-read the past for its missed futurities.³⁶

This chapter focuses on two novels – Jonathan Lethem's *The Fortress of Solitude* (2003), and, firstly, Michael Chabon's *Telegraph Avenue* (2012) – that trace versions of this post-utopian utopianism, and that, like *Smoke*, approach ideas of citizenship and community through the figure of interracial male friendship. I use DeKoven's ungainly term, 'post-utopian utopianism', not least because it recalls another inelegant yet useful critical label, one sometimes used to describe Lethem and Chabon's work, and which I have already alluded to in previous chapters – 'post-postmodernism'.³⁷ In their uneasy periodisation of the contemporary, both terms gesture toward my broader claim about the historical imagination of these novels. Their utopian historicity has affinities with Linda Hutcheon's 'historiographic metafiction', but in their exploration of the utopian potentiality of forms of temporal disorder, drag, and delay, of nostalgia and anachronism, they also substantiate a register of political affect that corresponds with the contemporary

³⁶ Leela Gandhi, "Friendship and Postmodern Utopianism", *Culture Studies Review*, 9:1 (May 2003), pp. 12-22 (19-20).

³⁷ See Jeffrey Nealon, *Post-Postmodernism: or, The Cultural Logic of Just-in-Time Capitalism* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2012), ix-25; with reference to Chabon and Lethem, see Andrew Hoberek, "Introduction: After Postmodernism", *Twentieth-Century Literature*, 53:3, (Fall, 2007), pp. 233-247 (235-239).

theoretical accounts of utopia, hope, and futurity I have been outlining.³⁸ Chapter One, of course, was also concerned with the forms of historical imagination available to contemporary fiction; but Chabon and Lethem's work returns to the radicalism of the past in a manner distinct from Roth's revisionary cultural pluralism. Both novels look back to the 1960s and their legacy, investing in the figure of interracial male friendship something of the decade's utopian promise of a realignment of the personal and the political, while also refracting contemporary debates regarding citizenship and communitarianism. But these friendships also come to symbolise the precarity, contradictions, and limitations of that hope, and of remaining utopian in post-utopian times.

3. 'Brokeland Creole'

Like *Smoke*, *Telegraph Avenue* centres on an independent store. 'Brokeland Records' represents another 'protopolitical' third place wherein local community takes shape – a 'neighborhood institution', as one character puts it.³⁹ Like Auster's cigar store, Chabon's record shop is 'full of time-wasting [...] male conversation', from which a casual interracial sociability emerges, forged in the image of the seemingly unlikely black-white friendship between the store's owners, Archy and Nat.⁴⁰ In his review, Troy

³⁸ See Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction* (New York: Routledge, 1988). For a summary, see Samuel Cohen, *After the End of History: American Fiction in the 1990s* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2009), 15-26.

³⁹ Christopher Lasch, *The Revolt of the Elites*, 123; Michael Chabon, *Telegraph Avenue* (London: Fourth Estate, 2012), 271. Brokeland Records is perhaps intended to recall Cody's, the famous independent bookstore on Telegraph Avenue in the 1960s. See Jesse McKinley, "In Berkeley, a Store's End Clouds a Street's Future", *New York Times*, June 18, 2006.

⁴⁰ Chabon, *Telegraph Avenue*, 472.

Patterson queries what he views as the novel's 'naive outlook' towards race relations, and suggests that its 'chin-up optimism' can be explained by a phrase 'at the end of the "About the Author" note: "he lives in Berkeley"'.⁴¹ But Chabon is in fact careful to locate his novel elsewhere. As Matt Feeney observes in his review, "'Telegraph Avenue' usually denotes the 'Cal Berkeley' terminus [of that] famous street [...] where all that stuff happened in the Sixties', that 'frisky, clamorous thoroughfare', as Michiko Kakutani's review describes it, 'so identified since the 1960s with the counterculture and community'.⁴² But Chabon's novel is set just a little further along the road: 'Brokeland' is the name in the book for the neighbourhood along 'the ragged fault where the urban plates of Berkeley and Oakland subducted', and so the novel's title is 'a sly misdirection', Feeney suggests, marking a certain critical as well as geographical distance from 'hippie-progressive Berkeley'.⁴³ Archy and Nat's store is pitched in the borderland between historically white Berkeley and historically black Oakland, and the novel is steeped in each city's history of radical politics. As such, the title offers the first indication that the novel's portrayal of race and place is less 'naive' than Patterson suggests, and that its 'optimism' is more reflexive than he assumes.

In an essay published alongside the novel, Chabon reveals that *Telegraph Avenue* wasn't begun in Berkeley at all, but in 'Los Angeles on October 3 1995' – the day of O. J.

⁴¹ Troy Patterson, "Archy and Nat's Last Stand", *Slate*, September 7, 2012.

⁴² Matt Feeney, "Michael Chabon's Oakland", *The New Yorker*, September 26, 2012; Michiko Kakutani, "Battling Progress and Other Demons: *Telegraph Avenue* by Michael Chabon", *New York Times*, September 3, 2012.

⁴³ Chabon, *Telegraph Avenue*, 47; Feeney, "Michael Chabon's Oakland"; Carolyn Kellog, "Review: Michael Chabon joyfully sets down on 'Telegraph Avenue'", *Los Angeles Times*, September 9, 2012.

Simpson's acquittal.⁴⁴ Watching footage of African-Americans celebrating the verdict on television, Chabon recalls being struck by his own 'astonishment' at their jubilation, an astonishment that he concludes 'indexed directly to the absence of black people in my life'. The Simpson trial was one of a handful of events that revealed 'the importance of the 1960s to the public life of the 1990s' in America, especially in regard to the question of race, and Chabon also veers back to the earlier decade to make sense of his own reaction.⁴⁵ In 'the Fall of 1969', Chabon writes, his family moved to the 'planned community' of Columbia, Maryland, an integrated new city that aspired 'to make life better in America' by giving 'white people and black people the chance to engage in the radical activity of living next door to one another'.⁴⁶ Designed by James Rouse – who amassed his fortune building shopping malls – Columbia was a 'Great Society [...] dream', and its model of racially-mixed community life was intended to be replicated across the country.⁴⁷ But Columbia remained an isolated experiment, and an example of some of the contradictions of the period's spatial politics. Funded through a public-private partnership, Rouse's vision of 'post-urban' city life was unambiguously a for-profit

⁴⁴ Michael Chabon, "O. J. Simpson, Racial Utopia and the Moment That Inspired My Novel", *New York Times Magazine*, September 27, 2012.

⁴⁵ Samuel Cohen, *After the End of History*, 11.

⁴⁶ Chabon, "O. J. Simpson".

⁴⁷ Chabon, "Fountain City", *McSweeney's*, 36 (December 2010), pp. i-112 (iii). See Ann Forsyth, *Reforming Suburbia: The Planned Communities of Irvine, Columbia, and The Woodlands* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 107-161. For a broader history of liberal urban planning in the period, see Rosemary Wakeman, *Practicing Utopia: An Intellectual History of the New Town Movement* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016). On race relations in Columbia, see Nicholas Bloom, *Suburban Alchemy: 1960s New Towns and the Transformation of the American Dream* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2001), 184-207. Rouse is cited in the Acknowledgements of *Telegraph Avenue* as 'dreamer of the original Brokeland' (628).

venture.⁴⁸ Designed as a series of ‘villages’ encompassing pseudo-public spaces largely set aside for shops and restaurants – and of course a grand Rouse mall – Columbia resembled a ‘bourgeois utopia’, an uneasy mix of well-meaning liberal planning and corporate land speculation.⁴⁹

The timing of the Chabons’ move to Columbia is made to resonate symbolically in the essay, the ‘Fall of 1969’ suggesting something of the fading idealism that the end of the decade came to mark; Chabon elsewhere describes growing up ‘in the broken Utopias of Columbia and the 1970s’.⁵⁰ As a child, however, Columbia seemed to Chabon to be a ‘City of the Future [...] avowedly utopian in its aims’, and a place where ‘a young Jewish boy could [...] feel connected to [...] black history’.⁵¹ But in 1990s L.A. – ‘capital of the eternal American present’ – Chabon realises that he has not only lost a connection to African-American culture but to the concept of the future itself; it is only when he moves to the East Bay area that he picks up a ‘trace’ of the utopian again. Describing the ‘D.I.Y. Fourierists and urban foragers’ whose ‘cranky attachment to their own individual development’ is ‘matched only by their yearning for fellowship’, Chabon satirises the fate of post-’60s Berkeley hippiedom; but it is among the ‘ashrams’ and ‘dojos’, ‘just on the

⁴⁸ See Steven Conn, *Americans Against the City: Anti-Urbanism in the Twentieth Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 240-255; Nicholas Bloom, *Merchant of Illusion: James Rouse, America’s Salesman of the Businessman’s Utopia* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2004), 126-50.

⁴⁹ Robert Fishman, *Bourgeois Utopias: The Rise and Fall of Suburbia* (New York: Basic Books, 1987), 202.

⁵⁰ Chabon, “Fountain City”, iii.

⁵¹ Chabon, “O. J. Simpson”.

Oakland side of the city line’, that he finds his own ‘would-be utopia’.⁵² At the front counter of a used-record store run by ‘a big black dude’ and ‘a little white guy’, Chabon encounters a group of customers ‘theorising, opining [...] Hanging together’:

I didn’t kid myself that these guys were united in perfect brotherhood. They had not bound up the nation’s racial wounds or invented a better America [...] They were just shooting the breeze, passing the time [...] In a little pocket of a big world, for a little hour.⁵³

‘Kid myself’ here draws attention to the way in which the essay as a whole plays upon an affinity between two developmental narratives. Entwining Chabon’s passage from childhood to adulthood with the course of American history since the late ’60s, the essay highlights how both are normatively marked as transitions from innocence to maturity, from youthful idealism to mature compromise. In this scene, however – in which adult men indulge in a passion of their adolescence – the essay conjures something unassimilable to this familiar teleology. ‘Little hour’, ‘shooting the breeze’, ‘hanging together’, ‘passing the time’ – all phrases that recall the ‘slow hours’ passed at Auggie’s store – trace a mode of temporal suspension and disjuncture at once pro- and retrospective, utopian and nostalgic. Elizabeth Freeman describes ‘the mutually disruptive energy of moments that are not yet past and yet are not entirely present either’, and

⁵² Chabon is also connecting Berkeley’s radicalism to a longer tradition of American utopianism. See James Gilbert, “New Left: Old America”, *Social Text*, 9-10 (1984), pp. 244-247.

⁵³ Chabon, “O. J. Simpson”.

something similar is happening here.⁵⁴ The scene's vision of interracial friendship is at once anachronistic – like the men's shared love of vinyl – and anticipatory. In another essay published a few years earlier, Chabon suggests that over the course of his life, 'the idea of the future [...] came itself to feel like something historical'.⁵⁵ In chronicling his journey from Columbia to Berkeley, Chabon not only records a version of this dwindling sense of futurity, but suggests how the past might be re-read for its utopian impulse. In this portrait of a 'little pocket of a big world', Chabon offers – as Auster does through Auggie's photographs – a local picture that invokes even as it repudiates a national context; and through the figure of interracial male friendship, Chabon gestures to a kind of historicity that might restore the idea of the future.

'It is the nature of utopia', Chabon remarks later in the essay, 'to go out of business', and, as *Telegraph Avenue* opens, it seems Brokeland Records is destined to close. Set in 2004, the novel's central duo is mired in a less recent past. Connoisseurs of late '60s and early '70s jazz-funk fusion, Archy and Nat are the self-appointed wardens of the 'Brokeland Creole sound', the signature style, back in the day, of their elderly musical guru, Cochise Jones. Brokeland Creole, Archy explains towards the novel's close, was:

Not just white boys playing black music, like always, or even black dudes playing in a white style, but really, like, this moment, this one moment,

⁵⁴ Elizabeth Freeman, "Packing History, Count(er)ing Generations", *New Literary History*, 31:4 (Fall 2000), pp. 727-744 (742).

⁵⁵ Michael Chabon, "The Future Will Have to Wait", *The Long Now Foundation*, January 22, 2006.

lasted four, five years, when the styles and the players were mixing it all up.⁵⁶

‘Creole’ becomes Archy and Nat’s unofficial credo, ‘sorta, what an *ideal*’ that the pair ‘always had in mind for this store’, even if it’s a vision they can only see in retrospect: Archy here is delivering Cochise’s eulogy, the store is set to shut, and Carole King’s “It’s Too Late” plays in the background.⁵⁷ But if Archy’s analysis is elegiac, it also reads ‘this moment’ of music history for its potentiality, and so provides a way of reading Brokeland’s own ephemeral, improvisatory arrangement of race relations. Earlier in the novel we are told that Cochise ‘liked to play against your expectations of a song, to light the gloomy heart of a ballad with a Latin tempo [... or] root out the hidden mournfulness, the ache of longing, in an up-tempo pop tune’, and the novel’s historical imagination is similarly attuned to hidden rhythms, to time-signatures and syncopations that deviate and disorganise the steady beat of linear history.⁵⁸

At the centre of the book is another kind of ‘record keeping’: like Auggie’s photography project, Archy and Nat’s vinyl collection indexes a form of historicism. As a business venture, their store is a disaster, but the pair are less interested in turning a profit

⁵⁶ Chabon, *Telegraph Avenue*, 502. On the association of black music with authenticity, and its appropriation see Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), 72-110.

⁵⁷ Chabon, *Telegraph Avenue*, 504. Emphasis in original.

⁵⁸ Chabon, *Telegraph Avenue*, 375. Cochise’s musical style tallies with Michaeline Crichlow’s description of ‘Creolization’ as a ‘historicized process of selective creation and cultural struggle’ alert to ‘the plural uneven temporalities and spaces that constitute nation-states’ and subjects’ histories’. *Globalization and the Post-Creole Imagination: Notes on Fleeing the Plantation* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009), 1.

than in a kind of cultural stewardship: Archy notes that Nat acts as if they are ‘not a couple of secondary-market retailers trying to stay afloat but guardians of some ancient greatness that must never be tainted’.⁵⁹ Collecting the ephemera of another age, Archy and Nat create a world in which history accrues unevenly and where the past lingers longer than expected. Their store becomes a site of what Elizabeth Freeman calls ‘temporal drag’: ‘a *productive* obstacle to progress, a usefully distorting pull backwards, and a necessary pressure upon the present tense’.⁶⁰ As such, Archy and Nat might be said to practice a form of ‘dissident materiality’ – Scott Herring’s term for ‘when a person’s stuff questions, problematizes, or refutes [...] the normative orderliness of what counts for everyday material life’.⁶¹ Freeman develops the concept of ‘temporal drag’ to reconsider ‘the interesting threat that the genuine past-ness of the past sometimes makes to the political present’, and Archy and Nat’s record collecting similarly gestures toward the novel’s broader exploration of the political potential of an unconventional historicism.⁶² We hear, for example, an echo of the utopian historicity conceptualised by Mûnoz and Berlant in the way that, as he ‘sift[s] through’ the latest batch of records to arrive at the store, Nat is at once ‘hopeless and hopeful’, because ‘each disc is potentially something great’, even if the chances of such a discovery are slight.⁶³ *Telegraph Avenue*

⁵⁹ Chabon, *Telegraph Avenue*, 45.

⁶⁰ Elizabeth Freeman, *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 64. Emphasis in original.

⁶¹ Scott Herring, “Material Deviance: Theorizing Queer Objecthood”, *Postmodern Culture*, 21:2 (January 2011), n.p.

⁶² Freeman, *Time Binds*, 63.

⁶³ Chabon, *Telegraph Avenue*, 9.

similarly explores modes of reading the past that are not straightforwardly nostalgic, but that might yield a kind of precarious hope for the future.

As the novel begins, Archy Stallings – who, as his name suggests, is practiced in putting off the inevitable – is struggling to keep step with two processes of seemingly unalterable progress. Archy and Nat’s relationship is mirrored by the partnership between their wives, Gwen and Aviva. The pair run a midwifery practice together, and throughout the novel, the ‘open-ended, eternal’ obligation of parenthood puts pressure upon both friendships.⁶⁴ Gwen is pregnant with her and Archy’s first child, and as the narrative opens, the ‘imminence of paternity’ is hanging heavy over her husband. Imminent, too, is the closure of Brokeland Records, its fate sealed when Gibson Goode – star quarterback–turned–businessman, and ‘the fifth richest black man in America’ – decides to open a new ‘Dogpile’ media megastore, complete with dedicated vinyl department, just down the block.⁶⁵ Brokeland Records, Archy and Nat acknowledge, is the ‘last of its kind, Ishi, Chingachgook’, a ‘holdout [...] in the path of the great wave of late modern capitalism’.⁶⁶ ‘I’ve been fucking off, fucking up, and fucking around for too long’, Archy resolves, ‘I need insurance, a pay cheque, all that straight-life bullshit’.⁶⁷

⁶⁴ Chabon, *Telegraph Avenue*, 13.

⁶⁵ Chabon, *Telegraph Avenue*, 8, 13. ‘Dogpile’ is an allusion to rapper and entrepreneur Snoop Dogg. See Maureen Farrell, “Snoop Dogg: From Gangster to Businessman”, *Forbes*, August 17, 2010.

⁶⁶ Chabon, *Telegraph Avenue*, 44, 146, 469.

⁶⁷ Chabon, *Telegraph Avenue*, 469.

The men's partnership is also refigured in the friendship between Nat's son, Julie, and Titus, who it eventually transpires is Archy's son from a previous relationship. The boys' friendship is sometimes sexual, Julie describing himself as 'twenty-five minutes to gay o'clock', while Titus is 'straight-up noon straight', and the 'queer time' of the boys' friendship suggests an alternative temporal arrangement to the 'straight time' of family and capitalism weighing Archy down.⁶⁸ The novel opens:

A white boy flatfoot on a skateboard, towed along, hand to shoulder, by a black boy pedalling a brakeless fixed gear bike [...] the white boy uncoupled the car of their little train [...] the black boy gripped his T-shirt at the hem [...] He lingered inside the shirt, in no kind of hurry [...] In a moment, maybe, the black boy would tug the T-shirt the rest of the way off [...] But for now, the kid on the skateboard just coasted along behind the blind daredevil, drafting.⁶⁹

The 'brakeless fixed gear bike' suggests, like 'the imminence of paternity' and 'the wave of late modern capitalism', a form of immutable progress, but the passage also draws out a quite different temporal logic. Its focus upon moments of delay – 'lingered', 'no kind of hurry' – seems to precipitate a move into the conditional future tense – 'In a moment, maybe, the black boy would' – before a return to the present tense – 'But for now' – and then the past – 'the kid [...] just coasted' – which itself is rendered obliquely conditional, or provisional we might say, in that final word, 'drafting'. Jess Walter suggests that the

⁶⁸ Chabon, *Telegraph Avenue*, 119.

⁶⁹ Chabon, *Telegraph Avenue*, 1.

portrayal of the boys' friendship in this scene offers 'a small, hopeful vision' of race relations; as in his depiction of the 'would-be utopia' of the used-record store, Chabon here explores the sense of potentiality evoked by a shiftingly pervious and 'unhinged' temporality.⁷⁰

This alternate sense of time can open up into a realm of fantasy in the novel. Rolling 'through the nighttime summer streets of South Berkeley and West Oakland', Julie and Titus also travel 'through the wildly ramifying multiverse of their imagination'; this expands into virtual reality, too, when they team up to roam the Marvel Comic Universe online.⁷¹ But while *Telegraph Avenue* sometimes pitches into the alternate universes and mythic landscapes that have always been a part of Chabon's genre-bending fictional world, the historical imagination of the novel is also embedded in a particular place – as the specificity of 'South Berkeley and West Oakland' suggests – and shaped by a local past.⁷² In his history of postwar Oakland, Robert Self argues that:

The long corridor from West Oakland north through South Berkeley [...] between San Pablo and Telegraph avenues, formed one of the most vibrant

⁷⁰ Jess Walter, "Telegraph Avenue by Michael Chabon", *SFGate*, September 7, 2012; Cindy Weinstein analyses 'temporally unhinged' texts that are 'incapable of keeping discrete past, present, future, and conditional'. *Time, Tense, and American Literature: When Is Now?* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 2.

⁷¹ Chabon, *Telegraph Avenue*, 120. On comic books in Chabon's fiction, see Stephen Hock, "Comix Remix; or, The Strange Case of Mr. Chabon", in Jesse Kavaldo and Bob Batchelor (eds.), *Michael Chabon's America: Magical Words, Secret Worlds, and Sacred Spaces* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2014), pp. 81-97.

⁷² On Chabon's interest in genre fiction, see Jesse Kavaldo, "Real Maps of Imaginary Places; or, Michael Chabon, Shadowtail", in *Michael Chabon's America*, pp. 1-17.

political landscapes anywhere in the nation in this period [...] Beginning in 1964 and continuing through the early 1970s, this corridor was home to some of the most creative and inspired political projects on the American scene. The flatlands were no utopia of racial egalitarianism [...] but they nonetheless formed a physical world where political milieus intersected: Berkeley emerged as the center of the white New Left in the East Bay (and nationally), while [...] North Oakland emerged as the center of African-American radicalism.⁷³

Archy and Nat's relationship is freighted with the legacies of the region's radicalism, saturated with the political style of the late '60s and early '70s as much as by the period's fashion and music. The twinned local histories of the New Left and Black Power become interwoven with the novel's broader exploration of the politics of the men's interracial friendship. Asked in an interview about the book's treatment of racial diversity, Chabon replied that 'some things are globally impossible but locally possible. And I think that's kind of what the record store represents'.⁷⁴ But the novel itself provides a more complex answer to the question of 'scale' within the political imaginary than Chabon's distinction between the 'local' and the 'global' allows, and leaves the idea of 'possibility' more

⁷³ Robert Self, *American Babylon: Race and the Struggle for Postwar Oakland* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), 223.

⁷⁴ Michael Mechanic, "Michael Chabon's Vinyl Draft", *Mother Jones*, September/October 2012.

radically open.⁷⁵ Instead, the novel problematises these questions through its exploration of the particular historical moment sketched by Self, a moment which produced competing and often contradictory cultural and political geographies, and a shifting sense of how the scales of the personal, local, national, and international measured up and intersected.

4. ‘... drop a little lore and history on the man’

Berkeley became ‘synonymous with student protest’ in the 1960s, imagined as a ‘prototype of the national student rebellion’ forming the main strand of the New Left movement.⁷⁶ A diverse program of dissent formed around the overlapping issues of civil rights, gender equality, freedom of assembly, and the anti-war movement, taking shape in the collective action of groups founded in the town, such as the Peace/Rights Organizing Committee, the Free Speech Movement – ‘born near the corner of Bancroft and Telegraph’ – and prominent campus chapters of national organisations, such as the

⁷⁵ ‘Scale’ has become an important and polyvalent term in cultural geography, especially for Marxist geographers conceptualising the production of space under capitalism. See Neil Smith, *Uneven Development: Nature, Capital, and the Production of Space* [1984] (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2008), 92-206. My use of the term has this discussion in mind, but more immediately addresses the question of the ‘location’ of citizenship in the liberal imaginary raised in the first part of this chapter. For an overview, see Hsuan Hsu, *Geography and the Production of Space in Nineteenth-Century American Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 1-25.

⁷⁶ Terry Anderson, *The Movement and the Sixties: Protest in America from Greensboro to Wounded Knee* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 89; Robert Cohen, “The Many Meanings of the FSM”, in Robert Cohen and Reginald Zelnik (eds.), *The Free Speech Movement: Reflections on Berkeley in the 1960s* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), pp. 1-55 (4).

Students for a Democratic Society.⁷⁷ As important as individual causes were, however, equally significant was the style of political engagement characterising the movement: to coin a New Left slogan, ‘The Issue is not the issue’.⁷⁸ The forms of protest that emerged in the period were less ‘about’ specific policy agendas than they were ‘expressions of a radical and utopian upsurge’ in the younger generation.⁷⁹ Nonconformist and antiestablishment, Berkeley student-activists engaged in a ‘prefigurative politics’ of ‘utopian, spontaneous and participatory’ democratic assembly.⁸⁰ Their commitment to ‘practice the future in the present’ took the form of local, grassroots networks of ‘communities of equality, direct democracy and solidarity’ that were imagined – in their spontaneity and emphasis on face-to-face relationships – as opposing a bureaucratised, de-personalising state machinery, variously figured by the university, the military, and the government.⁸¹

This style of political engagement reflected the role Berkeley radicals saw themselves and their town as playing within the broader context of a national revolutionary struggle in the 1960s – a role of ‘setting examples, pointing the way

⁷⁷ Self, *American Babylon*, 223. For a sense of the political climate on campus, see Jo Freeman, *At Berkeley in the Sixties: The Education of an Activist, 1961-1965* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004).

⁷⁸ Cited in Wini Breines, *Community and Organization in the New Left* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1989), 20.

⁷⁹ Breines, *Community*, xiv.

⁸⁰ Wini Breines, “Community and Organization: The New Left and Michels’ ‘Iron Law’”, *Social Problems*, 27:4 (April 1980), pp. 419-429 (427).

⁸¹ Flora Cornish et al, “Rethinking Prefigurative Politics”, *Journal of Social and Political Psychology*, 4:1 (2016), pp. 114-127 (121); Breines, *Community*, 27.

forward, elucidating the possibilities for the New Left in America'.⁸² But, as Anthony Ashbolt notes, a 'radical movement [seeking] wide-ranging social change in a country [like] the United States must have a twin focus: the local or regional and the national'. What was required was 'an alertness to the general and particular'.⁸³ As the '60s wore on, this dialectical sense of scale became increasingly obfuscated, and the movement risked a provincialism in its political ambition. This 'local consciousness', Ashbolt writes, was 'most evident in Berkeley, spawning perceptions of the possibilities for revolution in one town, even one street' – and one street in particular, in fact, with a variety of groups, such as the Telegraph Avenue Liberation Front, imagining Tel. Ave. as a 'utopian enclave', and a 'liberated territory'.⁸⁴

The New Left's conception of social protest emerged in dialogue with the spatialisation of political struggle developing at the other end of Telegraph Avenue. The Black Panthers were founded in Oakland in 1966, and, like the counterculture taking shape around the university in Berkeley, the Panthers' political critique was 'grounded in urban space'.⁸⁵ The party's 'famous alchemy' combined 'revolutionary socialism, informed by black nationalism [...] with what [co-founder Huey] Newton frankly called

⁸² Anthony Ashbolt, *A Cultural History of the Radical Sixties in the San Francisco Bay Area* (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2013), 27.

⁸³ Ashbolt, *A Cultural History of the Radical Sixties*, 69.

⁸⁴ Ashbolt, *A Cultural History of the Radical Sixties*, 7. Ashbolt quotes a member of the TALF who acknowledged, in 1969, that, 'As Telegraph Ave has come more and more to be under a state of siege, a tendency to overlocalize our problems has plagued us' (152).

⁸⁵ Self, *American Babylon*, 2.

[...] the “brothers on the block”⁸⁶ The Panthers adapted the internationalist rhetoric of anti-imperialist struggle, applying the ‘colonial analogy to the American ghetto’ and marking out a subjugated ‘black territory’ across America.⁸⁷ This ‘nation within a nation’ was to be defended by an armed militia, and the Panthers’ Marxism found justification for their promulgation of armed resistance in Frantz Fanon’s *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961), which stressed the inevitability of violence in the anti-colonial struggle.⁸⁸

Yet despite its internationalist framing, ‘the heart of the movement would be a politics and an expanded analysis of Oakland as a colonized space’: the Panthers, in other words, always stayed local.⁸⁹ While this struggle for the ghetto neighbourhoods of the city often took the form of armed protest against police brutality, it was also elaborated in projects like the Panthers’ popular free breakfast program for school children.⁹⁰ This ‘communitarian approach adapted neatly to some New Left thinking about community’ and elucidated a similar spatial politics to that which was emerging over in Berkeley.⁹¹ ‘The Panthers hoped to achieve a kind of revolutionary utopia’, Self writes, and imagined Oakland as ‘the starting line in a revolutionary race’:

⁸⁶ Robert Self, “‘To Plan Our Liberation’: Black Power and the Politics of Place in Oakland, California, 1965-1977”, *Journal of Urban History*, 27:6 (September 2000), pp. 759-792 (769).

⁸⁷ Self, *American Babylon*, 226.

⁸⁸ On Fanon and the Panthers, see Self, *American Babylon*, 222-229; Donna Jean Murch, *Living for the City: Migration, Education, and the Rise of the Black Panther Party in Oakland, California* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010), 133-134.

⁸⁹ Self, *American Babylon*, 229.

⁹⁰ See Dean Robinson, *Black Nationalism in American Politics and Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 59; David Hillard, *The Black Panther Party: Service to the People Programs* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2008), 30-35; Murch, *Living for the City*, 171-180.

⁹¹ Ashbolt, *A Cultural History of the Radical Sixties*, 124.

Anticolonial political struggle in Oakland would yield a “people’s city”, an example of rearranged political, social and economic priorities that would supply an example to the remaining “colonized world”. It was simultaneously a practical, because specific to Oakland, and ambitiously utopian notion.⁹²

A state of flux between the ‘practical’ and the ‘utopian’, the local and the global, and the personal and the political, was typical of Bay Area radicalism in this period. Marianne DeKoven, more generally, suggests that we can think of the 1960s as ‘characterised by the simultaneity of a final flowering of a dominant modernity and the emergence of the key elements of postmodernity’, and that this sense of transition is particularly apparent in the decade’s conceptualisation of utopia.⁹³ On the one hand, the New Left held to a ‘tradition of utopian socialist modernity’, and yet, at the same time, it ‘mov[ed] away from this Enlightenment metanarrative toward a politics of the local and particular, as well as a politics of the self’ that would become dominant in the 1970s and beyond; what is ‘characteristic’ of the 1960s, DeKoven argues, is that these two meanings of utopia ‘coexist as if they were the same thing’.⁹⁴

As DeKoven’s thesis implies, the balance soon tipped toward a postmodern ‘subject politics’ that marked what Michael Walzer calls ‘the pastoral retreat of the New

⁹² Self, “‘To Plan Our Liberation’”, 770.

⁹³ DeKoven, *Utopia Limited*, 19.

⁹⁴ DeKoven, *Utopia Limited*, 126.

Left’, beginning in the mid-1970s.⁹⁵ No longer ‘revolutionaries’, veterans of the counterculture ‘learned the art of making do’ in smaller, neighbourhood-based projects with modest, ‘reformist’ aims – which is to say that the localist orientation always present in and important to the New Left’s conceptualisation of politics became much more pronounced.⁹⁶ As the movement’s community-based action began increasingly to resemble an end in itself, its emphasis on ‘self-actualisation’, personal growth, and intimate relationships seemed less a political practice than a renunciation of the political altogether. Writing a history of public culture in 1977, Robert Sennett suggests that ‘the belief in direct human relations on the intimate scale has seduced us from converting our understanding of the realities of power into guides for our political behaviour’.⁹⁷ Sennett’s analysis predates and complements Berlant’s critique of the ‘intimate public sphere’ with which I began this chapter, and her assessment of the gradual transformation of the 1960s leftist credo, ‘the personal is the political’, into the 1990s neoconservative mantra, ‘the political is the personal’.⁹⁸ Sennett’s estimation of the ‘tyrannies of intimacy’ also returns us to DeMott’s concern over how politics is thwarted and displaced by the ‘friendship orthodoxy’, wherein structural inequalities are framed as a problem of ‘personal relations’.

⁹⁵ See DeKoven, *Utopia Limited*, 189-210, 249-270; Michael Walzer, “The Pastoral Retreat of the New Left”, *Dissent*, Fall 1979, pp. 406-411.

⁹⁶ Walzer, “Pastoral Retreat”, 407.

⁹⁷ Robert Sennett, *The Fall of Public Man* [1977] (London: Penguin, 2003), 339.

⁹⁸ For a broader discussion of the similarities, see Gabriele Linke, “The Public, the Private, and the Intimate: Richard Sennett’s and Lauren Berlant’s Cultural Criticism in Dialogue”, *Biography*, 34:1 (Winter 2011), pp. 11-24.

Telegraph Avenue looks back ambivalently to the late '60s and early '70s, not as a model for contemporary utopia, but as a period in which 'concrete utopian imagining' was still viable and vital, and in which the 'scale' and 'location' of political action were still fluid and negotiable – as a time, that is, in which the future was still an open question.⁹⁹ The novel, we might say, reads the political history of the period in much the same way as Archy reads its musical history, as 'this one moment, lasted four, five years, when the styles and the players were mixing it all up' – a moment, then, not of fixed perfection, but of experimental potentiality. The novel's utopian historicity finds its most prominent figuration in Archy and Nat's friendship itself, which is freighted both with a '60s hope for the radical realignment of the personal and the political, and a '70s sense of the shortcomings of a politics of intimacy. If Berkeley students engaged in a utopian 'prefigurative politics' that sought to 'practice the future in the present' in their personal relationships, Archy and Nat's friendship figures a politics of a more convoluted temporal order, a 'post-utopian utopianism' unevenly binding the past and future.

5. *'Hope unfulfilled, not yet betrayed'*

The East Bay area's political history resonates throughout the novel. One sub-plot chronicles a shady episode from the past of Luther Stallings, ageing blaxploitation star and estranged father of Archy. Back in '73, Luther was the getaway driver in a Panther shooting gone wrong in downtown Oakland.¹⁰⁰ Luther's accomplice that night was Chan Flowers; fast forward to 2004, and 'Chan the Man' is a powerbroker councilman taking

⁹⁹ Berlant, "'68, or Something", 125.

¹⁰⁰ Chabon, *Telegraph Avenue*, 31-40.

bribes on the side, a living reminder of how near at hand Oakland's radical past remains to the novel's present. It's Chan who, after a kickback or two, approves Goode's plan to open one of his 'Dogpile' media megastores in Brokeland. The fact that Goode is black not only upends the usual dynamic of powerful versus powerless at play in this familiar gentrification script – in which a national chain runs a local store out of town – but raises the question of who exactly in Brokeland is an out-of-towner, and what constitutes the local community.¹⁰¹ Goode grew up in L.A., but was born in Oakland, making him 'a semi-local product', as Garnet Singletary, Brokeland Records's landlord, puts it to Nat. 'Like [...] if you was to put you and Archy together. Half local, half out of town'. 'Half and half', Nat responds, picking up on Singletary's sly allusion to the mixture of racial and spatial politics underwriting Goode's arrival.¹⁰² Indeed, Goode's 'Dogpile Thang' project is not just a business venture: his 'imperial longings' are 'married to a sense of social purpose', and he maintains that 'the main idea of a Thang was not to make money but to restore, at a stroke, the commercial heart of a black neighborhood'.¹⁰³ 'Imperial' recalls the internal colonialism thesis that once informed Black Nationalism but now ironically refers to Goode's 'one-hundred-percent black-owned' business empire; 'black neighborhood', meanwhile, echoes the localist focus of the Panther movement. Goode's project is thus obliquely framed by the spatial politics of the city's radical history and its vexed contestation of the scales of the local, national, and international.

¹⁰¹ Michiko Kakutani noted the similarity between the novel's plot and that of Nora Ephron's 1998 movie, *You've Got Mail*, in which a national chain runs a local bookstore out of business. Kakutani, "Battling Progress and Other Demons".

¹⁰² Chabon, *Telegraph Avenue*, 43.

¹⁰³ Chabon, *Telegraph Avenue*, 14.

This connection between Goode and Oakland's political history is developed further aboard the 'Dogpile blimp', when the media mogul offers Archy a job managing his newly-named 'Cochise Jones Memorial Beats Department'.¹⁰⁴ Cruising at one thousand feet, the scene aboard the airship elaborates another perspective toward the question of scale, and the politics of space and race. Playing to Archy's vanity, Goode recounts his version of their first meeting, back when they were a couple of young comic book nerds. Archy, Goode claims,

Was peeling off all these sophisticated interpretations. Inner meanings. In *Luke Cage*. Talking about the American penal system as portrayed in Marvel Comics. Referencing all kinds of heavy reading materials. Eleven, twelve years old, telling me what, like, Frantz Fanon has to say about the possibility of black superheroes in a white superpower structure and whatnot.¹⁰⁵

Archy knows Goode is bullshitting him, because even now he has 'only a vague idea of who Frantz Fanon was, and apart from the redoubtable *Black Panther* [...] had never taken particular interest in the skin color of the comic book superheroes he loved'.¹⁰⁶ These allusions to Marvel's early black superheroes – *The Black Panther* and *Luke Cage* appeared in 1966 and 1972 respectively – coupled with the reference to Fanon – the 'posthumous mentor of the black power nationalists in America' – return us to the cultural

¹⁰⁴ Chabon, *Telegraph Avenue*, 312.

¹⁰⁵ Chabon, *Telegraph Avenue*, 303.

¹⁰⁶ Chabon, *Telegraph Avenue*, 304.

politics of Oakland's radical past.¹⁰⁷ But Goode's crude postcolonial cultural criticism doesn't fly with Archy, not least because of its clumsy attempt to play upon a feeling of racial solidarity. This is worked through later in the scene, when the blimp flies over nearby Port Chicago, infamous for the 1944 munitions explosion that killed 320 navy servicemen, the vast majority of whom were African-American:

“Fireball was three miles wide,” Goode said. “Air was filled with burning Negroes falling out of the sky. Only thing they ever did wrong was try too hard and work too fast to fight somebody else's war.”

“It was their war,” Archy said.¹⁰⁸

In this ‘history lesson’, Goode seems to adopt a simplified Fanonism of the kind espoused by the Black Panthers, for whom Fanon was inspirational not only in condoning revolutionary violence, but in his emphasis upon the importance of a black national culture and consciousness. More recent readings of Fanon, however, portray him as a ‘global theorist’ whose work reached, as Fanon himself wrote in *The Wretched of the Earth*, towards a ‘fundamentally different set of relations between men’, in the hope of defining a ‘new humanism’.¹⁰⁹ As such, Ross Posnock argues, Fanon did not regard

¹⁰⁷ Ross Posnock, “How It Feels to Be a Problem: Du Bois, Fanon, and the ‘Impossible Life’ of the Black Intellectual”, *Critical Inquiry*, 23:1 (Winter 1997), pp. 323-349 (328). The association of Fanon and superheroes is an allusion to Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952).

¹⁰⁸ Chabon, *Telegraph Avenue*, 304. See Robert Allen, *The Port Chicago Mutiny: The Story of the Largest Mass Mutiny Trial in U.S. Naval History* (Berkeley: Heyday Books, 1993).

¹⁰⁹ Henry Louis Gates, Jr., “Critical Fanonism”, *Critical Inquiry*, 17:3 (Spring 1991), pp. 457-470; Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Constance Farrington [1961] (London: Penguin, 2001), 246, 316.

‘nationalism or negritude as an endpoint or fixed identity’, as most within the Black Power movement would do; ‘rather they were moments, critical stages, to be worked through to reach the telos of the universal’.¹¹⁰ This ‘cosmopolitan Fanon’ makes visible a different sense of affiliation that is not grounded in an essentialized racial identity but that instead resembles something closer to Archy and Nat’s ‘creole’ ideal. As Goode attempts to persuade him to join the Dogpile ‘mission’, Archy can’t avoid the feeling that he is ‘stepping out on Nat’.¹¹¹ He thinks back to the beginning of their friendship, and how they ‘fell through the circular portals of Nat’s record collection, one after another, flat-out tumbled awestruck arm in arm like that team of chrononaut dwarfs in *Time Bandits*, through those magic wormholes in the fabric of reality’.¹¹² The ‘time’ of the men’s friendship here seems to open up into a fantasy world much like that in which Julie and Titus sometimes travel together. But this alternate temporality also offers a serious rebuttal to Goode’s ‘history lesson’, Archy and Nat’s friendship affording a different figuration of democratic affiliation, one attuned, but not subject, to fixed racial identities.

Goode’s version of ‘neighborhood revitalization’ also comes into conflict with Nat’s vision of Brokeland.¹¹³ When Chan tells him that the Dogpile store will be a ‘real boon for the community’, Nat gets riled:

¹¹⁰ Posnock, “How It Feels to Be a Problem”, 329. On Negritude, see Reiland Rabaka, *Forms of Fanonism: Frantz Fanon’s Critical Theory and the Dialectics of Decolonization* (Plymouth: Lexington Books, 2011), 93-97.

¹¹¹ Chabon, *Telegraph Avenue*, 304.

¹¹² Chabon, *Telegraph Avenue*, 308.

¹¹³ Chabon, *Telegraph Avenue*, 374.

“You know, Councilman, I don’t know why, but I was under the impression that this place right...here” – and Nat pounded the counter, *Right! Here!* – “was a community! But I guess I was wrong.”¹¹⁴

Nat responds by forming a protest group that bears the hallmarks of the ‘pastoral retreat of the New Left’. ‘Conserve Oakland’s Character against Homogenization, Impact, and Stress on the Environment’ – or ‘COCHISE’ for short – is made up of a ‘motley gathering of freaky Caucasians united [...] only by a reflexive willingness if not compulsion to oppose pretty much anything new that came along’ – a preservationist instinct symptomatic of the reactionary turn taken by post-’60s Leftism.¹¹⁵ Describing COCHISE’s (entirely white) membership, Chabon offers a satire of Berkeley’s contemporary progressive politics, depicting Claude Rapf ‘the urban planner’ and ‘the lady who owned the new-wave knitting store’ standing beside ‘two of the ageing Juddhists who had recently opened a meditation center called Neshama’.¹¹⁶

This group is ‘Nat’s constituency’, and the novel acknowledges that Brokeland Records resembles an iteration of the splintered ‘postmodern subject politics’ described by DeKoven. But Nat’s effort to save the store is also connected to a broader history of radical politics, and a longer tradition of utopian thinking. At Cochise’s funeral, we discover that the funky scion of Brokeland Creole, much to everyone’s surprise, was also a member of a Marxist library housed further up Telegraph Avenue. As the ‘fluty-voiced

¹¹⁴ Chabon, *Telegraph Avenue*, 55. Emphasis in original.

¹¹⁵ Chabon, *Telegraph Avenue*, 257, 266.

¹¹⁶ Chabon, *Telegraph Avenue*, 261.

old Marxist librarian' puts it in his eulogy for Mr. Jones, Cochise understood 'the interaction of base and superstructure, the way ultimately, class struggle underpinned all the racism in America'.¹¹⁷ In naming his protest group after Cochise, then, Nat (unwittingly) connects the record store to an Old Left conception of class-based politics and its tradition of revolutionary utopianism, in contradistinction both to postmodern identity politics and the black nationalism invoked by Goode – who had also tried, like Nat, to play on Cochise's good name in his effort to win Archy round.

The novel complicates this political genealogy still further by way of Nat's own family history. We learn that Nat is 'saddled with the especial uselessness of the third-generation socialist, one of the lonely grandsons of Eugene Debs, stood up by Utopia'.¹¹⁸ Debs – the five-time Presidential candidate of the Socialist Party of America in the early twentieth century – first came to national prominence in 1894 for leading the American Railway Union out in a mass boycott of the Pullman Palace Car Company – one of the country's biggest railroad car manufacturers – in protest over pay cuts.¹¹⁹ The Pullman Company is alluded to throughout *Telegraph Avenue*, in part because of Oakland's role as the West Coast headquarters of the Brotherhood of the Sleeping Car Porters, the first African-American workers' union in the country when it formed in 1925.¹²⁰ The BSCP

¹¹⁷ Chabon, *Telegraph Avenue*, 495.

¹¹⁸ Chabon, *Telegraph Avenue*, 155.

¹¹⁹ See Nick Salvatore, *Eugene V. Debs: Citizen and Socialist* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1982), 127-128; David Ray Papke, *The Pullman Case: The Clash of Labor and Capital in Industrial America* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1999).

¹²⁰ See Robert Allen, *Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters: C. L. Dellums and the Fight for Fair Treatment and Civil Rights* (London: Routledge, 2015).

features prominently in histories of the ‘long civil rights era’¹²¹: the way in which its ‘organizational campaign drew upon the memories of slavery and emancipation to connect the union’s challenge to the Pullman Company to the larger quest for first-class citizenship in the broader political arena’ influenced the way in which the civil rights movement historicised its struggle for representation and equality.¹²² Luther Stallings spins a kind of funk-fusion version of this history to his grandson Titus when they first meet at Luther’s garage. ‘Oakland, California’, Luther announces, ‘End of the dream. End of the motherfucking line [...] Everything got started for us, minute the white man wanted to get some sleep on the train’:

The discourse had been riding this particular local for most of the past fifteen, twenty minutes [...] something about how white folks back in the day, needing to catch their beauty sleep as they travelled West subjugating and conquering, turned to a man named Pullman. And this one white dude, Joe, no, George Pullman [...] not out of any kind of wanting to do the right thing but only because he was cheap [...] started hiring up free black men [...] [Luther] evoked the nightly scene, vigilant black men studying the sonorous nocturnal rumbling of wealthy sleepers in the sleeper cars [...] travelling toward] the far shore of the American Dream [...] all because the word “America” was actually a broken down version of “Amenthe-Ra”, the Land of the West in Ancient Egypt, where you went when you died [...in] a

¹²¹ Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, “The Long Civil Rights Movement and the Political Uses of the Past”, *Journal of American History*, 91:4 (March 2005), pp. 1233-1263.

¹²² Beth Tompkins Bates, *Pullman Porters and the Rise of Protest Politics in Black America, 1925-1945* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001), 5.

westbound boat like those that had freighted the sorrows of the Pullman porters' African ancestors, even though [...] the death journey to Amenthe-Ra was only a kind of sleep, in fact a dream – not Dream as in “I Have a Dream” [...although] you had to wonder why Dr. King [...] had chosen to couch his message using a term so central to the Secret History of the Black Man in California, the language of the Pullman Porter [...]¹²³

Luther's history maps a national (and international) context, even as his train of thought stays on a 'local' track. The 'westward' journey of Pullman's white passengers echoes the expansionist frontier movement of America's early colonial period, but also picks up the discourse of post-colonialism shaping the Panthers' rhetoric; Luther's allusion to ancient Egypt similarly has a flavour to it of the Afrocentrism that became a key intellectual trend of Black Power. In connecting the 'language of the Pullman Porter' to Martin Luther King's rhetoric, Luther seems to further ground his history of early twentieth-century Oakland in its radical politics of the 1960s and 1970s, even as he looks back to a longer history of racial subjugation. Finally, Luther connects this history, told to his grandson, back to Archy's record shop. 'This building you're in', he tells Titus, 'it was a train barn. You see that line there in the cement, crack like a big circle going all the way around. That's where the turntable is. Big old concrete turntable, spinning the music of dreams'.¹²⁴ Brokeland Records, then, is another station stop on this journey – and the tracks seem to lead from Archy and Nat to Julie and Titus, too. Taking our cues from Luther's funk-fusion historicism, we might connect his 'secret history' of the railroad

¹²³ Chabon, *Telegraph Avenue*, 423-425.

¹²⁴ Chabon, *Telegraph Avenue*, 427.

back to the novel's opening image of the two friends, riding in tandem, the boys forming a 'little train' as they cruise the streets of Brokeland.¹²⁵

In connecting Nat to Debs, the novel follows the tracks laid by Luther, plotting a political history that unsettles periodisation. Reaching back beyond New Left counterculture protest to a tradition of Old Left utopianism and collectivist action, the novel traces a tangled weave of progressive politics that crisscrosses the colour line, and blurs the border between the local and the national. In so doing, the novel not only espouses a critique of the region's spatial politics, but enacts a kind of 'temporal drag', to recall Elizabeth Freeman's phrase, which works to 'complicate the idea of horizontal political generations or waves succeeding each other in progressive time'.¹²⁶ The novel's saturation in Berkeley's and Oakland's diverse histories of radical politics produces a kind of 'stretched-out' contemporaneity, in which Nat's socialist 'inheritance' belongs not so much to the past, as to the 'not-yet'.¹²⁷ And what emerges from this 'utopian historicity' is, as Berlant suggests, a way of imagining 'social change in the present tense, but a present tense different from what we can now imagine for pragmatic [...] politics'.¹²⁸

Something of this utopian desire is discernible during the inaugural meeting of COCHISE, the past veering into the present in a Benjaminian flash:

¹²⁵ Chabon, *Telegraph Avenue*, 65.

¹²⁶ Freeman, *Time Binds*, 65.

¹²⁷ Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 5, 258-263.

¹²⁸ Berlant, "'68, or Something", 126.

For a kinescoped instant Nat cut away in his imagination from the scene at Brokeland to an afternoon forty years earlier, men and boys, maybe Chan Flowers and Luther Stallings among them, jostling around a portable black-and-white to watch Cassius Clay take down the Big Bear. Nat wished intensely that this gathering could be that gathering, these people could be those, with all the years of ferment and innovation in the music and the life of black America ahead of them. Hope unfulfilled, not yet betrayed.¹²⁹

As Matt Kavanagh suggests, Nat here expresses ‘a longing not so much for the past but for the possibilities foreclosed in the present’.¹³⁰ Nostalgic for hope itself, Nat gives expression to the kind of proleptic longing described by Svetlana Boym, ‘not for the idealised past, but only for its many potentialities that have not been realised’ – a nostalgia that is ‘prospective rather than retrospective, a kind of future perfect with a twist’.¹³¹ Linking Chan and Luther to the Clay vs. Liston fight, the scene alludes to the way the novel frequently approaches the political via black popular culture, whether it be music, film, comic books, or boxing. Also watching the fight on February 24, 1964 – at ringside, rather than on television – was Malcolm X, and it was in the post-match interview that the newly crowned world champion shed the name Clay and became Cassius X (and later of course Muhammad Ali), marking his first public acknowledgment

¹²⁹ Chabon, *Telegraph Avenue*, 272.

¹³⁰ Matt Kavanagh, “‘Hope Unfulfilled, Not Yet Betrayed’: Michael Chabon’s Nostalgia for the Future”, in Kavaldo and Batchelor (eds.), *Michael Chabon’s America*, pp. 235-255 (237).

¹³¹ Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York: Basic Books, 2001), 168.

of his long-rumoured affiliation with the Nation of Islam.¹³² That a history of radical black nationalism should be invoked by COCHISE's decidedly white membership is indicative of the way in which the novel tries to give form to a 'creolised' political history in its exploration of race and community, one that draws upon the political traditions either side of the Berkeley–Oakland line.

6. *The Audacity of Hope*

While I have situated Archy and Nat's friendship in relation to East Bay radical politics of the 1960s and 1970s and a broader history of leftist utopianism, a more immediate political context also emerges in the novel. The pair's creole ideal seems shaped by discussions regarding race relations in the U.S. prompted by Obama's victory in 2008, and echoes debates as to whether the election of the country's first black president might herald a 'post-racial' America.¹³³ In her review, Attica Locke notes that 'Obama's presence – and his most famous catchphrase, "change" – seem to linger at the outer corners of this novel's soul'.¹³⁴ But it is the other refrain of Obama's candidacy that resounds most clearly in the book: hope. Hope wasn't just a campaign slogan, but an evolving concept in Obama's political idiom, a hallmark of the 'utopian propensities' of the Senator's rhetoric, developed in *The Audacity of Hope* (2006), and central to his

¹³² See Kasia Boddy, *Boxing: A Cultural History* (London: Reaktion Books, 2008), 327-330.

¹³³ See Mark Ledwidge, Kevern Verney, and Inderjeet Parmar (eds.), *Barack Obama and the Myth of a Post-Racial America* (London: Routledge, 2013).

¹³⁴ Attica Locke, "Telegraph Avenue by Michael Chabon – review", *The Guardian*, September 5, 2012.

speech at the Democratic National Convention two years earlier.¹³⁵ This optimism, certainly, is what seems to have drawn Chabon himself to the Obama campaign, as he outlines in an essay entitled “An Article of Hope” (2007):

On the hustings Obama likes to toss around the word “hope,” as if all of us knew what he meant by it [...] but hope is one of those things that slips, when you think of it, from your understanding. [...] Is it only a kind of reaching in the darkness for a light switch that may never be found, a temporizing, a bid in troubled circumstances to buy ourselves a little more time? Is hope, in other words, a kind of lie? I don’t know. It might be.¹³⁶

In one sense, Chabon seems here to call for ‘hope in the dark’, to borrow the title of Rebecca Solnit’s 2004 book, but he also seems to offer a re-formulation of the concept of hope itself.¹³⁷ Figuring hope as a kind of ‘temporizing’, Chabon here foreshadows *Telegraph Avenue*’s exploration of the forms of temporal delay, drag, and uneven progress through which a ‘post-utopian utopianism’ might emerge. Earlier in the essay, Chabon

¹³⁵ Mark Ferrara, *Barack Obama and the Rhetoric of Hope* (Jefferson: McFarland, 2013), 13. James Kloppenberg reads Obama’s political maturation in the context of his time at Harvard Law, describing him as a ‘civic republican, committed to a revised version of Rawls’s principles of justice’ and influenced by ‘communitarianism’. *Reading Obama: Dreams, Hope, and the American Political Tradition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011) 94, 100-105. In 2004, Obama asked the DNC, ‘Do we participate in a politics of cynicism, or do we participate in a politics of hope?’.

¹³⁶ Michael Chabon, “An Article of Hope” (2007). See also, Chabon, “Obama vs. the Phobocracy”, *Washington Post*, February 4, 2008; Chabon, “Obama & the Conquest of Denver”, *New York Review of Books*, October 9, 2008.

¹³⁷ Rebecca Solnit, *Hope in the Dark: Untold Histories, Wild Possibilities* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2004).

suggests that his advocacy for Obama is in part explained by his ‘coming of age in the late sixties and early seventies’ in the ‘semi-utopia of Columbia, Maryland’. Just as he would in his essay exploring the origins of *Telegraph Avenue*, Chabon here explains the root of his support for Obama by tracing how, since leaving Columbia, he has ‘lost my illusions about racial progress in America’. Obama rejuvenates Chabon’s belief in racial equality, in part because he believes the Senator’s ‘black identity’ allows him to ‘embod[y] and inherit [...] the most inspiring and terrible of our national narratives’.¹³⁸ Chabon’s conception of Obama chimes with Sean McCann’s characterisation of the modern presidency as ‘a symbolic as much as a political office’, imbued with a ‘therapeutic promise to overcome the problems of representation and to exemplify the ideal harmony of a people and its state’.¹³⁹ Obama reaffirms for Chabon ‘the one illusion that I have not lost: that America’s history is [...] the responsibility of all its citizens, that our tragedies are common tragedies, and that the pride we take in the record of our national accomplishments ought to be only so great as the common blessings those accomplishments have bestowed’. Chabon thus offers a familiar vision of national citizenship, based around a common history, and figured symbolically in the ‘intimate person’ of the president.¹⁴⁰ But what is striking is how closely this description of the nation tallies with the description of ‘the neighborhood’ at the close of *Telegraph Avenue* – ‘that space where common sorrow could be drowned in common passion’.¹⁴¹ Just as the essay links the ‘semi-utopia’ of Columbia to Obama’s message of hope for America,

¹³⁸ Chabon, “An Article of Hope”.

¹³⁹ Sean McCann, *A Pinnacle of Feeling: American Literature and Presidential Government* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), 20.

¹⁴⁰ McCann, *A Pinnacle of Feeling*, 4.

¹⁴¹ Chabon, *Telegraph Avenue*, 624.

Telegraph Avenue explores these competing scales of commonality and affiliation, querying the ways in which the local and the national align and diverge in the political imaginary's fantasies of citizenship and community.

At one point in the novel, Archy and Nat's soul-funk fusion band is booked to play a political fundraiser at which Obama, fresh from his DNC address, is due to speak.¹⁴² The friends are grooving with particular fervour because Cochise Jones has just died, and the gig has become a tribute to their musical guru. Waiting to 'address his fellow guests', the Senator for Illinois 'stop[s] in the doorway [...] to listen for a minute to the hired band [...] cooking their way with evident seriousness of intent through an instrumental cover of "Higher Ground"'.¹⁴³ As he 'linger[s] there in the doorway [...] tapping his foot, bobbing his close-cropped head', Obama mentally 'fill[s] in the missing vocal line, lyrics that somehow managed to be at once hopeful and apocalyptic, perfectly in keeping with the mood of the hour politically, if there were anyone in the crowd to attend [...] He listened a while longer'.¹⁴⁴ The political 'hour', and its precarious utopianism, seems here to belong at once to 1973, the year "Higher Ground" was released, and to the novel's present, the two eras ambiguously twinned. Stevie Wonder was one of the most prominent Motown artists to engage with the rise of Black Power, using his albums as a 'forum to engage issues of racial, economic and political

¹⁴² On depictions of Democratic Party figures in twentieth-century fiction, and the Party's long-standing association with African-American music, see Michael Szalay, *Hip Figures: A Literary History of the Democratic Party* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2012).

¹⁴³ Chabon, *Telegraph Avenue*, 214.

¹⁴⁴ Chabon, *Telegraph Avenue*, 214.

inequalities'.¹⁴⁵ Recorded in the same year as "Living for the City" – his 'meditation on the underlying anxieties, frustrations, and material circumstances that inspire the rise of Black Power and black consciousness'¹⁴⁶ – "Higher Ground" was part of a wave of 'black freedom music' that 'responded to this era of activism'.¹⁴⁷ Singing along to Stevie Wonder, Obama is not only contextualised within a legacy of 1960s and 1970s radical black politics, but brought into a kind of contemporaneity – a unison as well as a harmony – with that history. In the way in which he 'stop[s]', 'linger[s]', and 'listen[s] a while longer', Obama also enacts the kind of 'temporizing' that underpins the novel's utopian historicity, allowing him – unlike the assembled guests – to hear in "Higher Ground" a political potentiality that resonates in the present.¹⁴⁸ But of course this 'present' has already receded: in setting the novel in 2004, and in imagining Obama before he announces his candidacy, Chabon plays upon a certain dramatic irony that further complicates the moment's optimism.¹⁴⁹ Again, the novel effects a kind of nostalgia for hope itself, for a time before the inevitable disappointment of Obama's presidency. That Obama will, ultimately, fail to deliver on his message of hope is signalled by the fact that

¹⁴⁵ Yohuru Williams, *Rethinking the Black Freedom Movement* (New York: Routledge, 2016), 99.

¹⁴⁶ Murch, *Living for the City*, 3.

¹⁴⁷ Ricky Vincent, *Party Music: The Inside Story of the Black Panthers' Band and How Black Power Transformed Soul Music* (Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 2013), 163; Portia Maultsby, "African American Musical Cultures", in Ellen Koskoff (ed.), *Music Cultures in the United States: An Introduction* (New York: Routledge, 2005), pp. 185-242 (237).

¹⁴⁸ My argument chimes with Daphne Brooks' account of 'sonic critical memory' in Brook, "'Bring the Pain': Post-Soul Memory, Neo-Soul Affect, and Lauryn Hill in the Black Public Sphere", in Nicholas Cook and Richard Pettengill (eds.), *Taking it to the Bridge: Music as Performance* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2013), pp. 180-203 (190).

¹⁴⁹ For a contrasting account of the novel's dramatic irony, see Kavanagh, "'Hope Unfulfilled, Not Yet Betrayed'".

the Senator arrives at the fundraiser by ‘catching a ride’ on ‘Gibson Goode’s private airship’.¹⁵⁰

Chabon’s bravura depiction of Obama confirmed for many reviewers *Telegraph Avenue*’s status as a ‘big, serious, probing American novel’ – a book that spoke to a national context, even as it focused on a local story.¹⁵¹ In bringing Obama into the orbit of Brokeland Records, the novel plays upon the symbolic resonance of the President and his office to extend its analysis of national identity and belonging. Just as, in *Smoke*, Rashid’s real name – Thomas Jefferson Cole – seems at once to raise and query the prospect of his relationship with Paul being read as neatly symbolic of national race relations, so too does the portrayal of the nation’s first black President in *Telegraph Avenue* inflect the novel’s exploration of Archy and Nat’s friendship as a figure for citizenship and interracial sociality. While DeMott argues that the ‘friendship orthodoxy’ removes ‘the large and complex dilemmas of race [...] from the public sphere’, rendering racism ‘one dimensional – lacking, that is, in institutional, historical, or political ramifications’, Archy and Nat’s friendship is deeply embedded in Brokeland’s racial history, and informed by the shifting cultural and political geographies of the 1960s and 1970s.¹⁵² In my discussion of *Smoke*, I argued that the historicisation of Paul and Rashid’s relationship worked to distinguish their friendship from buddy film bonhomie, marking a conscious critical distance from Hollywood’s sentimental depoliticisation of race. *Telegraph Avenue* goes

¹⁵⁰ Chabon, *Telegraph Avenue*, 218.

¹⁵¹ Attica Locke, “Telegraph Avenue by Michael Chabon – review”. John Freeman spoke of Chabon ‘imagining the Great American Novel’. “Telegraph Avenue by Michael Chabon”, *Boston Globe*, September 1, 2012.

¹⁵² DeMott, *The Trouble with Friendship*, 27.

much further. Aficionados of anachronism, Archy and Nat focalise the novel's exploration of the political potentiality of a certain kind of historical imagination. Freighted with the legacies of Berkeley and Oakland's radical histories, and carrying a kind of afterglow of the era's hope for a realignment of the personal and political, their friendship substantiates a mode of historicity articulating a temporally wayward register of political desire in the novel – a 'post-utopian utopianism' in which the future is steeped in the past.

7. *Seventies Throwback*

Published a year after *Telegraph Avenue*, Jonathan Lethem's ninth novel, *Dissident Gardens* (2013), is 'structured as a history of American radical leftism through the second half of the 20th century', a history told through the prism of a single family, the Angrush–Zimmers.¹⁵³ The novel begins in Sunnyside Gardens in Queens, New York, a Garden City-era planned housing complex, and 'the official Socialist Utopian Village of the outer boroughs'.¹⁵⁴ 'Forged by idealists', Sunnyside was 'sanctified as a leftist laboratory by Lewis Mumford', the influential urban planner and, for many years, author of the *New Yorker's* "Sky Line" column.¹⁵⁵ Socially egalitarian and planned around a shared commons, the Gardens, were intended to foster a 'robust political life' among its residents, 'with effective collective action'.¹⁵⁶ Lethem's novel is similarly concerned, as

¹⁵³ Marco Roth, "I don't want your revolution", *London Review of Books*, 36:4 (February 20, 2014), pp. 24-25 (24).

¹⁵⁴ Jonathan Lethem, *Dissident Gardens* (New York: Doubleday, 2013), 14.

¹⁵⁵ Lethem, *Dissident Gardens*, 143. See Donald Miller, *Lewis Mumford: A Life* (New York: Grove Press, 1989).

¹⁵⁶ Lewis Mumford, *The Culture of Cities* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1938), 484.

Benjamin Hollander notes in his review, with the ‘politics of the polis emerging out of the Gardens’ real and existential foundations’.¹⁵⁷

As the book begins, however, the once Dissident Gardens are already transforming into ‘a suburb of disappointment’, and Rose Zimmer – family matriarch and ‘one-woman embodiment of the Old Left’ – is being kicked out of the Communist Party.¹⁵⁸ The novel opens in ‘late Fall, 1955’, just prior to the Hungarian Revolution and the Twentieth Congress, the twinned crises of the Soviet project that would change the course of Communism. But Rose is already at odds with the Party authorities, not because of a lapse of faith, but because she is a ‘too sensuous egalitarian’: ‘Bringing revolution to the Negros, fine. To have one particular black cop in her sheets, not so fine. Oh hypocrites!’¹⁵⁹ While her German-born husband, Albert, stays loyal to the cause – eventually returning to his native country to write Soviet revisionist history – Rose’s affair with policeman Douglas Lookins begins her disassociation from the Popular Front, and the evolution of her political praxis. As Stacey Olster suggests, Rose gradually ‘replaces her husband’s 1930s “Communism is twentieth-century Americanism” advocacy with her own “Sunnysideism is Late-Twentieth-Century Communism” community activism’.¹⁶⁰ Hal Parker in turn notes that Rose abandons ‘the project of global revolution in favor of reformist localism’, as her politics begin to converge with

¹⁵⁷ Benjamin Hollander, “The Long View Back to the Gardens: Politics as Dissident Polis in Jonathan Lethem’s *Dissident Gardens*”, *The Brooklyn Rail*, December 18, 2014.

¹⁵⁸ Lethem, *Dissident Gardens*, 27; Lee Konstantinou, “Outerborough Destiny: Jonathan Lethem’s *Dissident Gardens*”, *Los Angeles Review of Books*, September 8, 2013.

¹⁵⁹ Lethem, *Dissident Gardens*, 7.

¹⁶⁰ Stacey Olster, *The Cambridge Introduction to Contemporary American Fiction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 89; Lethem, *Dissident Gardens*, 140, 254.

those of her daughter, Miriam.¹⁶¹ Miriam inherits from her mother a ‘second-generation cynicism toward collapsed gleaming visions of the future’, and she is also, like Rose, ‘a Bolshevik of the five senses’.¹⁶² Married to a folk-singer and living in a Greenwich Village commune, Miriam ‘incarnates the New Left in America’, and mother and daughter together represent ‘the emergence of a localist politics’ as the novel moves through the 1960s and 1970s.¹⁶³ The involvement of Miriam’s son, Sergius, in the Occupy movement brings the novel’s ‘collective portrait’ of American leftism up to date, delineating a ‘post-sixties and post-utopian’ contemporary moment struggling with the inheritance of the counterculture.¹⁶⁴ ‘The sixties formed a seaweed gauze through which they all paddled’, Lethem writes of Sergius’ generation, ‘browsing for opening enough to surface and breathe free’.¹⁶⁵

On the one hand, Lethem’s decline-of-the-family novel tells a familiar story of the decline of the Left – a drift from ideology to identity politics, from internationalism to individualism. On the other hand, *Dissent Gardens* is itself akin to the sort of work carried by Albert – that is, a kind of revisionist history, not dissimilar to those 1990s re-evaluations of the Popular Front I surveyed in my chapter on Roth. Emphasising the family resemblances between successive generations of leftists, Lethem portrays a contemporary political culture grounded in the ideals of a previous era, suggesting hope

¹⁶¹ Hal Parker, “Review: Jonathan Lethem’s *Dissent Gardens*”, *The American Reader*, 1:9 (November 2013).

¹⁶² Lethem, *Dissent Gardens*, 29.

¹⁶³ Parker, “Review: Jonathan Lethem’s *Dissent Gardens*”.

¹⁶⁴ Konstantinou, “Outerborough Destiny”.

¹⁶⁵ Lethem, *Dissent Gardens*, 311.

for the future of progressive politics. In Lee Konstantinou's reading, the novel seeks to look beyond the political cynicism of late twentieth-century postmodernism toward a 'postironic political commitment' indicative of a 'new sincerity'.¹⁶⁶ Lethem's novel thus emerges as what Konstantinou calls a 'postironic Bildungsroman', which 'figures postirony as the end of a process of either individual or collective political maturation', and which closes 'with a culminating – tentative but unambiguous – renewal of postironic political engagement, a new political hope'.¹⁶⁷

Nicholas Dames also discerns a political hopefulness in *Dissident Gardens*, but reads the novel's historical imagination quite differently.¹⁶⁸ Dames positions Lethem's book as a prominent example of 'Seventies Throwback Fiction', a sub-genre that looks back to the 1970s with 'complicated admiration and longing'. In terms similar to my analysis of the utopian historicity of *Telegraph Avenue*, Dames suggests that these novels attempt to 'transcend our knowing cynicism' about the decade by way of a reconceptualisation of anachronism and nostalgia. Resisting the 'leftist dogma that insists that nostalgia can only vitiate and never strengthen a progressive politics', these novels draw out the 'radical possibilities' of nostalgia. What throwback fiction never 'quite gets over', Dames writes, are the 'temporary, ramshackle utopias' that seemed possible in the 1970s, even after the 'decline of sixties radicalism', and its grander utopian aspirations.¹⁶⁹

¹⁶⁶ Lee Konstantinou, *Cool Characters: Irony and American Fiction* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2016), 275.

¹⁶⁷ Konstantinou, *Cool Characters*, 275, 281.

¹⁶⁸ Nicholas Dames, "Seventies Throwback Fiction: A Decade in Review", *n+1*, 21 (Winter 2014).

¹⁶⁹ Dames also includes Norman Rush's *Subtle Bodies*, discussed at the start of my Introduction.

Dames' analysis reorientates Konstantinou's account of the novel's hopefulness, positing a more complex form of historical imagination and political desire. In drawing out the ways in which these throwback fictions – pulled to-and-fro by nostalgia – move ambiguously between past and future, Dames suggests that Konstantinou's conception of the political 'maturation' elaborated in the 'postironic bildungsroman' might need revising. If we are to understand this kind of utopian historicity, we might need to acknowledge, to paraphrase Kathryn Bond Stockton, that there are ways in which fiction can imagine kinds of growth that is not a form of growing up.¹⁷⁰ I want to keep both Konstantinou's and Dames' arguments in mind as I turn to another of Lethem's 'New York novels', *The Fortress of Solitude* (2003).¹⁷¹ More so than *Dissident Gardens*, *The Fortress of Solitude* is pitched between the present and what Chabon called the 'Broken Utopia' of the 1970s, and so provides a different iteration of 'throwback fiction'. This earlier, more autobiographical, novel is also more explicitly an experiment in the form of the *Bildungsroman*, and as such offers another test case for Konstantinou's conception of the emergence of 'postirony' in 'post-postmodern' fiction. And as in a *Bildungsroman* discussed earlier – Roth's *I Married a Communist* – *The Fortress of Solitude*'s coming-of-age story is also a story about male friendship.

¹⁷⁰ Kathryn Bond Stockton, *The Queer Child, or Growing Sideways in the Twentieth Century* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009), 11.

¹⁷¹ Marco Roth suggests that, 'Lethem's New York novels [...] have always depended on a master genre: Bildung, the story of individuation'. Roth, "I don't want your revolution", 25.

8. Dose

Like *Telegraph Avenue*, *The Fortress of Solitude* portrays a changing neighbourhood, and like *Smoke*, the book is steeped in what Lethem elsewhere calls Brooklyn's 'slow-motion gentrification'.¹⁷² The first, long half of the novel chronicles the formative years of Dylan Ebdus, a white Jewish kid growing up on a black and Puerto Rican block in the 1970s. The demographics of Dean Street are shifting as the narrative opens, with young white families moving in and renovating the dilapidated brownstones. Overseeing this transformation is Isabel Vendle, an elderly middle-class woman also new to Brooklyn, intent on encouraging the ragged region of North Gowanus to reimagine itself as the neighbourhood of 'Boerum Hill':

Gowanus wouldn't do. Gowanus was a canal and a housing project. Isabel Vendle needed to distinguish her encampment [...] her new paradise, distinguish it from the canal, from Red Hook, Flatbush [...] she was explicating a link to the Heights, the Slope. So, Boerum Hill, though there was no hill.¹⁷³

'Hill' invents a topography and 'Boerum' fabricates a history: Vendle comes across the name in a 'leather-bound volume at the Brooklyn Historical Society', and reads that the

¹⁷² Jonathan Lethem, "L. J. Davis" (2009), in *The Ecstasy of Influence: Nonfictions, etc.* (New York: Vintage, 2012), pp. 406-409 (406).

¹⁷³ Jonathan Lethem, *The Fortress of Solitude* (London: Faber and Faber, 2003), 7. Vendle is based on Helen Buckler, who coined the name Boerum Hill. See Suleiman Osman, *The Invention of Brownstone Brooklyn: Gentrification and the Search for Authenticity in Postwar New York* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 197-198.

Boerums were a ‘Dutch family, farmers, landowners’ who in fact ‘kept their wealth in Bedford-Stuyvesant, had actually come nowhere near Gowanus’. Nevertheless, the name change – like those of nearby areas such as ‘Carroll Gardens’ and ‘Cobble Hill’ – performed important cultural work. Suleiman Osman explains that, ‘If Boerum and Carroll gave the “neighborhoods” an imagined aristocratic founding father, hill and garden symbolically delayed the industrial cityscape to reach Brooklyn’s agrarian past’.¹⁷⁴ Conjuring a pre-modern pastoral idyll, this ‘delaying’ of the city was also a ‘de-colouring’ of it; attempting to re-write the region’s past, ‘brownstoners’ like Vendle also tried to erase something of its ethnic diversity.¹⁷⁵ The Boerums weren’t just landowners, but slave owners too.¹⁷⁶

The Fortress of Solitude captures just how broad a church the ‘back to the city’ movement of the 1960s and early 1970s was, and the range of political outlooks it encompassed. Vendle is less than impressed with her ‘ragged first recruits’ to the neighbourhood, the ‘motley’ mix of ‘beatniks’ and ‘hippies making communes little better than the rooming houses’.¹⁷⁷ Among them are Dylan’s parents, Abraham, an avant-garde painter and filmmaker, and Rachel, a pot-smoking lefty and precursor to Miriam in *Dissident Gardens*. Vendle disapprovingly notes Rachel ‘talking Spanish to the men on the crates on the corner. That wasn’t going to solve anything’; but for Rachel the street’s ethnic diversity is not a problem to be solved, but a local quality to be preserved. ‘If

¹⁷⁴ Osman, *The Invention of Brownstone Brooklyn*, 199.

¹⁷⁵ Osman, *The Invention of Brownstone Brooklyn*, 199.

¹⁷⁶ See Marc Linder and Lawrence Zacharias, *Of Cabbages and Kings County: Agriculture and the Formation of Modern Brooklyn* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1999), 86.

¹⁷⁷ Lethem, *Fortress of Solitude*, 8.

someone asks you say you live in *Gowanus*', she tells Dylan, 'Boerum Hill is pretentious bullshit'.¹⁷⁸

'Echoing other social movements of the 1960s', brownstoners of Rachel's political orientation 'described a mission to bring participatory democracy [...] and face-to-face communal life' to impoverished enclaves in the borough, and many leftists 'arrived in Boerum Hill with the idealism of the period', drawing inspiration from 'the student revolts of 1968, the civil rights and environmental movements, and the counterculture'.¹⁷⁹ But by the mid-'70s, the 'new localism' of the brownstoners resembled another iteration of the 'pastoral retreat' of the New Left I tracked in the political history of Berkeley – the town to which Dylan will move in the second half of the novel. 'Suspicious of the metanarratives' of 'urban renewal' and 'universal social programs', the spatial politics of brownstoning took its cues not from Garden City projects of planners like Mumford (or James Rouse), but from the 'street ballet' of the ethnically diverse urban village described by Jane Jacobs in *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (1961).¹⁸⁰ Celebrating the 'organic spontaneity' of the face-to-face relations on the sidewalks of Hudson Street in Greenwich Village, Jacobs developed an evocative urban romanticism that appealed across the political spectrum. By the late-'70s, the new localism of the New Left brownstoners ironically 'dovetailed with a national conservative

¹⁷⁸ Lethem, *Fortress of Solitude*, 52. Emphasis in original.

¹⁷⁹ Osman, *The Invention of Brownstone Brooklyn*, 209, 8, 16.

¹⁸⁰ Osman, *The Invention of Brownstone Brooklyn*, 14. See Jane Jacobs, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (New York: Vintage, 1961), 4-25. Jacobs called Mumford's *The Culture of Cities* 'a morbid and biased catalogue of ills' (10). Mumford responded in a review of Jacobs' book, "Mother Jacobs' Home Remedies", *The New Yorker*, December 1, 1962, pp. 148-179.

movement that was similarly hostile to government regulation and [...] planning'.¹⁸¹ Both wings of the neighbourhood movement practiced a highly organised preservationism that successfully campaigned against new building developments – including social housing – within brownstone Brooklyn, in the process pricing out many economically disadvantaged social groups from the area. 'Gentrification', Rachel tells Dylan, 'is a Nixon word', but she fails to recognise the role played by her own brand of leftist localism in the transformation of the neighbourhood she had thought she was protecting.¹⁸²

Lethem's background overlaps considerably with Dylan's, and the novel is often read as straightforwardly autobiographical.¹⁸³ Lethem also grew up in the 1970s in a Dean Street brownstone, the son of 'hippies, with an avowed Bohemian-Egalitarian take on race'.¹⁸⁴ He describes his parents as 'not just overtly political', but 'countercultural', brownstoners who were 'high on the cultural possibilities in the air' in the late-'60s and for whom the neighbourhood was a 'Utopian space'.¹⁸⁵ But he is also attuned to the contradictions of their localist politics:

¹⁸¹ Osman, *The Invention of Brownstone Brooklyn*, 14.

¹⁸² Lethem, *Fortress of Solitude*, 52.

¹⁸³ Lethem suggests that he performs 'the Philip Roth trick of pouring [...] autobiographical feeling into the fiction, and raising the spectre of the direct confession'. Sarah Anne Johnson, "Interview with Jonathan Lethem", in Jaime Clarke (ed.), *Conversations with Jonathan Lethem* (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2011), pp. 78-99 (91).

¹⁸⁴ Jonathan Lethem, "Yolked in Gowanus" (2001).

¹⁸⁵ Jonathan Lethem, "Lives of the Bohemians", in *The Disappointment Artist: Essays* (New York: Vintage, 2005), pp. 85-106 (87, 90); Michael Silverblatt, "An Interview with Jonathan Lethem", in Clarke (ed.), *Conversations with Jonathan Lethem*, pp. 69-77 (71).

I grew up with a simultaneously righteous but guilty feeling that we, a white family, had come to the neighbourhood and now we were going to stand [...] against gentrification. The paradox of that dawned on me even as a child [...] My sympathies are liberal, and they are very much aligned with my parents [...] But the idea that you would take a single neighbourhood and determine that your political ideals should be reflected in opposing gentrification began to seem to me to be a misunderstanding, because in a way the viewfinder is both too wide and too narrow. Either you form a larger critique and you analyse the problems in society that have to do with the encroachment of capitalism [...] or you deal with specific issues of interpersonal relations of neighbourhood civility [...].¹⁸⁶

‘They wanted to do something real’, Lethem says of his parents’ move to Gowanus, ‘and that reflected their commitment to the civil rights era. They couldn’t fathom that they were [...] handmaidens to realtors’.¹⁸⁷ But Lethem is interested in more than the irony of his parents’ stand against gentrification, and in this passage he also offers a succinct critique of the problem of scale in the political imaginary of the Left at this historical juncture, capturing the period’s shifting sense of how the local and the national, and the personal and political, measured up.

¹⁸⁶ Natasha Lehrer, “How Many Miles to Brooklyn”, *Jewish Quarterly*, 51:1 (2004), pp. 14-18 (14).

¹⁸⁷ Silverblatt, “An Interview with Jonathan Lethem”, 71.

The first part of the novel, narrated in the third-person, offers an evocative portrait of Dean Street through the 1970s. While Dylan's home life is disjointed – his father hermetically working on his film; his mother, who will soon disappear to a commune, only fleetingly present – life on the street is vivid and exuberant. At the heart of this opening section is Dylan's intense friendship with Mingus Rude, son of washed-up soul singer, Barrett Rude Junior of 'The Subtle Distinctions', and Dylan's ticket to a world of music, comics, graffiti, and drugs. Mingus and his father live next door to Vendle, but they represent a very different Brooklyn, one much more to Rachel's liking. She introduces the boys to one another – 'Rachel's last setup', before she leaves the family for good – and their friendship carries the optimism of her integrationist politics.¹⁸⁸ Their relationship is worked out in the summer-long games of 'skully' they play out on the street, Matthew Mullins notes, and 'solidified on the walls, billboards, and train cars of Brooklyn as they share the graffiti tag "Dose"'.¹⁸⁹ Graffiti allows Dylan 'to merge his identity [...] with the black kid's, to lose his funky music white boy geekdom in the illusion that he and his friend Mingus Rude are both Dose'.¹⁹⁰ When Dylan comes into possession of a ring bestowing the power of flight (and, later in the novel, invisibility), he and Mingus merge again in another 'secret identity', becoming 'Aeroman', a rather ineffectual superhero who only 'works locally'.¹⁹¹ It's Arthur, the block's only other white kid, who unwittingly links the boys' superhero alter-ego with the other 'secret' they share, calling Aeroman's costume their 'homo suit'. Like Titus and

¹⁸⁸ Lethem, *Fortress of Solitude*, 54.

¹⁸⁹ Matthew Mullins, *Postmodernism in Pieces: Materializing the Social in U.S. Fiction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 87.

¹⁹⁰ Lethem, *Fortress of Solitude*, 138.

¹⁹¹ Lethem, *Fortress of Solitude*, 203.

Julie's relationship in *Telegraph Avenue*, Dylan and Mingus's friendship is sometimes sexual and, like their other secret identities, their experimentation allows a fantasy of merging subjectivities, rendering them 'sole and extraordinary'.¹⁹² But by the end of the novel's first part, their friendship is on the wane. When Rachel ups and leaves, Dylan's enchantment with the street dissipates: he attends a private high school, and starts saving to go to Camden, an expensive, 'experimental' college.¹⁹³ When he offers Mingus money to buy the magic ring, it seems to them both that he has 'asked to buy their friendship back'. Hurt, Mingus asks his old friend, 'what you got on you', a phrase that both know comes straight from the script of a street mugging, carrying 'the stony authority over white boys Mingus never exercised. Mingus had let him hear it: their difference, finally'.¹⁹⁴

The second half of the novel switches to Dylan's first-person narrative. Now in his mid-thirties and living in California, Dylan is a music journalist and self-confessed 'vinyl hawk'. It becomes clear that Dylan's understanding of his childhood has become increasingly conflicted – 'rich with unresolved yearning', as he describes Barrett Rude Junior's voice in the liner notes he writes to a reissued CD boxset of *The Subtle Distinctions*' back catalogue.¹⁹⁵ His narrative drifts through a number of comic set-pieces

¹⁹² Lethem, *Fortress of Solitude*, 211.

¹⁹³ Lethem, *Fortress of Solitude*, 383. Camden is based on Bennington College, which Lethem attended for a year before dropping out; his contemporaries included Donna Tartt and Brett Easton Ellis. See Sarah Anne Johnson, "Interview with Jonathan Lethem", 79-80.

¹⁹⁴ Lethem, *Fortress of Solitude*, 285-286.

¹⁹⁵ Lethem, *Fortress of Solitude*, 296. These liner notes constitute a short section between the two halves of the narrative. As such, Lethem suggests, the novel as a whole 'spatially mimic[s] the shape of a two-CD box set enshrining a soul group's career and breakup'. Lethem, "Writing and the Neighbor Arts", *The Ecstasy of Influence*, pp. 205-206 (205).

– such as his unsuccessful pitch to make an epic movie about The Prisonaires, a 1950s group of incarcerated black musicians – that highlight his uneasy appropriation of black cultural history. These scenes give credence to his girlfriend Abby’s suggestion that Dylan is ‘collecting [her] for the color of [her] skin’, and that she amounts to another ‘exhibit in the Ebdus collection of sad black folks’, set alongside his records and the talismanic objects of his childhood – including the ring.¹⁹⁶ Unlike Archy and Nat’s record collecting, Dylan’s archive indexes an ossifying antiquarianism, a congealed nostalgia. ‘Dylan’s passion for [...] surrounding himself with ties to black life and culture’, Matt Godbey suggests, ‘resides in its ability to continually return him to the idealized past of a pre-gentrified Gowanus’.¹⁹⁷ Dylan also attempts to reconnect directly with the vanished figures of his past: his mother, his father, and finally, Mingus, ‘the rejected idol of my entire you, my best friend’, a quest that leads him to the prison in and out of which Mingus has spent that last eighteen years.¹⁹⁸

Dylan never quite gets out from under the shadow of his old Dean Street brownstone: as Abby tells him, ‘Your childhood is some private sanctuary you live in all the time instead of here with me’. ‘My childhood’, Dylan replies, ‘is the only part of my life that wasn’t, uh, overwhelmed by my childhood’. He then pauses: ‘Overwhelmed, or did I mean ruined?’.¹⁹⁹ Highlighting this moment, Samuel Cohen argues that the exchange constitutes ‘the hinge between the time capsule of childhood’ in the first part of

¹⁹⁶ Lethem, *Fortress of Solitude*, 317.

¹⁹⁷ Matt Godbey, “Gentrification, Authenticity, and White Middle-Class Identity in Jonathan Lethem’s *The Fortress of Solitude*”, *Arizona Quarterly*, 64:1 (Spring 2008), pp. 131-151 (143).

¹⁹⁸ Lethem, *Fortress of Solitude*, 443.

¹⁹⁹ Lethem, *Fortress of Solitude*, 319

the book and ‘the narrative of the present’ in the second, and that it provides ‘a key descriptive term for one often-criticised aspect of the experience of reading the novel’: the sense that the first half of the novel ‘overwhelms’ the second, and even that Dylan’s adult first-person narrative ‘ruins’ the effect of the third-person narrative of his childhood.²⁰⁰ Many reviewers made this point, focusing on the narrative’s central ‘split’. Ron Charles, for example, notes that ‘the novel’s structure begins to creak and break apart’ after the narrative leaves Brooklyn, while John Leonard argues that ‘everything goes wrong about two thirds of the way through’.²⁰¹ Godbey reads this structural break as symptomatic of the political failing of the novel, arguing that the sociological sweep of the Brooklyn section is left behind for the ‘individualistic, identity-obsessed [...] heart of Dylan’s story’, the narrative effectively ‘recasting the story of gentrification as the story of the alienation of a middle-class white man’.²⁰² Others have read it as a failure of character development. ‘If this is a Bildungsroman’, Adam Mars-Jones writes, ‘it would be an advantage for Dylan Ebdus to actually grow up at some point’, echoing James Wood’s observation that, ‘in general we are engrossed in the prospect of the child as father to the man precisely in proportion to the development of the man, not just the persistence of the child’.²⁰³ A disappointment with the failure of Dylan and the novel to ‘grow up’ in the expected way is connected to the other widely criticised element of the book: the ‘immature’ superhero fantasy thread which runs through the text, and which

²⁰⁰ Cohen, *After the End of History*, 177.

²⁰¹ Ron Charles, “There Goes the Neighborhood”, *Christian Science Monitor*, September 11, 2003; John Leonard, “Welcome to New Dork”, *New York Review of Books*, April 7, 2005.

²⁰² Godbey, “Gentrification”, 146. See also Elizabeth Gunport, “Gentrified Fiction”, *n+1*, November 2, 2009.

²⁰³ Adam Mars-Jones, “It’s all in the detail. Unfortunately...”, *The Observer*, January 11, 2004; James Wood, “Spaldeen Dreams”, *The New Republic*, October 13, 2003.

‘many readers seemed to have a hard time knowing what to do with in the context of an otherwise realistic book’.²⁰⁴

Cohen is one of few readers to argue that the feeling of ‘a terrible fall’ the novel effects with its change of time and place is ‘part of a larger design’.²⁰⁵ He suggests that the ‘structural split’ is crucial to how the text ‘understands the relation between past and present’ – a preoccupation that he argues is particularly prevalent in turn-of-the-century novels written after the so-called ‘end of history’.²⁰⁶ Eventually, Cohen writes, ‘Dylan stops jumping the gap’ and ‘leaving things out’, and so ‘begins to suture his life back together’. Part of this ‘gap-filling work’ is understanding his past in relation to ‘family and community and history’, and in particular to ‘confront [his] guilt at having left Mingus behind’. Ultimately, Cohen argues, the ‘lesson’ Dylan learns, and ‘the lesson this novel takes from seeing the past as ever-changing is the existence and importance of contingency. Things change, in unforeseen ways, and they always will’.²⁰⁷ James Peacock concurs, suggesting that, in contrast to the ‘idyllic vision of childhood utopian community’ described in its first section, the second half of the novel ‘reminds us of [...] the perpetuity of change’; while the novel ‘acknowledges the nostalgic desire to romanticise communities of the past’, it ultimately portrays the ‘utopian past moment’ as one that will inevitably ‘evade capture’.²⁰⁸ The novel’s understanding of contingency,

²⁰⁴ Cohen, *After the End of History*, 175.

²⁰⁵ Wood, “Spaldeen Dreams”; Cohen, *After the End of History*, 175.

²⁰⁶ See Cohen, *After the End of History*, 7-15.

²⁰⁷ Cohen, *After the End of History*, 180-181.

²⁰⁸ James Peacock, *Jonathan Lethem* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2012), 121.

they argue, means that the novel refuses the consolation not only of nostalgia, but also of closure, by showing the work of historical sense-making to be ongoing. *The Fortress of Solitude* thus offers a ‘vision of a world of unfixed positions, of possibility’; ‘it is not’, Cohen writes, ‘a book without hope for the future’, whatever that might be.²⁰⁹

Cohen’s reading usefully revises our understanding of *The Fortress of Solitude*’s structural split from a shortcoming to a central facet of the novel’s historical imagination. And yet his argument that the book’s hopefulness emerges from a lesson in historical contingency seems to inadequately account for the readerly, affective experience – recorded so insistently in the reviews above – of the novel’s move away from 1970s Brooklyn. If we agree with Peacock that the novel does not simply hanker after a romanticised vision of neighbourhood life, but instead interrogates and qualifies Dylan’s idealisation of the Dean Street of his youth, we nevertheless have to find another vocabulary with which to describe the book’s attachment to a past that seems to overwhelm it; or, to put it another way, to find a way to talk about how the novel can feel ‘ruined’ and hopeful at the same time.

9. *Growing Up Adolescent*

Cohen’s analysis rests on his own historicisation, as it were, of the historical imagination of the novel. He argues that *The Fortress of Solitude*’s approach to history reflects the fact that ‘American optimism and faith in self-determination [...] were shaken’ in the wake of 9/11: ‘The happy future assumed to be around the bend after the

²⁰⁹ Cohen, *After the End of History*, 185.

U.S. found itself the only superpower’, at the end of the Cold War, ‘was harder to assume in such a radically contingent-feeling present’.²¹⁰ But rather than taking the Cold War and 9/11 as my touchstones, I have been reading the novel within its more immediate ‘post-sixties and post-utopian’ setting, exploring the ways in which it is ‘thrown back’ to the 1970s in the long first half. In clarifying this further, we can begin to think about how the novel’s structural break subverts the generic expectations of the *Bildungsroman*. The paradigmatic genre of development, the *Bildungsroman* dramatises and produces a certain version of growing up – what Jed Esty calls an ‘historically specific notion of becoming’.²¹¹ In its original form’, he explains, ‘the bildungsroman stabilises the protagonist’s ageing process within and against the backdrop of the modern state’, such that ‘adulthood and nationhood’ serve as ‘mutually reinforcing versions of stable identity’; the genre thus shows the individual, in Bakhtin’s phrase, ‘growing in national-historical time’.²¹²

In Esty’s reading of the modernist *Bildungsroman*, the protagonist’s development into ‘national-historical time’ begins to unspool when, under the conceptual pressure of colonialism, the nation-state itself begins to lose its coherence as a structure of belonging. His analysis thus aligns with a number of postcolonial responses to Benedict Anderson’s conception of the ‘old-fashioned novel’ as a ‘device’ for the presentation and production

²¹⁰ Cohen, *After the End of History*, 170.

²¹¹ Jed Esty, *Unseasonable Youth: Modernism, Colonialism, and the Fiction of Development* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 5.

²¹² Esty, *Unseasonable Youth*, 39; Mikhail Bakhtin, *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays*, trans. Vern McGee (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1986), 25.

of the ‘empty, homogeneous time’ of the nation.²¹³ As Homi Bhabha suggests, this temporalisation does not account for the lived experience of time as ‘disjunctive’ and multiple, nor for the realist novel’s propensity to register ‘competing orders of time’.²¹⁴ As I outlined in the first section of this chapter, recent queer theory has contributed to this critique by analysing the ways in which the institutionalisation of a ‘linear, ordered, teleological’ conception of time inscribes a certain heteronormativity – what Valerie Rohy terms ‘the “straight time” of linear history’, Jack Halberstam ‘repro-time’, and Lee Edelman ‘reproductive futurism’ – in which the structures of marriage, child rearing, and generational inheritance are folded into the time of the nation and its history.²¹⁵

Part of this work specifically challenges the developmental narrative in which the *Bildungsroman* is invested. Halberstam, for example, asks that we ‘rethink the adult/youth binary’ in order to ‘disrupt conventional accounts of [...] adulthood and maturity’, and in fact Esty argues that, as the temporal logic of the *Bildungsroman* began to falter, the genre itself recorded this disruption in its portrayal of adolescence.²¹⁶ Once thought to entail ‘the telos of maturity’, he writes, the ‘trope of adolescence’ came to ‘refer both to

²¹³ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* [1983] (London: Verso, 2006), 26.

²¹⁴ Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994), 177; Lloyd Pratt, *Archives of American Time: Literature and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010), 8.

²¹⁵ Dana Luciano, *Arranging Grief: Sacred Time and the Body in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: New York University Press, 2007), 2; Valerie Rohy, *Anachronism and Its Others: Sexuality, Race, Temporality* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2009), xii; Jack Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* (New York: New York University Press, 2005), 5; Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), 5.

²¹⁶ Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place*, 2.

the developmental process and its multiple site of failure and incompleteness'.²¹⁷ In queer theory, these 'sites of failure and incompleteness' have been imagined as sites of potential hope. Halberstam, for example, suggests that 'failure allows us to escape the punishing norms that [...] manage human development with the goal of delivering us from unruly childhoods to orderly and predictable adulthoods'.²¹⁸ In this schema, adolescence becomes a time in which the apparent certainties of growing up might be called into question. Pamela Thurschwell describes adolescence as a 'strange and uncanny temporal state' of suspension, an 'insecure cultural space' marked not only by an 'anticipatory relation to the future and a haunted relationship to the past, but also something less assimilable to teleological notions of time and progress'.²¹⁹ Not growing up in the expected ways, failing to fall into step with 'national' time, might suggest the possibility of other kinds of futurity, and other kinds of community.

Telegraph Avenue is a novel in part about 'fucking off, fucking up, and fucking around', about not growing up in the right ways, and about forestalling inevitabilities.²²⁰ Lethem's reviewers similarly felt that *The Fortress of Solitude* was a novel in which adolescence lasted too long. Outgrowing itself, the Brooklyn section enacts a kind of arrested development upon the narrative, impeding the 'teleological process' expected of

²¹⁷ Esty, *Unseasonable Youth*, 36.

²¹⁸ Jack Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 3.

²¹⁹ Pamela Thurschwell, "The Ghost Worlds of Adolescence", 239-240.

²²⁰ Chabon, *Telegraph Avenue*, 469. I explore Chabon's engagement with the *Bildungsroman* elsewhere; see Michael Kalisch, "Michael Chabon in a Queer Time and Place", *Open Library of the Humanities*, 3(2):10 (2017), pp. 1-27.

the *Bildungsroman*.²²¹ And it's Dylan's friendship with Mingus, I want to suggest, that is integral to the 'temporal drag' effected by the first part of the book; that is to say, the novel forges a link between what Thurschwell calls the 'uncanny' temporality of adolescence and the time of friendship. Engaging consciously with the form of the *Bildungsroman*, *The Fortress of Solitude* explicates a different form of 'becoming', and with it, a different form of historical time. The novel's hopefulness, its 'postironic' politics, is not articulated in a process of 'maturation', as Konstantinou suggests, but in the ways in which it fails to grow up.

10. 'windows of time'

In school, Dylan is taught 'how to tell the time', and that 'a book report is the story of a book', but the novel itself teaches a less straightforward lesson about temporality and narrative.²²² Dylan inherits from each of his parents a sense of untimeliness. Abraham's film, Lethem suggests in an interview, 'is more like a novel than the work of a painter or filmmaker', and, 'like *Fortress*, the film is a record of days on a given street – Dean Street'.²²³ And as a 'record', the film gives form to a historical imagination that the rest of the novel will develop in its own way. Early in the book there is a scene much like the one in *Smoke* in which Auggie shows his photographs to Paul:

²²¹ Kenneth Millard, *Coming of Age in Contemporary American Fiction* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007), 5.

²²² Lethem, *Fortress of Solitude*, 32.

²²³ Lorin Stein, "The Art of Fiction No. 177: Jonathan Lethem", in Clarke (ed.), *Conversations with Jonathan Lethem*, pp. 46-68 (65).

“That looks the same,” Dylan said, watching his father finish a frame, turn to the next.

“It changes very slightly.”

“I can’t see.”

“You will in time.”²²⁴

‘Progress’, we learn, is an ‘illusion’: ‘the stillness of the film was part of the project’.²²⁵ This sense of suspension stretches out onto the street itself: ‘Time was indeed a series of days, and the film of the block’s changing was as static as a series of hand painted frames. Fifth grade was an abstract art, painted one frame at a time’.²²⁶ When Rachel leaves the family to travel, eventually settling in a Californian commune, she keeps in infrequent contact with Dylan through a series of postcards, which she signs ‘Running Crab’. Cryptic, lyrical, and carrying a trace Beat poeticism, her messages force Dylan to read carefully, for ‘the stories embedded in the words like puns, waiting’.²²⁷ The missives continue sporadically, such that, after a while, Dylan trusts that there is ‘no urgency to the Running Crab postcards [...] nothing in any way timely’.²²⁸ Both the film and the postcards intertextually explicate temporal modes resistant to linearity and, in their nonconformity, they carry a sense of Abraham and Rachel’s countercultural politics. Running Crab’s sideways cross-country shuttle and Abraham’s ‘incomprehensible

²²⁴ Lethem, *Fortress of Solitude*, 10.

²²⁵ Lethem, *Fortress of Solitude*, 31.

²²⁶ Lethem, *Fortress of Solitude*, 61.

²²⁷ Lethem, *Fortress of Solitude*, 95.

²²⁸ Lethem, *Fortress of Solitude*, 169.

progress' become twinned images of a hopefulness in retreat, of the kind of dwindling utopian desire that Dames suggests is longed for and mourned in throwback fiction.

This political affect is also manifest in the boys' relationship. Dylan's friendship with Mingus exists in 'brief windows of time' – a phrase used repeatedly in the first half of the book in connection to their relationship.²²⁹ Like Chabon's sense of the interracial 'fellowship' within an Oakland record store forming a 'little pocket of a big world, for a little hour', these windows open up a provisional form of temporal disjuncture in the novel that is also a time of hope:

The two boys on the walkway apparently standing still: they were moving faster than the cars. Nineteen seventy-five. Dylan Ebdus and Mingus Rude in the spring of 1975, walking home along Dean Street studying marker tags in black and purple ink [...] Dylan and Mingus together and alone, in windows of time [...] White kid, black kid, Captain America and Falcon, Iron Fist and Luke Cage. In windows of time [...] Dylan Ebdus and Mingus Rude like figures stepping through mists of silence every few weeks to read a comic book or fool around with tags in ballpoint, dry runs, rehearsals for something else.²³⁰

Much of this recalls Chabon's evocation of Titus and Julie's friendship: the 'unhinged' temporality shifting between past and present; the allusion to early black comic book

²²⁹ Lethem, *Fortress of Solitude*, 69, 79.

²³⁰ Lethem, *Fortress of Solitude*, 78.

superheroes; the sense of futurity gestured to in ‘rehearsals’, echoing the provisionality of the final word of *Telegraph Avenue*’s opening vignette, ‘drafting’. Something of this waywardness comes to define the two secret identities the boys share, ‘Dose’ and then ‘Aeroman’, each of which appears to offer a brief transcendence of the racial divide and material reality of the street. Reading the novel as a conventional *Bildungsroman*, Peacock suggests that ‘graffiti writing [...] exerts the strongest emotional pull on Dylan and thus constitutes the greatest obstacle to his maturation’.²³¹ The novel’s exegeses on tagging form part of Dylan’s effort, Peacock writes, to ‘remediate childhood experience through the figure of ekphrasis’ so as to ‘at least attempt, in deeply ambiguous ways, to move on from them’.²³² Because ‘graffiti is racially inscribed for Dylan’, this process of ekphrasis makes painfully legible the unsurmountable social divide separating him from Mingus; for Peacock, graffiti is thus a form of trauma writing, betokening ‘loss, division, betrayal and social injustice’.²³³

But when Dylan and Mingus first team up, ‘Dose’ seems to briefly symbolise something different. Graffiti might well be an ‘obstacle to [Dylan’s] maturation’, but obstacles, as Elizabeth Freeman suggests, can be ‘productive’, and ekphrasis itself

²³¹ Peacock, *Jonathan Lethem*, 117.

²³² Peacock, *Jonathan Lethem*, 117.

²³³ Peacock, *Jonathan Lethem*, 127-128.

becomes one of the ways the novel explores this potential.²³⁴ ‘The figure of ekphrasis’, Lloyd Pratt explains, ‘belies the more familiar story about modern time, its relationship to nationalism, and the theory of modern literature that the figure of print encapsulates’.²³⁵ In classical poetics, ekphrasis was employed to ‘intrude upon the flow of discourse, and, for its duration, to suspend the argument of the rhetor or the action of the poet [...] It was, then, a device intended to interrupt the temporality of the discourse’.²³⁶ Instead of the homogeneity of national time, Pratt argues, ekphrasis makes visible ‘two different orders of time’: ‘the linear time of progress and an experience of simple duration’.²³⁷ As in the case of Abraham’s film – the novel’s other prominent example of ekphrasis – graffiti conjures an alternate temporality that disrupts the ‘flow’ of narrative time, and in so doing, posits a different sense of ‘progress’ from that in which the form of the *Bildungsroman* is invested. Rather than the process of ‘gap filling work’ that Cohen argues defines the novel’s historicism, the figure of ekphrasis suggests that it is in the text’s moments of temporal disjuncture – its windows of time – that its historical imagination really takes shape.

²³⁴ Graffiti is one of many links between *The Fortress of Solitude* and Don DeLillo’s *Underworld* (1997), another temporally wayward turn-of-the-century historical novel/*Bildungsroman* set partly in New York (though the Bronx rather than Brooklyn). For a good account of ekphrasis in *Underworld*, see Amanda Ryan Toronto, “Ekphrasis and the religious impulse in late-twentieth-century American fiction”, New York University, Ph.D. Thesis, 2009, pp. 39-79. Lethem suggests that his attempt in *The Fortress of Solitude* to try and ‘write in so many different voices in the same book [...] comes again from reading DeLillo, reading a book like *Underworld*’. James Schiff, “A Conversation with Jonathan Lethem”, in Clarke (ed.), *Conversations with Jonathan Lethem*, pp. 100-115 (113).

²³⁵ Pratt, *Archives of American Time*, 27.

²³⁶ Murray Krieger and Joan Krieger, *Ekphrasis: The Illusion of the Natural Sign* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992), 7, quoted in Pratt, *Archives of American Time*, 54.

²³⁷ Pratt, *Archives of American Time*, 54.

Another of these windows opens with the boys' second secret identity, Aeroman, and the ring which briefly grants their alter-ego superhero the power of flight. 'The ring', Mullins writes, 'enacts the story of [Dylan's] fusion with Mingus', and allows them 'for a time [...] to resist, even defy, what are presented as the logics of nature and culture', including the logic of race.²³⁸ While Michiko Kakutani dismisses the superhero narrative as 'cutesy pyrotechnics' – a holdover from Lethem's more explicit experiments with genre fiction earlier in his career – we might instead read the ring as part of the novel's political project of imagining another form of belonging.²³⁹ Like their 'Dose' persona – which allows Dylan to 'merge his identity with Mingus' – Aeroman is, as A. O. Scott suggests in his review, 'a sign of utopian possibility' in the novel, just as the boys' friendship itself represents 'a shred perhaps of utopian symbolism'.²⁴⁰ And like graffiti, the ring elaborates a different form of time in the book. Kakutani complains that the superhero scenes amount to 'awkward interludes' in the narrative, but this is precisely their purpose: their 'awkwardness' exemplifies the 'in-between time' of adolescence, giving shape to what Kathryn Bond Stockton calls 'the unruly contours of growing that don't bespeak continuance'.²⁴¹ In an essay responding to James Wood's criticism that *The Fortress of Solitude* fails to show Dylan 'growing up in any of the conventional mental ways of the teenage *Bildungsroman*', Lethem draws attention to this aspect of the novel's 'formal discontinuity'. *The Fortress of Solitude* 'wrenches its own "realism" [...] into

²³⁸ Mullins, *Postmodernism in Pieces*, 97.

²³⁹ Michiko Kakutani, "White Kid, In a Black World", *New York Times*, September 16, 2003. On Lethem's experiments in genre fiction, see Peacock, *Jonathan Lethem*, 1-18.

²⁴⁰ A. O. Scott, "When Dylan Met Mingus", *New York Times Book Review*, September 21, 2003; Lethem, *Fortress of Solitude*, 241.

²⁴¹ Kakutani, "White Kid, In a Black World"; Stockton, *The Queer Child*, 13.

crisis', Lethem argues, 'by insisting on uncanny events' which work to disrupt the 'conventional' developmental narrative of the *Bildungsroman*.²⁴² But this 'uncanniness' doesn't just belong to the novel's unexpected elements of 'magic realism', but to the boys' friendship itself. Dylan and Mingus are 'that uncanny sporadic pair, their solidarity a befuddlement to passerby', and when Mingus reads aloud to him from an issue of *Black Panther*, Dylan feels himself 'permeated by some ray of attention, moved so that he felt an uncanny warmth in the half of his chest that was turned toward Mingus'.²⁴³

Like *Telegraph Avenue*, *The Fortress of Solitude* forges a connection between friendship, comic books, and superheroes. But though both books frame friendship as a form of potential fantasy, in neither novel is it a form of escapism. Aeroman's powers, after all, only extend a few blocks from Dean Street, and the ring itself is given to Dylan by a local homeless African-American man. A symbol of the possibility of transcending the socio-economic realities of the street, the ring also emblematises the intransigence of these material conditions. 'Dose' and the figure of ekphrasis similarly seem to briefly gesture to a different form of race relations, but what the boys' moniker also makes legible is the institutional apparatus ultimately structuring life on the street. We see this most clearly when, during a solo flight, Mingus tags the prison:

Four letters: D, O, S, E.

²⁴² Jonathan Lethem, "My Disappointment Critic/ On Bad Faith", in *The Ecstasy of Influence*, pp. 384-389 (387).

²⁴³ Lethem, *Fortress of Solitude*, 137, 55-56.

The tag was a cry, a claim, an undeniable thing. The looming jail which no one mentioned or looked at and the trail of dripping paint that covered the city's every public surface and which no one mentioned or looked at: two invisible things had rendered one another visible, at least for one day.²⁴⁴

In *Smoke*, Paul and Rashid's friendship allows Auster to reflect upon the racial divide between neighbourhood Brooklyn and the Projects. Similarly, it is through Dylan's friendship with Mingus that *The Fortress of Solitude* engages with the diverse cultural geography of the 'the grid of zones, the huddled brownstone streets between prison and projects'.²⁴⁵ Their relationship thus focalises the novel's interrogation of the localist politics of Dylan's parents, and the dwindling, qualified utopianism of 1970s leftism. Near the end of the story, Dylan reflects upon the records that led him to become a music journalist. In particular, he describes how Brian Eno's *Another Green World*, 'conjure[s] and dwell[s] in' a 'middle space [...] a bohemian demimonde, a hippie dream', which he likens to Dean Street when his parents first moved there:

It was the same space the communists and gays and painters on celluloid imagined they'd found in Gowanus, only to be unwitting wedges for realtors, a racial wrecking ball. A gentrification was the scar left by a dream, Utopia the show which always closed on opening night.²⁴⁶

²⁴⁴ Lethem, *Fortress of Solitude*, 274.

²⁴⁵ Lethem, *Fortress of Solitude*, 79.

²⁴⁶ Lethem, *Fortress of Solitude*, 510.

Dylan's description recalls Lethem's critique of his parent's New Left localism, and his analysis of the problem of scale – what he called the 'viewfinder' – in their conception of community, citizenship, and political action. 'Middle space' captures something of this conflicted, compromised sense of scale: like 'third place', it locates the political between the private and public, an ambiguation that, as we have seen, the concept of civic friendship also risks. But 'middle' is also a useful temporal, as well as spatial, term in analysing the novel's politics. It gestures to *The Fortress of Solitude*'s preoccupation with times of transition – Dean Street on the cusp of gentrification, the 'in-between-time' of adolescence – and so to the way in which the novel looks back to the 1970s as a time of utopian possibility, however provisional and temporary. Like the 'windows of time' in which Mingus and Dylan's friendship exists, middle spaces 'open and close like a glance' in the novel; nevertheless, as Michael Warner writes in his study of 'counterpublics', 'the direction of our glance can constitute our social world'.²⁴⁷ By exploring the potential of the *Bildungsroman* to articulate non-teleological forms of development and progress, and by elongating the 'awkward' time of adolescence, *The Fortress of Solitude* attempts to keep these 'collapsing' middle spaces open a little longer, and to direct and fix our attention toward them, so as to see them anew.

In both *Telegraph Avenue* and *The Fortress of Solitude*, it is finally the novel, not the neighbourhood, in which these utopian middle spaces become most vividly imaginable. Reflecting on his parents' politics, Dylan wonders whether 'Abraham had the better idea, to try and carve the middle space on a daily basis, alone in his room'.²⁴⁸

²⁴⁷ Michael Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics* (New York: Zone Books, 2005), 89.

²⁴⁸ Lethem, *Fortress of Solitude*, 510-511.

Abraham's asceticism cautions that art might only be a renunciation of the political. But Lethem and Chabon also suggest that the middle space of reading might constitute a site of 'postironic' political engagement, a 'place' for the articulation of the collective contemporary feeling I've been calling 'post-utopian utopianism'.²⁴⁹ In Benedict Anderson's conception of the nineteenth-century novel, fiction represents national time as 'empty' and 'homogenous', allowing readers to imagine their 'simultaneity' with other citizens, and so to conceive of themselves as members of a national public sphere.²⁵⁰ These post-postmodern novels instead elaborate a form of what we might call, following Ernst Bloch, 'nonsynchronous time', in which the contemporary 'moment' emerges as fractured and multiple, unevenly steeped in the past. In this way, they gesture to a different kind of civic belonging, one attuned to Blanchot and Nancy's sense of community as ultimately 'unavowable', in which the time of friendship is a Derridean one of retrospect futurity.²⁵¹ 'The nonsynchronous is not synonymous with backwardness', but is rather 'something new that emerges in the articulation and contradictions between different temporalities'.²⁵² Through portrayals of interracial male friendship – that classic trope of nineteenth-century American fiction – these oversized

²⁴⁹ My idea of the 'middle space of reading' is in dialogue with Punday's analysis of *The Fortress of Solitude*. See Daniel Punday, *Writing at the Limit: The Novel in the New Media Ecology* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2012), 232-234. On the 'time of reading' in relation to Chabon's *The Yiddish Policemen's Union*, see Theodore Martin, "The Long Wait: Timely Secrets of the Contemporary Detective Novel", *Novel: A Forum on Fiction*, 45:2 (Fall 2012), pp. 165-183.

²⁵⁰ Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 25.

²⁵¹ See Bloch, "Nonsynchronism and the Obligation to Its Dialectics", *New German Critique*, 11 [German, 1932] (Spring 1977), pp. 22-38. Lethem alludes to Bloch's theory of nonsynchronism in a different context in "Diary", *London Review of Books*, 38:24 (December 15, 2016), pp. 38-39.

²⁵² Steffen Jensen and Finn Stepputat, "Notes on Securitization and Temporality", in Martin Holbraad and Morten Axel Pederson (eds.), *Times of Security: Ethnographies of Fear, Protest and the Future* (New York: Routledge, 2013), pp. 213-222 (222).

neighbourhood novels put pressure upon the competing scales of affiliation and representation that structure the civic imaginary. They plot national stories attuned to the fluxes of local time; they search for the American futurities embedded in the regional histories of Brooklyn and Brokeland.

Conclusion

Greg Marnier, the protagonist of Benjamin Markovits' 2015 novel, *You Don't Have To Live Like This*, has a pretty clear notion of what people really want:

Small-town life, free time. People have this idea that they hate big government. But what they don't like is national government. It's a category mistake. And if you keep things local, if you pool together, if you help each other out, you can live pretty well without chasing the buck.¹

This desire for life lived at the local level leads thirty-something Greg to ditch an unpromising academic career and sign up for 'Start-from-scratch-in-America', a project begun by Robert James, an old friend from Yale with deep pockets and grand political ambitions. Robert's big idea is a 'Groupon model for gentrification', in which investors buy up and rent out vast swaths of dirt-cheap domestic and commercial real estate in Detroit, a city that has suffered from white-flight and federal underfunding since the 1960s, and which was particularly badly hit by the stock market crash of 2008, when much of the novel is set.² Backed by Goldman Sachs, 'Start-from-scratch-in-America' seems a quintessential neoliberal start-up, a 'private-public partnership' aiming to attract a young 'creative class' handpicked on Facebook to revive the Rust Belt city; in fact,

¹ Benjamin Markovits, *You Don't Have to Live Like This* (London: Faber and Faber, 2015), 267.

² Markovits, *You Don't Have to*, 17. On Detroit's post-WWII history, see Thomas Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit* [1996] (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005). On the city's more recent travails, see for example Monica Davey and Mary Williams Walsh, "For Detroit, a Crisis of Bad Decisions and Crossed Fingers", *New York Times*, March 11, 2013, A1.

Detroit witnessed many such ‘regeneration’ projects following the credit crunch.³ Robert acknowledges that for ‘Start-from-scratch-in-America’ to work, ‘somebody would have to get rich off it’, but he isn’t motivated only by profit. Initially, part of the impetus behind the project seems to be Robert’s desire to rekindle something of the feeling of ‘community’ he had at Yale. Like Norman Rush’s *Subtle Bodies, You Don’t Have to Live Like This* is a novel which takes seriously the idea that, as Greg puts it, ‘college friendships can take a lot of explaining’, and that their influence can last a lifetime.⁴ Robert had always ‘cared a lot about secret societies’ as an undergraduate, and it is clear that ‘Start-from-scratch-in-America’ – planned as a series of neighbourhoods that each roughly equate to ‘a midsize college campus’ – is in part imagined as an updated version of collegiate life.⁵

But Robert – like James Rouse, the entrepreneur behind Columbia, Maryland – also sees the project as part of a ‘tradition’ of ‘small-town community’ living that has its origins in ‘the founding of this country’; he earnestly talks of Greg and the other volunteers as belonging to a lineage of ‘pioneers’ reaching back to ‘the pilgrims’ and ‘early settlers’.⁶ His bookshelves – filled with old college editions of ‘*Democracy in America*, *The Republic*, and *Of Mice and Men*’ – give a sense not only of the political and

³ Markovits, *You Don’t Have to*, 55. Greg refers to Richard Florida, the sociologist who popularised the term ‘creative class’ in *The Rise of the Creative Class: And How It’s Transforming Work, Leisure and Everyday Life* (New York: Basic Books, 2002). On Detroit’s post-2008 gentrification, see Peter Moskowitz, *How to Kill a City: Gentrification, Inequality, and the Fight for the Neighborhood* (New York: Hachette, 2017), 35-67.

⁴ Markovits, *You Don’t Have to*, 48, 36, 169.

⁵ Markovits, *You Don’t Have to*, 39.

⁶ Markovits, *You Don’t Have to*, 169, 53.

philosophical genealogy Robert has in mind, but also of the connection between the themes of political community, citizenship, and male friendship that the novel will explore.⁷

Greg's academic specialism is 'American colonial history', and Robert is keen to have his old friend on board to 'take the long view' and to interpret their project in Detroit within a broader historical context.⁸ In Chapter One, we saw that Roth's American Trilogy also took the 'long view' of American democracy, connecting the politics of the 1990s to a series of earlier periods in U.S. history. Reviewers of *You Don't Have To Live Like This* compared the novel's first-person narrative structure to *The Great Gatsby* (1925), a parallel Markovits winks at when Greg – a Yalie like Nick Carraway – describes Robert's grand mansion as 'like something from the 1920s'.⁹ But a more immediate model might be Nathan Zuckerman's role in Roth's novels. In a review of his late novella, *Everyman* (2006), Markovits notes that one of Roth's great themes is 'the growth and decay of big cities' – a concern *You Don't Have To Live Like This* shares – and ventures the unpopular critical opinion that *I Married a Communist* is 'one of Roth's best novels', and the strongest of 'the Zuckerman sequence', because it is most 'driven by a sharp sense, both political and personal, of what matters and what doesn't' – an echo of Roth's

⁷ Markovits, *You Don't Have to*, 33.

⁸ Markovits, *You Don't Have to*, 53.

⁹ Markovits, *You Don't Have to*, 31. See Francesca Wade, "'You Don't Have to Live Like This', by Benjamin Markovits", *Financial Times*, July 24, 2015.

comment that the trilogy explores ‘the joining of the public and the private’.¹⁰ Like Murray Ringold, Greg’s father worked as a ‘union organizer’ – of journalists rather than teachers – and, given Markovits’ admiration for Roth’s novel of Popular Front political culture, it’s not entirely surprising to find a precocious young Greg Marnier reading ‘Sandburg’s life of Lincoln’.¹¹

It is the presence of another president, however, that is most strongly felt in the novel. Obama has an important cameo appearance in *You Don’t Have to Live Like This* and, as Chabon does in *Telegraph Avenue*, Markovits uses the figure of the first black President to highlight issues of race and representation that the rest of the novel will explore further. After speaking at a fundraising event at Robert’s house, Obama spots a basketball hoop over the garage door and organises a game of three-on-three out on the driveway. Basketball is the focus of Markovits’ semi-autobiographical novel, *Playing Days* (2010) – based on his experience playing professionally for a season in Germany – and sport is the subject of much of his journalism.¹² In a profile piece on NBA All-Star legend LeBron James, Markovits reflects that ‘being an athlete teaches you pretty quickly where you belong in the scale of things’ but, in imagining the larger-than-life Obama hustling on the backyard basketball court, *You Don’t Have To Live Like This* subtly plays

¹⁰ Benjamin Markovits, “A morality story”, *Times Literary Supplement*, May 5, 2006, pp. 21-22 (21); David Remnick, “Philip Roth at 70” [Interview], Dir. Deborah Lee, *BBC4* (May 7, 2003). Following Roth’s death, Markovits paid tribute to him in “The Great American Novelist: Philip Roth 1933-2018”, *Times Literary Supplement*, June 1, 2018, p. 17.

¹¹ Markovits, *You Don’t Have to*, 3, 2.

¹² Markovits briefly wrote a Sports column for the *New Statesman*. See, for example, “Benjamin Markovits misses a hoop”, *New Statesman*, May 22, 2006.

with the understandings of scale.¹³ Greg is charged with guarding the President and is enjoying the game before he realises that his teammate Robert is ‘pissed off’. ‘Maybe’, he speculates, ‘it was a racial thing’:

Robert played varsity basketball for Claremont High. They had one of those teams where the uniforms don’t show your name. The way Robert was brought up, you played hard and you made the extra pass [...] And you didn’t talk. But Obama liked to run his mouth.¹⁴

On the confines of the court, then, the ‘racial thing’ dividing Obama and white liberal Ivy League supporters like Robert becomes ambiguously accentuated, and their game seems to refract the national debate about race that Obama’s election heralded.¹⁵ Like boxing and dancing in *The Human Stain*, or the summer-long games of ‘skully’ on Dean Street in *The Fortress of Solitude*, basketball becomes an evocative metaphor in *You Don’t Have to Live Like This*, capturing the distinctly male and racially-charged mix of rough-and-tumble intimacy and edgy competitiveness that defines personal relations in the novel not only between the hoops, but out on the streets of Detroit.

¹³ Benjamin Markovits, “Just Undo It: The LeBron James Profile That Nike Killed”, *Deadspin*, July 10, 2014. In *Playing Days*, the narrator Ben describes training with wunder-kid Karl: ‘He seemed to moving according to a different scale’. *Playing Days* (London: Faber and Faber, 2005), 28.

¹⁴ Markovits, *You Don’t Have to*, 189.

¹⁵ Markovits reflects on the role of basketball in African-American culture in “The Colours of Sport”, *New Left Review*, 22 (July/August, 2003), pp.151-160. He also explores Obama’s relationship with the game in “A new global game?”, *New Statesman*, January 15, 2009, p. 28.

Most of those moving to New Jamestown – as the neighbourhoods of the ‘Start-from-scratch-in-America’ enclave quickly become known – are white.¹⁶ Like the mostly middle-class back-to-the-city ‘pioneers’ of the 1960s and 1970s portrayed in *The Fortress of Solitude*, the ‘Groupon settlers’ are a motley mix of ‘potheads and Marxists’, as well as a few ‘Tea Party types’ with a ‘libertarian streak’.¹⁷ As in Lethem’s novel, the confrontation between the new arrivals and the existing black working-class population is focalised through a central interracial male friendship. Like Nathan Zuckerman, Greg is something of a ‘sucker for manly intimacy’.¹⁸ ‘The thing about you’, Robert tells him, ‘is that you’re the kind of guy who falls in love with guys, I don’t mean like a gay thing, but you get ideas about them and you can’t see straight’.¹⁹ Nolan Smith – a gruff would-be artist and single father who lives down the street – is one of the men in the novel Greg gets ‘ideas about’, although their relationship is always fraught. ‘You like me’, Nolan says to him, ‘you’re kind of scared of me, but you still think you’re smarter than me because I’m black’.²⁰ Nevertheless, Nolan does open up to Greg about his art and particularly his love for music, which was fostered as a kid by spending time at ‘Jez’s place’:

There used to be a record shop on Charlevoix, run by a white guy named Jez Lansky, who’s been at the corner since the neighborhood was about a quarter

¹⁶ Jamestown, Virginia was the first permanent English settlement in the Americas, established in 1607.

¹⁷ Markovits, *You Don’t Have to*, 229, 127.

¹⁸ Roth, *I Married a Communist*, 233.

¹⁹ Markovits, *You Don’t Have to*, 227.

²⁰ Markovits, *You Don’t Have to*, 144.

Polish. Probably he'd have got robbed out of business or beaten up if people didn't like his records. But he played a lot of good music [...] Able John and Billy Eckstine, Art Blakey and Horace Silver and Clifford Brown. Nolan's dad used to say, "Jez is all right, you can hang out at Jez's".²¹

Jez's is the kind of corner store utopia imagined in *Smoke* and *Telegraph Avenue*, a racially-mixed all-male 'third place' infused with black culture. But the kinds of hangouts being started up by the white New Jamestown gentrifiers do not match this model: 'you didn't see many black faces at Joe Silver's coffeehouse', Greg admits, noting that 'most of the old residents kept to themselves'.²²

Unlike the mixed neighbourhoods of Brooklyn and Brokeland imagined by Auster, Chabon, and Lethem, New Jamestown is also an experiment in Silicon Valley-style social engineering – an attempt, as the Zuckerberg-esque software developer Nathan Zwecker puts it, to 'take a virtual community and make it real, give it real estate, fill it with people'.²³ Zwecker's task is to augment the process of gentrification taking place on the streets of Detroit with an 'E-change' online platform that functions as a local auction site for goods and services, with a built-in ranking system in which users are rated for their friendliness and helpfulness, but also monitored for inappropriate behaviour. As Greg's friend Steve Zipp explains, users are marked on whether they 'show up on time, can they keep up their end of the conversation [...] Do they spend all their time checking

²¹ Markovits, *You Don't Have to*, 141.

²² Markovits, *You Don't Have to*, 151.

²³ Markovits, *You Don't Have to*, 153. In *Telegraph Avenue*, Archy resolves that it is 'time to get real', and starts 'selling real estate' (617; emphasis in original).

their phones?'. Greg points out that Steve checks his phone 'constantly' when they're together. 'That's because you're a real friend', Steve replies, 'I would never behave that way with a virtual friend. It kills your rating'.²⁴ Like Auster then, Markovits is interested in the indeterminacy between genuine and counterfeit friendship; and like Chabon in his portrayal of Julie and Titus' friendship moving into the online Marvel Comics Universe, Markovits here explores how the virtual world bleeds into reality, and considers the effects on our social relations. In this regard, New Jamestown's E-change recalls Dave Eggers' portrayal of a Google-esque tech giant in *The Circle* (2013), a novel that also explores the dystopian tenor of some of Silicon Valley's grand projects of interconnectedness, and similarly points to the way 'real' friendship is distorted and devalued in an age of Facebook friends.²⁵

Greg, however, is something of a 'Luddite', and keeps off the E-change because his real life is 'filling out nicely'.²⁶ In fact, he becomes one of the unlikely success stories of New Jamestown when he begins teaching at the local school and dating Gloria, a black teacher. But Greg's attempts to enter into 'new relations with people', and especially black people, are met with scepticism from some of those around him.²⁷ Tony – a combative Italian-American and native Detroiter – warns him:

²⁴ Markovits, *You Don't Have to*, 154-155.

²⁵ On this aspect of *The Circle*, see Betsy Morais, "Sharing is Caring is Sharing", *The New Yorker*, October 30, 2013.

²⁶ Markovits, *You Don't Have to*, 155.

²⁷ Markovits, *You Don't Have to*, 89.

Don't expect me to say that some of my best friends are black. My best friends *aren't* black [...] I know some brothers, and like a few, too, but there's a point beyond which I don't really understand or trust them, and to be honest, the black guys I respect are the ones who feel the same about me.²⁸

When he comes to visit, Greg's brother Brad – a high-flying businessman who still 'dresses like a frat boy on spring break' – also questions whether the New Jamestown vision of small-town integrated community is really what people aspire to.²⁹ 'You're kidding yourself', he says to Greg, 'if you think that Americans want to help each other out. That's not what I pay my taxes for. I pay my taxes so that other people are not my problem'.³⁰ Brad sounds a little like Goldstine, the factory boss in *I Married a Communist*, and he espouses a conception of negative liberty similar to that which I explored in my Introduction, wherein the bonds of citizenship and political community are attenuated in the name of protecting personal freedom. Greg's opposing belief in positive liberty is tested when two high-profile and racialised crimes spark violent protests in the city. Soon, as a *Time* magazine article on New Jamestown's troubles reports, the 'Utopian Vision Faces Real-world Politics and Problems'.³¹ The second crime involves Tony and Nolan, embroiling them and Greg in a bitter legal wrangle. Greg clings to 'this idea, maybe it was a stupid idea, that Tony and Nolan could work out their

²⁸ Markovits, *You Don't Have to*, 63.

²⁹ Markovits, *You Don't Have to*, 258.

³⁰ Markovits, *You Don't Have to*, 268.

³¹ Markovits, *You Don't Have to*, 336.

differences personally, and leave the law out of it'.³² But his attempts at local democracy and the negotiation of justice between friends is quickly engulfed by a tide of court proceedings and lawyer meetings. Reflecting on his experience of the law, Greg notes that 'you realise pretty quickly that you are in the hands of massive but at the same time small-scale forces'.³³ The rest of the novel explores how the scales of the national and local intersect in New Jamestown, and how easy it is to make a 'category mistake' between the two when you're trying to effect broad political change through your personal relationships.

Greg is no paragon of virtue, however, nor simply a naive liberal caught in the system. One of the defining ambiguities of the novel is whether, as Markovits note in an interview, Greg is part of 'the problem or the solution'.³⁴ Like Dylan in *The Fortress of Solitude*, Greg is 'a little bit off about race', and often his attitude to black culture isn't friendly but appropriative.³⁵ When he starts dating Gloria, for example, he begins 'reading a lot of African-American literature' and is 'a little ashamed' that he develops a 'taste for it'.³⁶ In these moments, Markovits points to the problems of addressing race in fiction, and especially the difficulties of white authors writing about black characters – something that Roth, Auster, Chabon, and Lethem all attempt. He explores these tensions further in an article published shortly after *You Don't Have To Live Like This*, in which he

³² Markovits, *You Don't Have to*, 316.

³³ Markovits, *You Don't Have to*, 334.

³⁴ Alan Bett, "Benjamin Markovits: Class War in Rust Belt America", *The Skinny*, September 12, 2016.

³⁵ Bett, "Benjamin Markovits".

³⁶ Markovits, *You Don't Have to*, 222.

revisits *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* in light of contemporary debates about ‘transracial’ identity.³⁷ Markovits approvingly quotes Norman Mailer’s observation – made in 1984 on the 100th anniversary of the publication of Twain’s classic – that ‘Riding the current of [*Huckleberry Finn*], we are back in that happy time when the love affair [between whites and blacks] was new and all seemed possible’.³⁸ This sounds a lot like Leslie Fiedler’s earlier judgment of Huck and Jim’s friendship, and Markovits surveys the contemporary literary scene for updated portrayals of this archetypal interracial ‘love affair’. He discusses Nathan and Coleman’s relationship in *The Human Stain* before noting how ‘Jonathan Lethem in *The Fortress of Solitude* and Michael Chabon in *Telegraph Avenue* have not only written about black characters (from a white point of view) but adopted their voices as well’.³⁹ Markovits here highlights how these authors – and we could add Auster to the list – have self-consciously positioned themselves as part of a genealogy of American fiction reaching back to the nineteenth-century, and in so doing also aligns his own work with this tradition.

Just as Chabon revisited his childhood in Columbia, Maryland to write about race relations in Oakland, Markovits reflects on his very different ‘experience of that love affair’ growing up in Texas and being bused to a majority black school where he had ‘no

³⁷ Benjamin Markovits, “The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn: how to write about race in the US”, *The Guardian*, August 1, 2015.

³⁸ Markovits, “The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn”. See Norman Mailer, “Huckleberry Finn, Alive at 100”, *New York Times*, December 9, 1984.

³⁹ Markovits, “The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn”. Markovits has reviewed two of Chabon’s novels. See “A crack in the ordinary”, *Times Literary Supplement*, November 15, 2002, p. 23; “The parrot holds the key”, *The Telegraph*, February 20, 2005.

black friends' – a backstory he also gives to Greg.⁴⁰ Markovits seems to have been particularly attuned to the question of race not only because of the demographics of his home town, but because his own ethnic identity seemed to him curiously fluid growing up. The son of a Jewish-American father and a Protestant, German-born mother, Markovits reflects elsewhere that his 'Jewishness wasn't a simple matter growing up' and that, while he felt 'very Jewish in Texas', he now usually identifies as 'half-Jewish'.⁴¹ In the Huck Finn essay, he notes that in *The Human Stain*, Roth is invested in the question of whether 'the Jewish experience and the black experience are translatable into each other'. Although this issue isn't explicitly raised in *You Don't Have to Live Like This* – Greg isn't Jewish – Markovits' approach to the troubled 'love affair' between blacks and whites follows a similar pattern to that of the black-Jewish friendships in the works by Roth, Auster, Chabon, and Lethem discussed in previous chapters, in which male friendship becomes a prism through which to explore both the solidarities and the tensions – racialised or otherwise – underwriting American society more broadly.⁴²

For all these authors, in fact, interracial male friendship seems most intensely to manifest both the promise and the limitations of the politics of male friendship in general. We have seen that the negotiation of intimacy between two men figures and maps the possibilities for broader forms of political association, and that these friendships therefore

⁴⁰ See Markovits, *You Don't Have to Live Like This*, 222.

⁴¹ Markovits, "The allegiance that I can't quite pledge", *New Statesman*, November 17, 2003, p. 26. In *Playing Days*, the narrator Ben shares Markovits' background, and similarly says that his 'relationship to Jewishness has never been straightforward' (64).

⁴² There are other Jewish characters in *You Don't Have to Live Like This*, however, including Jack Rosen, who describes his family as 'settlers' in New Jamestown, and compares his pioneering relocation from New Jersey to that of 'boys I knew from synagogue in Port Jervis' who 'moved to Katzin', an Israeli settlement in the Golan Heights (127).

focalise a wider concern with questions of citizenship and community. We have also seen that linking friendship to these broader issues is something that not only novelists, but political philosophers and theorists were also attempting in this period. Troubling the scales of the liberal imaginary, the interstitiality of friendship allows these authors to query how the public and the private sphere relate to and inform one another – both in reality and in our utopian political fantasies – and to probe the ‘category mistakes’ of the national and the local, the personal and the political, that shape and distort American life.

In the Huck Finn essay, Markovits observes that ‘the great failure of the American novel is that it has not adequately addressed the diversity of the American experience for fear of getting *the other* wrong’. One insight that Markovits seems to glean from his reading of Roth’s American Trilogy is that getting other people wrong is an inevitability, that life is an extended schooling in our shared ignorance of one another, and that if this is a source of fear that risks atomising us, it might also be a source of hope that brings us together. It can lead, for example, to the kind of open-ended, late-in-life conversation between Nathan and Murray that structures *I Married a Communist*, in which nothing is off the table, and in which each man helps the other in pulling together the pieces of the past. Or it can lead to the fraught, potentially life-changing exchanges that crisscross Paul Auster’s fiction, in which fear and hope often intermingle in the ambiguous gifts that are the currency of friendship in his work. Or it can result in the interracial ‘love affairs’ at the centre of Chabon and Lethem’s neighbourhood novels, where the fantasies and frustrations of integration are shown in their tangled historical context.

In *Subtle Bodies*, Ned remembers how he and his college buddies had hoped to ‘somehow generaliz[e] their friendship’ into a broader politics.⁴³ Over the course of this thesis, I have demonstrated the longevity and tenacity of this hope, both in political philosophy and in the American novel. For the authors I have discussed, male friendship continues to be a figure through which they can imagine and interrogate the forms of intersubjectivity and alliance that shape a life and a political community, to reveal that, ultimately, we are, to recall Greg’s phrase, ‘in the hands of massive but at the same time small-scale forces’. Beginning with portrayals of friendship between two men, these novels plot larger stories of affinity and solidarity that reach back into American history and out to a broader context; listening to the intimate talk of friends, they bring readers into a national conversation about what connects and divides us as members of a community and as citizens. In the always-closing ‘middle space’ of the novel-form, and through the strange intimacy that develops between writers and readers, these contemporary fictions uncover the imaginative and political possibilities of reordering the world with, in Ned’s words, ‘friendship at the core of everything’.

⁴³ Norman Rush, *Subtle Bodies* (New York: Knopf, 2013), 12.

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