Modernism's Legacies: Forms, Feelings, and Figures

Shelby Sleevi

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LOYOLA UNIVERSITY CHICAGO

MODERNISM’S LEGACIES:
FORMS, FEELINGS, AND FIGURES

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SHELBY R. SLEEVI
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For my family.
The past no longer belongs only to those who once lived in it; the past belongs to those who claim it, and are willing to explore it, and to infuse it with meaning for those alive today. The past belongs to us, because we are the ones who need it.

—Margaret Atwood, “In Search of Alias Grace: On Writing Canadian Historical Fiction”
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ABSTRACT

My dissertation, entitled “Modernism’s Legacies: Forms, Feelings, and Figures,”
explores American modernism’s legacies within contemporary fiction, not only as a set of aesthetic trends but also as a looming and influential mythos. Whether the practices and concerns of early twentieth-century literary modernism are evoked through obvious allusion, explicit reference, or strong resonance on the level of narrative, the contemporary texts in my discussion together attest to modernism’s continued influence on and relevance for our current era. Tracing the legacies of William Faulkner, Gertrude Stein, Djuna Barnes, and Vladimir Nabokov in the contemporary fictions of Edward P. Jones, Julie Otsuka, George Saunders, W. G. Sebald, and Aleksandar Hemon, my study reveals the myriad ways that contemporary fictions engage their modernist precursors and considers the historical, sociopolitical, and ethical implications of those engagements. Based on my textual analyses, I argue that modernism’s wide-ranging contemporary afterlives call for an expansion of the concept of “metamodernism” as proposed by David James and Urmila Seshagiri, one that allows for a more capacious understanding of how modernism persists into the literature of the late-twentieth and early-twenty-first centuries. Drawing on narratology as a methodology to precisely detail the effects of certain narrative strategies, this dissertation demonstrates how modernist techniques and approaches are redeployed in contemporary fiction to exploit, or expose, their social, political, and ethical imperatives.
INTRODUCTION

MODERNISM’S LEGACIES

This dissertation examines the legacies of literary modernism in contemporary fictional texts. Modernism lives on in the fiction of more recent decades as both a set of aesthetic practices and a looming and influential mythos, precedents that contemporary authors variously revere, redeploy, and revise in their own fictional works. In the chapters that follow, I read a range of contemporary texts alongside their modernist precursors to reveal the complexities of the relationships between them: how contemporary fiction extends, nuances, and reconfigures well-known modernist aesthetics; how modernism is revisited as a cultural moment in order to expand our understanding of the individuals who inhabited it; how modernist influences can be both embraced and challenged within the same contemporary works; and how recent remobilizations of modernism’s practices, settings, and concerns draw sociopolitical correlations between the modernist period and our own while also confronting that earlier tradition’s inequities. Tracing the legacies of William Faulkner, Gertrude Stein, Djuna Barnes, and Vladimir Nabokov in the contemporary fictions of Edward P. Jones, Julie Otsuka, George Saunders, and W. G. Sebald and Aleksandar Hemon, respectively, this study contributes to our understanding of modernism’s continued presence in more recent fiction through an expansion of the formal, thematic, and literary-historical legacies considered under that rubric. Based on the American modernist legacies analyzed here, I argue that the contemporary texts I bring together treat their
pasts—both literary and historical—not only as entities to be revisited and remobilized, but also to be scrutinized and supplemented in an ongoing way.

In discussing the resemblances between modernist texts and the fictions produced after them, I add to a growing body of twenty-first century scholarship that explores these relationships and their larger implications. In “The Legacies of Modernism,” a contribution to *The Cambridge Companion to the Modernist Novel* (2007), Laura Marcus points out that “The question of the legacies of modernist fiction for the generations of writers that followed could lead us in a number of different directions” (82). Marcus’s own discussion takes her in the direction of modernism’s “direct, rather than diffuse, influences” through a survey of “the ways in which recent and contemporary novelists (including Paul Auster, Alan Hollinghurst, Don DeLillo, Ian McEwan, Salman Rushdie, Jeanette Winterson, Zadie Smith, Michael Cunningham and Colm Tóibín) are engaging with modernist fiction and its creators” (82). Highlighting such modernist practices as the “one-day” novel structure in Woolf and Joyce (85), the broad range of aesthetic and linguistic registers brought together within Joyce’s fiction, and the destabilization of rigid sexual identities in the works of Eliot, Woolf, Joyce, and Barnes, Marcus writes that the contemporary novelists who continue these trends “raise complex issues of reinscription and of ways of negotiating literary legacies” (85). These engagements with the legacies of modernism extend to contemporary works that include “fictional-biographical depictions” of modernist authors (96)—such as Michael Cunningham’s representation of Woolf in *The Hours* (2002) and Colm Tóibín’s depiction of Henry James in *The Master* (2004)—as well as what Marcus describes as “some very interesting turns by contemporary novelists to modernist texts—in particular those of James, Forster, Lawrence and Woolf—as spaces in and through which
questions of art, life and value can be reposed and reconfigured” (94). The contemporary novels in Marcus’s discussion explore “questions of proximity and distance” (95) regarding their modernist influences, undercutting the long-standing notion of a “radical break” between modernist literature and what we’ve come to call postmodernist literature while revealing that they are “as concerned with dramatizing their distance from their modernist precursors as with their proximity” (85). Altogether, Marcus argues, these contemporary “returns” to modernist fiction suggest “that the interplay of modernist knowledge and obliquity continues to play a powerful role in shaping the fiction of the present” (96), an assertion to which my project lends further support. Marcus’s chapter raises many of the issues that inspire my own study, in particular the question of how contemporary authors “negotiate” the legacies of the modernisms that influence and shape them—aesthetically, ethically, and otherwise.

Modernist fiction’s influence on the literature that followed it is explored at greater length in The Legacies of Modernism: Historicising Postwar and Contemporary Fiction (2012), a collection of essays edited by David James that engages “with the stylistic, thematic and political afterlives of the formal and intellectual ambitions of literary modernism” (1). As James writes in his introduction, the collection “offers a series of disciplinary interventions concerning how we compare apparently discrete phases of literary history,” interventions that together suggest that “we can legitimately read the modernist period itself via models of continuity and adaptation (rather than demise) after mid century” (2-3). This understanding of later twentieth-century literature in terms of continuity with modernism—rather than a hard break with or complete rejection of it—remains “somewhat under-theorised” (3), James explains, in part due to the same oversimplified narrative of progression Marcus indicates above wherein modernist
approaches “are merely displaced or satirised by postmodern fiction” (4). The book’s contributions seek to provide a more nuanced version of this shift in literary history, one that pays attention to, among other elements, “the implications of [modernism’s] correspondence both with the histories of decolonisation and with the contemporary geopolitical challenges of globalisation” (2). In each of the collection’s four parts, contributors who offer larger disciplinary and theoretical interventions are featured alongside “more textually focused ‘case studies’, insofar as they closely read modernist influences either in particular works or comparatively in two or more writers” (9). In essays ranging from Randall Stevenson’s investigation of “forms of nostalgia” in the WWII-era novels of writers like Evelyn Waugh and Malcolm Lowry (9), to Peter Preston’s discussion of the “uncomfortable and ethically compromising attraction” to D. H. Lawrence’s style in the work of A. S. Byatt (14), to Rebecca L. Walkowitz’s comparison of Virginia Woolf and J. M. Coetzee’s literary attempts “to imagine transnational forms of community and accountability” (16), The Legacies of Modernism provides a multifaceted consideration of how the history of postwar Anglophone fiction can be understood by, as James puts it, “relating its innovations to those of early twentieth-century writing” (1). Through these varied elucidations of how writers since modernism have contended with the influence of that earlier movement, James claims that we can “alter the axis of debates not only about the way we pinpoint transitions in fiction’s development from mid century to the present day, but also about how the very nature of those transitions can only fully be understood as dialogues with, rather than departures from, their modernist past” (6). My own analyses fall more in line with the “case studies” in The Legacies of Modernism than its larger disciplinary debates, as I, too, examine contemporary texts alongside those I have identified as their modernist
predecessors. But in attending closely to the redeployments of particular narrative techniques, my textual comparisons themselves lend further theorization to James’s overarching interest in how recent texts continue modernist practices instead of performing a rupture with them, as the contemporary authors I discuss utilize modernist strategies to make their own literary contributions even as they extend and revise those strategies in the process.

More recently in “Metamodernism: Narratives of Continuity and Revolution” (PMLA, 2014), an article that addresses the “surprisingly persistent legacy” of the modernist “mythos” in contemporary literature (87), James and his co-author Urmila Seshagiri coin the term “metamodernism” to refer to fictions by contemporary authors that “place a conception of modernism as revolution at the heart of their fictions, styling their twenty-first century literary innovations as explicit engagements with the innovations of early-twentieth century writing” (87). As the authors explain, metamodernist literature enacts these engagements in a variety of different ways:

It pays tribute to modernist style (as in the writing of Allan Hollinghurst, Kazuo Ishiguro, Michael Ondaatje, Zadie Smith, Jeanette Winterson); it inhabits the consciousness of individual modernist writers (Virginia Woolf in Michael Cunningham’s The Hours [1998], Henry James in Colm Tóibín’s The Master [2004], Henry James and Joseph Conrad in Cynthia Ozick’s Dictation: A Quartet [2008]); and it details modernism’s sociopolitical, historical, and philosophical contexts (Bruce Duffy’s The World As I Found It [1987], Monique Truong’s The Book of Salt [2004], Pat Barker’s Life Class [2007]). And if early-twentieth-century modernism takes center stage in fiction that aggressively examines the very idea and ethos of modernist artistry (McEwan’s Atonement and Coetzee’s Youth), it plays an equally formative role as an absent or vanishing referent in novels where overt influences are less visible (Barnes’s The Sense of an Ending [2011], Ali Smith’s There but for The [2011], Self’s Umbrella [2012]). (93)

Whether “shaped by an aesthetics of discontinuity, nonlinearity, interiority, and chronological play” or less experimental but “plotted around the very creation and reception of modern art and letters,” the metamodernist fictions on which James and Seshagiri focus display “inventive, self-
conscious relationships with modernist literature” that “extend, reanimate, and repudiate” its approaches and concerns (88-89). In the article’s one extended consideration of a contemporary writer whose work they deem metamodernist, James and Seshagiri discuss the fiction of Tom McCarthy: rather than drawing on “the interiority, obliquity, and density of James or Faulkner,” they explain, “McCarthy has advanced the kind of uncomfortable externalism advocated by Wyndham Lewis” (94). By taking as their case study a novelist who focuses on the “external ‘shells’” of characters instead of remobilizing “the legacy of literary impressionism” (94), James and Seshagiri illustrate the wide range of texts and practices they include within the conceptual category of metamodernist fiction. Still, the authors do draw certain limits as they theorize this contemporary movement, particularly in their defense of understanding modernism itself as “historically conditioned and culturally specific clusters of artistic achievements between the late nineteenth and mid–twentieth centuries” (88). In James and Seshagiri’s view, “We dull modernism’s particular brilliance when we dissolve it into a collective of techniques comparable with what other writers have practiced at other points in history,” potentially depriving modernist works of “the formal and temporal inventiveness unique to their era” (92). Retaining modernism as a distinct literary period, James and Seshagiri argue, is not a hindrance but a boon to the project of mapping metamodernism, as it enables us to more precisely chart “the myriad ways that much twenty-first-century fiction consciously engages modernism through the inheritance of formal principles and ethicopolitical imperatives that are recalibrated in the context of new social or philosophical concerns” (91-92). James and Seshagiri’s article provides a springboard for my own study, as I intend to broaden the selection of metamodernist texts and methods under
consideration, even as I focus more narrowly and meticulously on fictions that engage a particular set of legacies from within the American modernist tradition.

These recent critical interventions, regardless of how their starting points and emphases may vary, together show that the study of modernism’s afterlives comprises a prominent branch of contemporary scholarship. And in each of the scholarly contributions above, the authors gesture toward the need for further work on the subject: Marcus writes that there is still “much new work to be undertaken” (82), James cautions that *The Legacies of Modernism’s* contributions are “rich but by no means exhaustive” (James 1), and James and Seshagiri point out that the complexity of modernism’s “appeal for the ambitions of twenty-first-century novelists” remains “undertheorized” (James and Seshagiri 88). In this project, I take up these invitations to add to the conversation surrounding contemporary engagements with modernism, building on and expanding the existing scholarship in several ways. Although my chapters will be closer to the “case studies” presented in *The Legacies of Modernism* than its more theoretical chapters, as I have said, my analyses nonetheless point to larger critical issues and concerns throughout; in this way, I aim to strike the same balance James’s collection does between “engaging with the implications for the discipline of historicizing postwar narrative via its modernist inheritance” and “bringing into focus what’s formally inventive about writers from recent years through the lens of tradition” (James 9). However, I depart from the content of *The Legacies of Modernism*, as well as the approaches of Marcus and James and Seshagiri, in terms of the selection of modernist authors in my discussion. While a majority of the modernists whose influences are discussed by the aforementioned critics come from the British Isles—among them Woolf, Joyce, and Lawrence—I focus exclusively on the legacies of American modernist authors
(and in Nabokov’s case, an émigré author who composed some of his most well-known texts during his time in America). By examining the literary influences of Faulkner, Stein, Barnes, and Nabokov at work in the fictions of the past thirty years, my project broadens the “literary–geographical scope and selection” of texts under consideration (James 16-17) and highlights what makes American modernisms—and their legacies—distinct from their counterparts across the globe. As my readings will show, this narrowed focus on the texts of American modernists reveals how certain sociopolitical and ethical issues broached in those texts, especially those related to race, class, gender, sexuality, and national identity, remain of vital significance in American culture and literary production today.¹

My overall approach falls very much in line with that of James and Seshagiri, as the following chapters aim to shed light on what the authors ask at the onset of their article: “What artistic issues emerge when innovators today open up alternative futures for fiction through engagements with their modernist past? In turn, what fresh light does today’s writing cast on modernism’s own generative moment, its always vexed beginnings, middles, and ends?” (88). In order to address both of these questions and appreciate the nuance of the two literary periods they indicate, I balance my analysis for the most part between the modernist and contemporary narratives in each chapter. I find “metamodernism” to be an apt categorization for the textual relationships I draw out in my discussion, although I do adjust the parameters of the term as James and Seshagiri use it. In their article, James and Seshagiri repeatedly use words like “explicit” (87) and “conscious” (88, 92) to describe the nature of the engagements with

¹ In this way, the modernist authors in my study can be thought of as a version of what Michel Foucault terms “founders of discursivity” (“What is an Author?”, 1977, p. 225), insofar as they produced “characteristic signs, figures, relationships, and structures” (226) that made possible the experimental metamodernist fictions that followed them.
modernism they discuss, and although these descriptors apply readily to the contemporary fictions discussed in my first and fourth chapters, the idea of “conscious” or “intentional” engagement is not essential to my exploration of metamodernism overall. Indeed, James and Seshagiri themselves seem to waver on this qualification when they write that contemporary engagements with modernism can be “implicit or explicit” (93), and in their comparison of the textual strategies of McCarthy and Lewis, the authors never make the claim that McCarthy’s is an active, explicit engagement with his literary ancestor (94-95). I also bend James and Seshagiri’s definition slightly by expanding the temporal range from which my modernist texts are drawn. Although I agree that modernism should be regarded as “an era, an aesthetic, and an archive that originated in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries” (James and Seshagiri 88), I extend my discussion of modernist methods beyond “the decades between 1890 and 1940” (91) to consider Nabokov’s late-modernist aesthetics in the 1950s and 60s and how contemporary fiction remobilizes and responds to them. Thus, my investigations of the contemporary resurgence of modernist-era literature’s forms and thematic entanglements broadens the scope of James and Seshagiri’s metamodernism in various ways, while still “reassessing modernism as a seismic event for narrative form as well as an epochal episode for modern culture” (James and Seshagiri 94).

My project views modernism as a matrix of styles, ideologies, and subjects rather than a monolithic entity, and acknowledges that metamodernist literature is a similarly capacious category. To do justice to the breadth of aesthetic practices considered in both periods, I make use of concepts and terminology from the field of narrative theory throughout, drawing on the contributions of such theorists as Gérard Genette, James Phelan, and Brian Richardson. My
attention to narrative form aligns with James and Seshagiri’s observation that, “if modernist studies has in recent years partly marginalized formalism while privileging historicism,” the study of metamodernist fiction “offers a welcome opportunity to revisit the field’s current methodological preoccupations” (89). Importantly, however, I adopt a pragmatic approach to narrative theory in my analyses, one that makes use of its valuable contributions without getting caught up in some of the pitfalls noted by critics of classical narratology: the excessive proliferation of new terminology, a scope too insularly focused on existing debates among narratologists, and a lack of engagement with the cultural and other contexts out of which different narratives emerge. Although I occasionally present new perspectives and coinages during the course of my chapters, the narratological elements of my project work in service of its larger focus on understanding the multifaceted relationships between specific contemporary fictions and their modernist antecedents. The experimental texts in my discussion require precise, even molecular examination in order to assess and appreciate their individual narrative dynamics and intertextual correlations, a task for which I find the tools of narrative theory to be particularly well-suited. But each narrative’s textual strategies must always be considered in light of its unique sociohistorical circumstances, and to be sure, the entwinement of the two produces some of this project’s most illuminating revelations: about history, human experience, and the abilities and limitations of narrative as a means of relating them. Like the contributors to The Legacies of Modernism, then, I explore not just the methodologies but “the politics of modernist aesthetics in terms of the work they do – and might still do – for fiction today” (James 10). Rather than separating narrative techniques from the social, political, and ethical engagements

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2 Such as the “speculative prolepses” proposed in Chapter One, for example.
they enact and invite, I foreground the reciprocities between them—the ways in which they are always already intertwined. Demonstrating the potential for even classical narratologies to operate within more contextually-mindful analyses—and indeed, to bolster those analyses—is, thus, another of this project’s contributions, upholding the value of narrative theory as a resource for parsing the methodologies and effects of formally experimental texts.

The trajectory of the legacies I trace here is indicated by the tripartite subtitle “Forms, Feelings, and Figures,” although these emphases overlap throughout. Chapters One and Two compare the use of two narrative practices as outlined by Genette—“narrative anachronies” and “iterative narration,” respectively—the first within Faulkner’s novels and Edward P. Jones’s *The Known World* (2003) and the second in Stein’s *Three Lives* (1909) and Julie Otsuka’s *The Buddha in the Attic* (2011). In both of these opening chapters, the modernist narrative strategies under examination are redeployed by Jones and Otsuka in ways that foreground perspectives and experiences distinct from those presented by their modernist predecessors. While Chapter Three also highlights a shared formal phenomenon in Barnes’s *Nightwood* (1936) and George Saunders’s *Lincoln in the Bardo* (2017), the “narrative melancholia” on which I focus is a facet of characters’ experiences of marginal status—the feelings that accompany and generate a particular modernist form. In Chapter Four, I consider how Nabokov has been incorporated into W. G. Sebald’s *The Emigrants* (1992) and Aleksandar Hemon’s *The Lazarus Project* (2008) as a set of aesthetic practices and an authorial figure emblematic of late-modernism, a legacy both authors actively evoke but also push back against. Each of these contemporary texts, therefore, performs a metamodernist relationship that “incorporates and adapts, reactivates and complicates the aesthetic prerogatives of [the] earlier cultural moment” that was modernism (James and
Seshagiri 93). As I will demonstrate, the contemporary fictions of Jones, Otsuka, Saunders, Sebald, and Hemon engage history in general and the modernist tradition in particular as archives they can draw from and reactivate but also revise and supplement, returning to modernist innovations and thematics while simultaneously uncovering additional perspectives, problems, and possibilities. Whether they are set as historical novels (as in the fictions of Jones, Otsuka, and Saunders) or dramatize the efforts of present-day individuals to retrieve and narrativize historical events (as in the texts of Sebald and Hemon), I argue that the metamodernist narratives this dissertation groups together all evidence a contemporary impulse to revisit distinctly American pasts and literary practices. At the same time that these fictions offer correctives to modernist inequities and oversights—often on behalf of identities and experiences excluded or only partially represented by that earlier tradition—they invite a rethinking of our own cultural moment as well, in particular the assumption that we have progressed beyond the social, political, and ethical concerns of the past.
CHAPTER ONE

NARRATIVE ANACHRONIES IN WILLIAM FAULKNER AND EDWARD P. JONES

In the final pages of Edward P. Jones’s Pulitzer prize-winning *The Known World* (2003), the reader encounters a letter addressed to “My Dearest and Most Loved Sister”—one of the novel’s main characters, Caldonia Townsend—from her brother Calvin, who has been largely absent from a majority of the novel’s pages. In his letter, Calvin describes to his sister an “enormous wall hanging” displayed in a hotel dining room in Washington, D.C., a curious piece that is “part tapestry, part painting, and part clay structure—all in one exquisite Creation” (Jones 384). As Calvin explains, the artwork is “a map of life made with every kind of art man has ever thought to represent himself,” though the word “map,” Calvin insists, fails to encapsulate the essence of the project (384). This strange and “wondrous thing” (384), we learn in Calvin’s letter, depicts the fictional county of Manchester, Virginia—where the events of Jones’s novel take place—as rendered by an escaped slave from the Townsend plantation, Alice Night. Together with another map that shows the Townsend plantation and all of its past and present residents, Alice’s art renders visually the variety of people and places we have come to know in the text, immortalizing them for any viewer who passes by.

But Alice’s “Creations” are not alone in evoking a sense of patchworked magnificence in Jones’s novel. In many ways, *The Known World* itself is just such a project, weaving together the lives of its numerous characters and their past, present, and future circumstances. In a discursive
sense, the novel is also in constant conversation with its textual antecedents, including accounts of slavery documented by historians, autobiographical slave narratives written by such authors as Frederick Douglass and Harriet Jacobs, and fictional literature about the antebellum South that has long been in circulation. Jones’s novel evokes and builds upon these textual precursors while simultaneously exposing their limits and upending their conventions, troubling their legitimacy and authority as a result. Ultimately, however, *The Known World* does not attempt to replace the existing records with a new, more authoritative account, but instead functions as a palimpsest in which new possibilities are etched on and within the same discursive space as the narratives already inhabiting it.

One essential set of texts upon which Jones’s palimpsest narrative is etched is the canon of works by American modernist William Faulkner. Manchester County, as Susan V. Donaldson points out in “Telling Forgotten Stories of Slavery in the Postmodern South” (2008), is essentially Jones’s version of Faulkner’s Yoknapatawpha: it is composed of “a cacophony of competing stories—between slaveholders asserting their mastery and slaves quietly resisting, between stories made and enforced by the institution of slavery and individual narratives seeking connection, acknowledgment, and recognition” (272-273). But not only in terms of setting and subject matter are Jones’s and Faulkner’s texts interrelated. In both Faulkner’s novels and *The Known World*, events are presented in a radically nonlinear fashion, revealing glimmers of the past and future that make the present difficult to decipher. These complex temporal progressions in Jones’s and Faulkner’s narratives will be the focus of this chapter, and most importantly, the ways in which Jones distinguishes his experiments with temporality from their clear Faulknerian influence. Thus, this chapter aims to build on the work done by scholars like Cindy Weinstein
and Matthew Dischinger who have already identified and explored important similarities between Jones’s novel and Faulkner’s work. However, I intend to develop a fuller analysis of these novels’ shifting temporalities in order to understand the ways *The Known World* responds to Faulkner’s techniques and impulses from a contemporary vantage point. Indeed, a close examination of the radical nonlinearity in Jones’s text reveals him to be revising Faulknerian strategies in the very act of deploying them, providing alternative perspectives that Faulkner did not or could not include.

Gérard Genette’s discussion of “narrative anachronies” in *Narrative Discourse* (1973) offers a helpful framework for understanding the distinctive ways time and progression function in Jones’s and Faulkner’s texts. Narrative anachronies, Genette writes, are “the various types of discordance between the two orderings of story and narrative”: that is, between the order in which events occur in the story and the order in which they are related in the narrative discourse, the telling of that story (36). Two primary manifestations of anachrony are “analepsis,” referring to “any evocation after the fact of an event that took place earlier than the point in the story where we are at any given moment,” and the less common “prolepsis,” defined as “any narrative maneuver that consists of narrating or evoking in advance an event that will take place later” (40). Though Genette stresses that anachrony is neither “a rarity” nor “a modern invention,” his examination of Proust’s *À la recherche du temps perdu* (1908) suggests that anachrony nonetheless becomes more prominent in literary modernism than in prior periods, as temporal sequence is actively sabotaged in many modernist works as a site of aesthetic and conceptual experimentation. Both analepsis and prolepsis—in lay terms, “flash-back” and “flash-forward”—are manipulations of chronology found throughout both Faulkner’s oeuvre and *The Known*
World, but far from being constrained by Faulknerian forms, I want to suggest that Jones uses the obvious similarities with Faulkner’s style and subject matter as a means to underscore the distinctness of his own project. Jones’s palimpsestic engagement with Faulkner’s canon is, I argue, metamodernist in nature; for, as David James and Urmila Seshagiri write, metamodernist literature is contemporary work that “consciously responds to modernist impulses, methods, and commitments” (88). Although considering The Known World a metamodernist novel recasts the way it has been contextualized in much scholarly work, exploring Jones’s novel’s relationship to Faulkner’s legacy—and especially to his distinctive use of narrative anachrony—is a particularly fruitful way of understanding both authors’ commentaries on the institution of slavery, its generational consequences, and the lives of those involved on all sides. Although Faulkner’s narratives are notoriously analeptic and past-obsessed, my analysis shows that they are also acutely aware of the future, a similarity with Jones’s novel that a Genettian framework can best help to parse. Jones’s metamodernism is, then, a formal as well as a content-oriented engagement with Faulkner’s “impulses, methods, and commitments”: by revising both the ways narrative anachronies are used and the perspectives from which they emanate, The Known World presents a vision of past, present, and future that is not focused on the South’s white slave-owners and their defeated descendants but on the black subjects Faulkner’s work treats only obliquely—enslaved, free, and otherwise.

Haunting Pasts and Impotent Futures: Faulkner’s “fluid cradle of events”

Faulkner’s experiments with temporality have been the focus of much critical attention, from Jean-Paul Sartre’s essay on time in The Sound and the Fury to more recent analyses like Jo Alyson Parker’s 2007 study that reads Faulknerian nonlinearity through a “chaos-theory model”
Of course, one cannot discuss Faulkner and time without noting his characters’ often obsessive relationship to the past, with many unable to let go of either the old South that enabled them to profit from the labor and bodies of enslaved persons or of the mores of gender, sexuality, and class that accompanied those “simpler” times. Critics often conceive of Faulkner’s narratives as a series of “backward glances,” compulsive remembrances of or flashbacks to the past that are rendered through frequent analepses on the level of narrative discourse. As Sartre famously remarks in “On The Sound and the Fury: Temporality in Faulkner”:

> It seems Faulkner’s worldview can be compared to that of a man sitting in an open-topped car and looking backwards. At each moment, formless shadows rear up to right and left; flickerings, subdued vibrations, wisps of light, which only become trees, people and cars a little later, as they recede into the distance. The past acquires a sort of surreality in this: its outlines become crisp and hard—changeless. The present, nameless and fleeting, suffers greatly by comparison; it is full of holes and, through these holes, it is invaded by things past, which are fixed, still and silent, like judges or stares. (109)

Certainly, the distinctness of the past against a murky and porous present is a common feature within the Faulkner novels I will discuss here: past events are always looming, continuing to affect characters’ lives long after they have taken place. However, through an examination of how narrative anachronies are developed from The Sound and the Fury (1929), to Absalom, Absalom! (1936), to Go Down, Moses (1942), I want to shift the focus onto the many proleptic gestures that appear in Faulkner’s work and argue that he is just as concerned with futures as with the past: the futures feared by his focalizing characters as well as those revealed authoritatively by omniscient narrators. It is by observing these proleptic moments that we can best understand how Jones’s own use of anachrony in The Known World diverges from and

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1 Indeed, the past looms so large in Faulkner’s work that it has been the subject of an entire monograph; see Carl E. Rollyson Jr.’s Uses of the Past in the Novels of William Faulkner (1984).
responds to Faulkner’s canon, providing alternative futures and perspectives that are absent from Faulkner’s texts.

As has been well-documented since its publication, *The Sound and the Fury* (1929) is one of Faulkner’s earliest experiments with the disorienting shifts in time that would become a trademark of his work. Tracing the way narrative anachronies unfold in the progression of *The Sound and the Fury* reveals the Compson family’s experiences with time to be fluid, inexact, and constantly inflected by a past that refuses to stay behind them. Lee Anne Fennell has theorized this “disordered time” through its relation to memory, writing, “It is memory, with its disregard for chronological time and its idiosyncratic and highly personal chains of association, that pulls pieces of the past into the present, resurrects the dead, and remakes family history” (35). The movement of time in *The Sound and the Fury* is indeed a direct result of the movement of memory within characters’ consciousnesses, with what Genette refers to as “memory-elicited” analepses occurring frequently throughout (44). The powerful persistence of memory is especially evident in the first two sections of the novel, narrated by the cognitively-disabled Benjy Compson and his brother Quentin, respectively. In Benjy’s section, the events he encounters in the narrative present of April 7, 1928 continually evoke his memories of the past. The use of italics often signals a temporal shift in the narration, such as the following passage in which Benjy remembers waiting for Caddy to return home from school:

“Did you come to meet Caddy,” she said, rubbing my hands. “What is it. What are you trying to tell Caddy.” Caddy smelled like trees and like when she says we were asleep.

What are you moaning about, Luster said. You can watch them again when we get to the branch. Here. Here’s you a jimson weed. He gave me the flower. We went through the fence, into the lot.

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2 The “narrative present,” Genette explains, refers to “the moment in the story when the narrative was interrupted to make room for the anachrony” (48).
“What is it.” Caddy said. “What are you trying to tell Caddy. Did they send him out, Versh.” (6-7)

Here, Benjy’s vivid and sensory memory of an experience with Caddy is briefly interrupted by an event in his present, his current life as a thirty-three year old man who no longer has Caddy to help take care of him. This movement is indicative of how time moves back and forth for Benjy, disrupting our ability to locate a “primary” narrative in either the past or the present; sometimes analeptic passages are set off in italics, and sometimes momentary flickers back into the present are. Quentin’s section—in which the narrative present takes place at Harvard on June 2, 1910—is similarly rife with recollections of his past back in Jefferson, especially as they relate to the preoccupations that haunt him within the text. Caddy’s virginity is one of Quentin’s major fixations; once, as he recalls in one of the section’s many analepses, he even insisted to Mr. Compson that he and Caddy had “committed incest” in hopes that then her sexual encounters with other men “wouldnt be so” (177). In Quentin’s logic, which is caught up in his Southern culture’s obsession with female virginity, Caddy’s promiscuity will bring about not only her own ruin but the ruin of the Compson family at large—a dismal forecast indeed. What is perhaps even more shocking than Quentin’s false confession of incest, however, is his father’s response to it: “man,” Mr. Compson tells his son, “is conceived of by accident and [his] every breath is a fresh cast with dice already loaded against him” (177). Mr. Compson’s fatalistic outlook is one in which choices do not matter and the future is already doomed; even if Quentin wished to intercede on Caddy’s behalf, the past has already dictated the family’s fate.³ In Mr. Compson’s

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³ Quentin and Benjy’s brother, Jason, and their mother, Mrs. Compson, also share this deterministic view of the future, expressed frequently through their belief that Caddy’s illegitimate daughter, Quentin, Jr., is following in the footsteps of her mother: Jason remarks that she has been “running about the streets with every drummer that comes to town” (230) and Mrs. Compson insists that she has “inherited all of [Caddy’s] headstrong traits” (261).
view, “was” is “the saddest word of all there is nothing else in the world its not despair until time its not even time until it was” (178). If time isn’t anything at all until it is conceived of in the past tense—“until it was”—then being past is what creates time, what legitimates anything, rendering human action utterly meaningless in the present moment.

Of course, what these various perspectives on the past and present do not acknowledge is that—as a white, formerly well-to-do Southern family—what brought the Compsons to ruin was not so much “fate” as the fall of the institution of slavery, an institution that allowed them to profit from the labor of slaves for generations. The Compsons, at least in *The Sound and the Fury*, do not reflect directly on this history and their relation to it, but instead dwell upon its effects in the present and how drastically their situation has changed for the worse. Only in the novel’s final section, which follows their black servant, Dilsey, are we provided a viewpoint beyond the Compsons’ limited perspectives—and, importantly, Dilsey’s section is also the one place in the text that contains brief proleptic gestures toward the future. At the service Dilsey attends on Easter Sunday, April 8, 1928, the reverend delivers a sermon about the easing of earthly burdens to which the faithful can look forward in the afterlife:

> I tells you, breddren, en I tells you, sistuhn, dey’ll come a time Po sinner sayin Let me lay down wid de Lawd, lemme lay down my load. Den whut Jesus gwine say, O breddren? O sistuhn? Is you got de ricklickshun en de Blood of de Lamb? Case I aint gwine load down heaven! (295)

Dilsey is deeply affected by the reverend’s words, to the extent that she begins to weep on the walk back home with her daughter:

> “Whyn’t you quit dat, mammy?” Frony said. “Wid all dese people lookin. We be passin white folks soon.”
> “I’ve seed de first en de last,” Dilsey said. “Never you mind me.”
> “First en last whut?” Frony said.
> “Never you mind,” Dilsey said. “I seed de beginnin, en now I sees de endin.” (297)
Dilsey’s words here are unsettling, suggesting that perhaps her own life—a life of total servitude to the crumbling Compson family—is now nearing its end. However, her feelings of witnessing a finality of sorts are clarified when she tells Benjy a few pages later, “You’s de Lawd’s chile, anyway. En I be His’n too, fo long, praise Jesus” (317). Here, we discover that Diley’s outlook is in actuality a positive one, as she finds consolation in her religious faith and looks forward to a future in heaven. Though *The Sound and the Fury*’s final section offers a glimmer of optimism regarding what is to come, then, it is not for any better life on earth: the future only looks bright to Dilsey as she imagines being removed from the plane of humanity altogether. A better life on earth becomes an unreachable dream for Dilsey—and to her mind, for Benjy as well—one that gets deferred to a realm outside the lived tenses of past, present, and future. For the struggling Compson family, possibilities remain bleak as long as the past reigns supreme, inserting itself at every corner and reminding them of a troubled heritage they cannot escape.

In *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936), a later novel also centered on the Compson family, the past continues to lord over the present action through frequent analepses—however, proleptic shifts of various kinds also begin to appear throughout the narration. In the novel, Quentin Compson, Mr. Compson, and Quentin’s Harvard roommate, Shreve, attempt to piece together the legend of Thomas Sutpen, a mysterious figure who in 1833, according to Supten’s sister-in-law, Rosa Coldfield, “came out of nowhere and without warning upon the land with a band of strange niggers and built a plantation” (5). In the September of 1909, Quentin becomes obsessed with the Sutpen story as recounted to him by his father and “Miss Rosa.” The past that their stories evoke is one not only of Thomas Sutpen, but of “the deep south dead since 1865 and peopled with garrulous outraged baffled ghosts” (4); since 1865 marks the end of the South as
white slave owners knew it, the ghosts inhabiting the postbellum South bring with them all the social and racial complexities that accompanied that historical milestone. As Quentin sits listening to Rosa—“to one of the ghosts which had refused to lie still even longer than most had”—he feels that he is “too young to deserve yet to be a ghost” but knows he “nevertheless [has] to be one for all that, since he was born and bred in the deep South the same as she was” (4). Although he does not narrate his thoughts autodiegetically as in *The Sound and the Fury*, the narrative inhabits Quentin’s focalization as he considers the relation of the South’s “ghosts” to his identity:

His childhood was full of them; his very body was an empty hall echoing with sonorous defeated names; he was not a being, an entity, he was a commonwealth. He was a barracks filled with stubborn back-looking ghosts still recovering, even forty-three years afterward, from the fever which had cured the disease, waking from the fever without even knowing that it had been the fever itself which they had fought against and not the sickness, looking with stubborn recalcitrance backward beyond the fever and into the disease with actual regret, weak from the fever yet free of the disease and not even aware that the freedom was that of impotence. (7)

This oft-quoted passage, with its “back-looking ghosts” and complex mapping of generational involvement in the “disease” of slavery (7), suggests that being from and inheriting the history of the “deep South” is Quentin’s own curse in *Absalom, Absalom!*, one that we must consider in relation to his eventual suicide as revealed in *The Sound and the Fury*. The passage also prepares the reader for a narrative that will be obsessively analeptic—preoccupied with the past and the legend of Sutpen—already haunted in the present by the anti-climax of an “impotent” future. As Rosa tells Quentin how her life “was destined to end on an afternoon in April forty-three years ago” (12) when her nephew, Henry Sutpen, killed his half-brother, Charles Bon, the narrator explains: “Meanwhile, as though in inverse ratio to the vanishing voice, the invoked ghost of the man whom she could neither forgive nor revenge herself upon began to assume a quality almost
of solidity, permanence” (8). The figure of Thomas Sutpen seems to materialize for Quentin as Rosa talks about him and the chaos he brought forth, as do the other characters involved in the legendary family saga: as the narrator puts it, “Quentin seemed to see them” (9). Through “the talking, the telling” of Rosa’s history (15), her ghosts become Quentin’s as well, reminding him that his family too is implicated in the problematic dynamics of yesteryear—after all, Quentin’s grandfather, General Compson, was “Sutpen’s first Yoknapatawpha County friend” (309). In this way, the ghosts that haunt the present in Absalom, Absalom! remind the novel’s characters not only of their painful personal memories, but of their more complex cultural histories as well.

As I have indicated above, however, a closer look at the novel’s anachronistic tendencies exposes not just analeptic movements but also many proleptic ones that divulge fragments from later in the narrative timeline. The first occurs while Quentin listens to Rosa retell the Sutpen legend: “It would be three hours yet before he would learn why she had sent for him,” the narrator notes, “because this part of it, this first part of it, Quentin already knew” (7). A similar prolepsis occurs at the beginning of the second chapter, as Quentin sits with his father and waits to head back to Rosa’s:

It was a summer of wistaria. The twilight was full of it and of the smell of his father’s cigar as they sat on the front gallery after supper until it would be time for Quentin to start, while in the deep shaggy lawn below the veranda the fireflies blew and drifted in soft random—the odor, the scent, which five months later Mr Compson’s letter would carry up from Mississippi and over the long iron New England snow and into Quentin’s sitting room at Harvard…. (23)

We are provided only this brief glimpse into Quentin’s future before the narrative shifts back to the “day of listening” before Quentin leaves for college (23). The difference in what Genette calls the “reach” of these two early prolepses is noteworthy (48), with the second passage reaching months rather than simply hours into the future. The longer excerpt also acts as what
Genette refers to as a “repeating” prolepsis, one that appears as a “brief allusion” in advance to “an event that will be told in full in its place” (73). Repeating prolepses “play a role of advance notice” and thus “double, however slightly, a narrative section to come” (71-73). Quentin’s receipt of his father’s letter at Harvard, though alluded to early on in the narrative progression, will not be detailed in full until over a hundred pages later when Quentin is with Shreve in their dormitory. The letter, containing the promised scent of wisteria, informs Quentin of Rosa’s recent death and funeral—a fact which, of course, we cannot know at the moment of the advanced mention. These repeating prolepses are one type of what Genette calls “internal” anachronies, which jump to events that take place later within a narrative’s immediate “temporal field” (68). There will be many prolepses of this type to follow in the novel, each of which establishes anticipation on the part of the readers as we wait for the events alluded to in advance to arrive in the narrative discourse.

Time moves forward and recedes backward in *Absalom, Absalom!*, ebbing and flowing in a manner that places the narrative “present” on shaky ground. In several cases, the movements of analepsis and prolepsis even become mingled, as in an analepsis to Sutpen’s early days in Jefferson:

> He just said that he would not care for a drink; it was years later before even Quentin’s grandfather (he was a young man too then; it would be years yet before he would become General Compson) learned that the reason Sutpen did not drink was that he did not have the money with which to pay his share or return the courtesy. (25)

Another passage of this kind appears shortly thereafter:

> So they were certain now that he had departed to get more [money]; there were several who even anticipated in believing (and even saying aloud, now that he was not present)

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4 For *Absalom, Absalom!*, then, that temporal field would range from the night Quentin sits talking with Rosa in September of 1909 to the evening he spends reconstructing the Sutpen story with Shreve at Harvard in January of 1910.
what Sutpen’s future and then unborn sister-in-law was to tell Quentin almost eighty years later: that he had found some unique and practical way of hiding loot and that he had returned to the cache to replenish his pockets. (26)

In these portions of the narrative, wherein analeptic passages contain prolepses, it is as if time is agitated, anticipatory, unable to remain in the past and compelled to divulge glimpses of the future to come. The effect of this movement is to keep our eye on time as a continuum; the narrative does not allow us to get a solid foothold for too long within any temporal realm, but instead insists on blurring and interlacing them. This blurring of past, present, and future in Absalom, Absalom! aptly enacts Mr. Compson’s theorization of time as a “fluid cradle of events” (51), and these fluid temporal movements indeed make the present seem, as Sartre suggests, “nameless and fleeting” (109).

In considering the novel’s narrative anachronies, of course, it is essential to recognize the degree to which the story of Sutpen’s life is transmitted through—by either direct narration or perspectival focalization—the novel’s many characters. The temporal movements of Absalom, Absalom!, like those in The Sound and the Fury before it, are largely directed by characters’ thought processes and narrational styles. One character whose style of storytelling wields a strong influence over the text is Mr. Compson, who can’t help but divulge proleptic glimpses even as he narrates important events of the past. While (re)telling Quentin the backstory of Rosa’s youth, for example, Mr. Compson describes Rosa’s father as “that man who was later to nail himself in his attic and starve to death rather than look upon his native land in the throes of repelling an invading army” (47). Mr. Compson’s prolepses often feel or are literally parenthetical, hinting at the ends of things even while narrating events that occurred much earlier: “So Miss Rosa did not see any of them, who had never seen (and was never to see alive)
Charles Bon at all” (58). Though these proleptic moments often feel like asides, Mr. Compson tends to fold important plot details into them, such as Rosa’s eventual and short-lived engagement to Sutpen after Ellen’s death. Describing Sutpen as a young man, Mr. Compson explains,

He was not portly yet, though he was now getting on toward fifty-five. The fat, the stomach, came later. It came upon him suddenly, all at once, in the year after whatever it was happened to his engagement to Miss Rosa and she quitted his roof and returned to town to live alone in her father’s house and did not ever speak to him again except when she addressed him that one time when they told her that he was dead. The flesh came upon him suddenly.… (63)

These abrupt movements forward then back again are a trademark of Mr. Compson’s narrational style, one that is obviously influenced by his knowledge of and eagerness to disclose events later in the Sutpen/Coldfield chronicle. Despite the fact that they have already occurred in a historical sense, these passages function as prolepses for the reader, revealing information from much later in the Sutpens and Coldfields’ lives that continually interrupts Mr. Compson’s narrative momentum and calls attention to his position as storyteller.

But while the prolepses above give accurate accounts of a future that will indeed come to pass, others are of a more speculative quality. Many of the prolepses in Mr. Compson’s narration are of this speculative nature, and they are frequently permeated by the sense of fatalism we have come to associate with his character. From his vantage point so many years later, the actions of the Sutpens and Coldfields seem fixed and inevitable as part of the legend they would become: Rosa is a “spinster doomed for life at sixteen” (59), and Henry (around the time of Rosa and Sutpen’s engagement) has “not yet returned to play his final part in his family’s doom” (67). Doom and destiny are the driving forces that undergird Mr. Compson’s retelling of the Sutpen legend, and throughout, they lead him to make speculations like the one that Henry “must have
known” he was “doomed and destined to kill” Charles Bon (72). Rosa, too, has difficulty staying in the past as she relates her experiences to Quentin. In her case, however, speculations about the future reach further than the boundaries of the Sutpen legend to anticipate how she will figure into that narrative and be remembered in the years to come. As Rosa tells Quentin about the early days of her sister’s marriage to Sutpen, she feels the need to qualify, “I was not spying when I would follow her. I was not spying, though you will say I was” (118), and later, when discussing her own engagement to Sutpen, she remarks similarly, “I stayed there and waited for Thomas Sutpen to come home. You will say (or believe) that I waited even then to become engaged to him; if I said I did not, you would believe I lied. But I do say I did not” (124). These anticipations show a concern for authority and accuracy on Rosa’s part, as well as an awareness that she will lose control over her family’s story when she is no longer present to tell it. These “speculative prolepses,” as I refer to them, are the proleptic equivalent of the “memory-elicited analepses” we have seen in The Sound and the Fury, as they originate from within characters’ minds. Though they cannot be considered “accurate” in the same way memory-elicited analepses can—since, of course, it is possible to know what has happened but impossible to know for certain what will—they are nonetheless an important aspect of the movement of temporality in the narrative, showing characters to be mindful of futurity even as they are obsessed with the past.

As Absalom, Absalom! draws to a close, the cumulative effect of the novel’s many analepses and prolepses comes into clearer focus: the past that refuses to stay past serves as an ominous window into the future. As Quentin meanders through the Sutpen story, his elongation of the telling prompts a comparison of him with his father: “Dont say it’s just me that sounds like your old man,” Shreve insists (210). Internally agreeing with this assessment, Quentin thinks,
Yes. Maybe we are both Father. Maybe nothing ever happens once and is finished...Yes, we are both Father. Or maybe Father and I are both Shreve, maybe it took Father and me both to make Shreve or Shreve and me both to make Father and maybe Thomas Sutpen to make all of us. (210)

Quentin’s “maybes” all gesture toward a theorization of time as circular: his thoughts reach forward and backward in time, implying not only that the present is a repetition of the past but that the future will likely be, as well. Moreover, if Supten is indeed—as Quentin fears—the progenitor of them all, the novel suggests that all of its white characters are in some way implicated in the history of enslaving and exploiting people of color based simply on the justification of perceived racial superiority. This unsettling temporal overlap leads Quentin to speculate about his own future, revealing his anxieties about what might come to pass: “Am I going to have to hear it all again he thought I am going to have to hear it all over again I am already hearing it all over again I am listening to it all over again I shall have to never listen to anything else but this again forever” (222). Quentin’s premonition projects a dark vision of an infinitely repeating future in which he will be forced to relive the past with every retelling of the Sutpen saga. In the novel’s final sequence, Shreve offers his own premonition that “in time the Jim Bonds are going to conquer the western hemisphere” (302). If Shreve is gesturing toward a future of racial mixing—Jim Bond being the most recent in a long line of Sutpen’s mixed-race descendants—that gesture does not hold a particularly positive charge. Instead, and as in many other moments throughout the novel, the threat of miscegenation carries with it an almost apocalyptic force.

As evidenced by many of the examples above, most of the proleptic visions in Absalom, Absalom! emanate from within characters’ perspectives, be they verifiable revelations of a future that has since become past or speculations inflected by characters’ fear, guilt, or other emotions.
However, there do exist a few notable exceptions to this rule in the novel. One is the early prolepsis discussed previously that references the letter Quentin will receive from his father at Harvard; in that passage, the narrator states authoritatively that the letter “would carry up” the scent of Jefferson “into Quentin’s sitting room at Harvard” several months later (23). Another prolepsis of this type occurs in the opening lines of the novel’s eighth chapter:

> There would be no deep breathing tonight. The window would remain closed above the frozen and empty quad beyond which the windows in the opposite wall were, with two or three exceptions, already dark; soon the chimes would ring for midnight, the notes melodious and tranquil, faint and clear as glass in the fierce (it had quit snowing) still air. (235)

The perspective in this passage, too, is further removed from character focalization than are a majority of the narrative’s other prolepses. Moreover, the declaration that there “would be no deep breathing tonight” and descriptions of what the windows and chimes “would” do seem definitive, giving the reader no reason to question their reliability. But while these momentary flickers of omniscience provide a perspective beyond what the characters themselves can see and know in the present, what they do not offer is any information to counteract the novel’s many pessimistic suspicions about the future that are so deeply influenced by the past. Furthermore, in *Absalom, Absalom!* on the whole, it is essential to note that while we are provided a degree of commentary on slavery and those it exploited, all information to that effect is filtered through the perspectives of the novel’s white characters, individuals who are myopically focused on their own plights and postbellum realities and can never know the horrors of slavery as experienced firsthand.

In the later novel *Go Down, Moses* (1942), Faulkner’s use of prolepsis becomes both more foregrounded and more complex, gesturing frequently toward future possibilities its
characters themselves cannot see. The seven interrelated shorter narratives that make up *Go Down, Moses* hopscotch between time periods in the history of Isaac McCaslin and those related to him on or near his family’s Yoknapatawpha plantation. Dara Llewellyn has described the operation of time in the novel as a movement that doesn’t exactly “pass” but instead “flows and pulsates” (499); as a result, the reader must “move back and forth between stories” in order to “create logical and systematic patterns of meaning” (497). As in both *The Sound and the Fury* and *Absalom, Absalom!*, the past is ever-present in *Go Down, Moses*. For example, the title of the novel’s opening narrative—“Was”—is itself analeptic, shifting our focus to the past from the novel’s very first page. The events that take place in “Was” are framed as having happened deep in the recesses of the past and communal memory, as the narrator points out immediately that they were not witnessed firsthand by “Uncle Ike”—who is now “past seventy and nearer eighty than he ever corroborated any more, a widower now and uncle to half a county and father to no one”—but were instead experienced “by his elder cousin, McCaslin Edmonds” (4). Not only the duration of “Was” but much of the novel as a whole will be fixated on “the old days” (4); as the narrator remarks in “The Old People,” the first of the three sections that follow Ike as a character, “gradually to the boy those old times would cease to be old times and would become a part of the boy’s present, not only as if they had happened yesterday but as if they were still happening” (165). To be sure, as Llewellyn points out, the reader must “be concerned with what was while deciphering what is” in *Go Down, Moses* (500-501). But while much of the text is indeed preoccupied with the past and history, what distinguishes *Go Down, Moses*’s use of narrative anachrony from both *The Sound and the Fury* and *Absalom, Absalom!* is the intensified presence of prolepses in the narration, with proleptic moments asserting themselves much more
strikingly than in the previous two novels and, in many cases, emanating from the narrator’s more omniscient perspective instead of character narration or focalization.

The opening sequence of “The Old People,” which details Ike’s early experiences as “the boy” learning to hunt under the tutelage of the half-black, half-Chickasaw Sam Fathers (157), is indicative of the ways anachronies—especially prolepses—will appear throughout *Go Down, Moses*. In the story’s opening lines, in which the specificity of the narrative present is already a bit nebulous, an analepsis appears almost immediately:

> At first there was nothing. There was the faint, cold, steady rain, the gray and constant light of the late November dawn, with the voices of the hounds converging somewhere in it and toward them. Then Sam Fathers, standing just behind the boy as he had been standing when the boy shot his first running rabbit with his first gun and almost with the first load it ever carried, touched his shoulder and he began to shake, not with any cold. Then the buck was there. (157)

With the fleeting image of Sam “as he had been standing” behind Ike during a hunt together years before, the narrative present is interrupted by the sense that the scene at hand has an antecedent, that Sam and Ike have adopted this stance many times already in the past. But on the heels of this analeptic vision, there follows a prolepsis that gestures beyond the events of the story to provide a glimpse far into Ike’s future:

> The boy did not remember that shot at all. He would live to be eighty, as his father and his father’s twin brother and their father in his turn had lived to be, but he would never hear that shot nor remember even the shock of the gun-butt. He didn’t even remember what he did with the gun afterward. (158)

This prolepsis, pinpointing a “temporal distance” (Genette 48) many decades into Ike’s future, has a further reach than any of the prolepses in *Absalom, Absalom!*—and while only a handful of prolepses in that novel are not rooted in character narration or focalization, this more omniscient perspective will recur time and again throughout *Go Down, Moses*. As the narrator
authoritatively divulges that such a climactic moment in Ike’s youth will someday be lost to his aging memory, a qualitative difference between this omniscient prolepsis and those in Absalom, Absalom! also presents itself: while the occasionally omniscient prolepses in Absalom, Absalom! effectively display the narrator’s all-knowing abilities, they do not provide as robust a vision as this one of the characters’ lives after the narrative present. As in this example, a number of the more informative omniscient prolepses in Go Down, Moses will provide a depressing vision of the future to come, confirming many characters’ fears and speculations and showing a postbellum South whose white citizens are deeply in decline.

Omniscient prolepses abound within “The Bear,” the longest and most well-known section of Go Down, Moses in which the sixteen-year-old Ike participates in the legendary hunting trip for “Old Ben.” In one example, we are told that the young Ike now owns his own gun: “he would own and shoot it for almost seventy years,” the narrator explains, “through two new pairs of barrels and locks and one new stock, until all that remained of the original gun was the silver-inlaid trigger-guard with his and McCaslin’s engraved names and the date in 1878” (196). The narrator does not linger on this proleptic vision, but moves immediately back into the present narration after this sudden jolt out of Ike’s focalization. Another prolepsis of this kind occurs later in the section when, in the middle of a conversation between Ike and his cousin McCaslin, the narrator provides a view of the distance between who Ike is “now” and who he someday will be:

Isaac McCaslin, not yet Uncle Ike, a long time yet before he would be uncle to half a country and still father to none, living in one small cramped fireless rented room in a Jefferson boarding-house where petit jurys were domiciled during court terms and itinerant horse- and mule-traders stayed, with his kit of brand-new carpenter’s tools and the shotgun McCaslin had given him with his name engraved in silver and old General Compson’s compass (and, when the General died, his silver-mounted horn too) and the
iron cot and mattress and the blankets which he would take each fall into the woods for more than sixty years and the bright tin coffee-pot (286-287)

This lengthy catalogue of the possessions in Ike’s future home stops as abruptly as it began—without punctuation or grammatical completion—before moving immediately back in time to describe the “legacy” left to Ike from his uncle, Hubert Beauchamp. The length on the page of this prolepsis—in Genette’s terms, its “extent” (48)—is notable here, as the narrative of Ike’s future as a childless man in a “small cramped fireless room” at least momentarily overtakes the narrative of the hunt. The prolepsis asserts itself as the inevitable conclusion to Ike’s life, rendering the narration of his “present” already anti-climactic. However, not all prolepses of this omniscient type are entirely disentangled from Ike’s perspective. As the sixteen-year-old Ike observes Sam Fathers the morning after one of Old Ben’s attacks, the narrator relates:

There was something in Sam’s face now. It was neither exultation nor joy nor hope. Later, a man, the boy realised what it had been, and that Sam had known all the time what had made the tracks and what had torn the throat out of the doe in the spring and killed the fawn. It had been foreknowledge in Sam’s face that morning. And he was glad, he told himself. He was old. He had no children, no people, none of his blood anywhere above earth that he would ever meet again. And even if he were to, he could not have touched it, spoken to it, because for seventy years now he had had to be a negro. It was almost over now and he was glad. (206, sic)

The prolepsis to “later,” of course, reveals information that the teenaged Ike himself cannot know; but in the vision we are provided of the “later” Ike, we see the past-test ruminations of a man who now has the benefit of hindsight to help him narrativize the events of the legendary hunt. Importantly, it is this Ike who “tells himself” that Sam was “glad” his mortality was looming, an interpretation predicated on the assumption that he now knows what Sam thought and felt about his racial and social status at the time. As in Absalom, Absalom!, all speculative prolepses about the future come exclusively from the perspectives of the novel’s white
characters; not once are we privy to the inner thoughts of non-white individuals about the hardships they have endured.

However, the questions of race and slavery are soon addressed more directly and objectively—albeit briefly—by the text’s omniscient narrator. After the long sequence detailing the hunt for Old Ben, there is a jump in the narration to the point at which Ike is twenty-one and looking through his family’s plantation ledgers. In this section of the narrative, two prolepses in particular shift the focus to a future much broader than simply Ike’s. In the commissary where Ike sits looking through the ledgers, there are advertisements around him for snuff and cures for chills and salves and potions manufactured and sold by white men to bleach the pigment and straighten the hair of negroes that they might resemble the very race which for two hundred years had held them in bondage and from which for another hundred years not even a bloody civil war would have set them completely free (244)

The focalization here is striking, since neither Ike nor his cousin McCaslin—who also makes an appearance during this sequence—can possibly know what will occur “another hundred years” into the future. This passage also marks the first time in the narrative that slavery is confronted directly by the narrator: the institution is described in clearly negative terms, but also with a sense of futility that emphasizes the continued hardships black subjects will face rather than the positive possibilities that might accompany liberation. A similar but more specific prolepsis occurs several pages later as Ike reads the entry in the plantation ledger for a slave woman named Tennie Beauchamp:

and no date of freedom because her freedom, as well as that of her first surviving child, derived not from Buck and Buddy McCaslin in the commissary but from a stranger in Washington and no date of death and burial, not only because McCaslin kept no

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5 See Matthew Dischinger’s “‘It Was Enough That The Name Was Written’: Ledger Narratives in Edward P. Jones’s The Known World and Faulkner’s Go Down, Moses” (2013) for helpful context on this famous ledger-reading scene, including information about Faulkner’s own transformative experiences “reading real plantation ledgers” (221).
obituaries in his books, but because in this year 1883 she was still alive and would remain so to see a grandson by her last surviving child. (259-260)

As in the previous example, this prolepsis contains information—specifically, the revelation that Tennie “would remain” alive for many more years—beyond what Ike or any other character can be aware of at the moment of its disclosure; this proleptic vision of Tennie’s future comes from an all-knowing source that can look not only at Ike’s future, but also at the futures of the South more broadly and the persons his family has enslaved. Unlike the previous prolepsis, however, this glance at Tennie’s future—however momentary—is also the one flicker of hopefulness the novel provides on behalf of those enslaved persons, as the narrator reveals Tennie’s life to hold potential beyond simply what the ledger has documented. Matthew Dischinger writes that although Ike’s reading of the ledgers enables his own “realization of his place in history,” its formal qualities “obscure other narratives” concerning the lives of the slaves they document through such short, nondescript, and occasionally erroneous entries (221). The prolepsis about Tennie’s life is, then, one attempt on the part of the omniscient narrator to depart from the confines of the ledger form and provide information that genre does not, if only to the reader.

Although this brief flicker of a better, more liberated future for characters like Tennie minimally offsets some of the narrator’s more bleak premonitions, the novel’s latter half shifts back into Ike’s focalization to foreground his own negative speculations about what is to come. At the end of “The Bear” is an acceleration forward in time to a point after Ike’s repudiation of the plantation that is his birthright, a decision largely based on his discovery in the plantation ledgers that there exist instances of both miscegenation and incest throughout the McCaslin family line. In this final sequence, Ike makes his last visit to the hunting camp “before the lumber company moved in and began to cut the timber” (301). Here, we are given a clear picture of the
future Ike fears: specifically, the encroachment of modernity on the rural South. When Ike arrives at Hoke’s, “the tiny log-line junction which he had always thought of as Major de Spain’s property too,” he is met with a startling sight:

[he] looked about in shocked and grieved amazement even though he had had forewarning and had believed himself prepared: a new planing-mill already half completed which would cover two or three acres and what looked like miles and miles of stacked steel rails red with the light bright rust of newness…. (303)

This “newness” is clearly unsettling to Ike, for whom the wilderness symbolizes the purity of a simpler time now becoming the past. Watching the “little locomotive” move “between the twin walls of unaxed wilderness as of old,” Ike thinks: “It had been harmless once” (304). But “it was different now,” we learn a few pages later, as Ike ponders what he fears will be a dark future:

It was the same train, engine cars and caboose, even the same enginemen break-man and conductor…yet this time it was as though the train (and not only the train but himself, not only his vision which had seen it and his memory which remembered it but his clothes too, as garments carry back into the clean edgeless blowing of air the lingering effluvium of a sick-room or of death) had brought with it into the doomed wilderness even before the actual axe the shadow and portent of the new mill not even finished yet and the rails and ties which were not even laid…. (306)

The wilderness, in Ike’s estimation, is now “doomed” (307), waning in equal proportion to the persistence of technological advances like the train and the new mill. For Ike, the woods are “timeless”—they will always hold within them memories of his childhood such as “the day, the morning when he killed the buck and Sam marked his face with its hot blood” (308). The wilderness becomes the past for Ike, a crucial part of his identity that he suspects correctly will remain “his mistress and his wife” (311) well into his adulthood. As long as the wilderness remains untouched, so does Ike’s past, one situated in the problematic old South he continues to idealize.
The novel’s final two sections, “Delta Autumn” and the title narrative “Go Down, Moses,” provide a look at what takes place after Ike’s fears about modernity have indeed come to pass. In these narratives, Isaac has now become the “Uncle Ike” referred to in so many prolepses before, and in his advanced age, we find him thinking of the past and weighing its relation to the present. “At first they had come in wagons,” Ike remembers. “There had been bear then” (319). But on the heels of these reflections about “then” are many commentaries on the state of things as they are “now,” including the depletion of Ike’s beloved wilderness: “Now a man drove two hundred miles from Jefferson before he found wilderness to hunt in” (324). In a speech reminiscent of the Compsons, Ike explains the diminishing of the wilderness in terms of a curse on the South: “The woods and fields he ravages and the game he devastates will be the consequence and signature of his crime and guilt, and his punishment” (332). While it is not stated precisely what the “crime” and “guilt” in this configuration refer to—slavery, miscegenation, incest, or otherwise—what is clear is Ike’s vision of man and nature’s comingled and inevitable demise, one in which “all [races will] breed and spawn together until no man has time to say which one is which nor cares” (347). Much like Shreve’s comment at the close of *Absalom, Absalom!*, the prospect of this racially-mixed society, as articulated by Ike, sounds almost apocalyptic. Of course, narrative progression matters, and as Patrick O’Donnell has pointed out, Ike’s view of the future in “Delta Autumn” could potentially be counterpointed by the narrative of Lucas Beauchamp’s grandson, Samuel Worsham Beauchamp—who has murdered a Chicago policeman and is executed for his crime—in “Go Down, Moses.” Though Beauchamp could be considered “the literal embodiment of the future Ike has projected,” fulfilling “all of the racist stereotypes to be associated with the end of the miscegenistic line,”
O’Donnell argues that he might also act as that embodiment’s “utter contradiction”: Beauchamp’s corpse is a “radically indeterminate” image that, “at the end of the line…exists as a form of historical disturbance—an eruption into McCaslin’s constructed future—that cannot be assimilated or explained away” (113-114). On the whole, however, the arc formed by *The Sound and the Fury, Absalom, Absalom!*, and *Go Down, Moses* when read together ends with an overwhelming sense that the future that has now become present is indeed an impotent tense, yielding nothing but disappointment and defeat for the white characters on whom Faulkner’s novels focus. And although the transcendent proleptic visions of omniscient narrators do increase in number and content over the course of these three novels, they do little to suggest that the future still to come will hold anything other than these characters’ continued decline.

“It mattered only that those kind of chains were gone”: Perspective and Possibility in Jones’s *The Known World*

After tracing how narrative anachronies function in these texts from Faulkner’s canon, we can see how Edward P. Jones’s *The Known World* carves out its own relation to Faulkner’s narrative techniques and their effects. In addition to Sue V. Donaldson’s suggestion that Jones’s Manchester functions much like Faulkner’s Yoknapatawpha, *The Known World* shares with *Absalom, Absalom!* another notable element on the story level: both novels feature characters named Henry—Sutpen and Townsend, respectively—who ultimately reject the legacies of their fathers and become, in their own ways, morally implicated in what Donald Warren refers to as the “disease” of slavery (50). *The Known World* begins just after the death of Henry Townsend, a free black man who owned “thirty-three slaves and more than fifty acres of land that sat him high above many others, white and black, in Manchester County, Virginia” (5). The duration of the novel relates the story of Henry’s life and the lives of various individuals associated with him,
including his wife, Caldonia; his parents, Augustus and Mildred; his overseer, Moses; and his former master, William Robbins. Much of what occurs in the novel takes place on or near Henry’s plantation, but these events are far from related chronologically. As James W. Coleman writes:

Godlike, the narrative jumps back and forth in the past, present, and future, and deals with the stories of Moses and Henry, many other major and minor characters, and a plethora of peripheral characters. The present time of the novel’s central plot(s) is about two months beginning in July 1855, but the story ranges back far in the past and looks into the future from the late nineteenth to the late twentieth century. (11)

Because of these temporal movements, Coleman writes, “the structure and chronology of the novel are complex and dizzying” (13)—a summation that also describes the experience of reading Faulkner’s novels, as we have seen. However, an important distinction lies in how Jones’s and Faulkner’s texts are narrated: while many of the temporal shifts in Faulkner’s narratives result directly from the movement of character consciousness—as with memory-elicted analepses and speculative prolepses—the complex progression of The Known World is entirely at the mercy of its “godlike” narrator, an entity omniscient in the fullest possible sense. The narration in Jones’s novel emanates from what Carolyn Vellenga Berman has described as “the perspective of what those caught up in it could not know” (233), and when compared to the occasional presence of such an all-knowing perspective in Absalom, Absalom! and Go Down, Moses, The Known World’s narrator flaunts its “distinctive omniscience” (Berman 235) both more frequently and more boldly. The Known World’s proleptic moments take on a much more pronounced role than those in Faulkner’s texts, enacting a metamodernist relationship that shows perspectives and possibilities—especially on behalf of Manchester’s black inhabitants—that Faulkner’s texts do not account for.
Some of the temporal shifts within *The Known World* appear where we might expect them, such as the beginnings of new, separated sections within each chapter or moments early in the text where background information about characters is filled in analeptically after the narrative’s “in medias res” beginning. Other shifts, however, are more jarring, including the many proleptic ones that intersperse knowledge of the future where we’d least anticipate encountering it. As a rule, the proleptic visions in *The Known World* are more frequent and much more pronounced than its analepses. The novel’s first chapter, initially focalized through Moses, contains several of these sudden cuts to the future, setting the stage for the narrative techniques that will follow throughout. The first occurs in the middle of an autoerotic moment when Moses is “undressed down to his nakedness” (3) alone in the woods on a rainy evening. Abruptly, the narrator explains: “When he was an old man and rheumatism chained up his body, he would look back and blame the chains on evenings such as these, and on nights when he lost himself completely and fell asleep and didn’t come to until morning, covered with dew” (3). Just as abruptly, the narration moves back to Moses in the forest immediately after this line. Several pages later, another prolepsis provides a glimpse of a broader future beyond individual characters’ lives to the time when “the War between the states came” and “the number of slave-owning blacks in Manchester would be down to five” (7). On the heels of this revelation, another brief prolepsis creeps even further into the future to events that will take place “after the War between the States” (7) in the life of Fern Elston, a free black schoolteacher who will become an important character within the text. Prolepses even occur within analepses in this opening chapter: situated within several pages of background information about Henry’s childhood—specifically, about the day his parents left William Robbins’s plantation after purchasing their
freedom—is a prolepsis revealing that Rita, the woman who took care of Henry after his parents’ departure, will escape from slavery “years later” (17). These many and varied prolepses are a prominent characteristic of the unique textual fabric that makes up *The Known World*, and each type brings with it a different set of effects on our experience of reading the narrative.

Prolepses to points much later in characters’ lives abound within *The Known World*. Early on, couched within a description of Robbins’s child by his mistress and former slave, Philomena, the narrator states that Louis later “became an honest man in many people’s eyes, honest enough for Caldonia Townsend to say yes when he asked her to marry him” (24). Prolepses like this one, which contrast children against the adults they will become, are common throughout the text; another emerges within an analepsis to Henry as a newly-freed youth and divulges that “it would be the second black person Henry Townsend bought—not the first, Moses who became his overseer—who would trouble him after the purchase” (49-50). In these moments, the narrative does not allow us to become absorbed in who characters may once have been but instead insists on providing a longer view of their lives and future behavior. The novel also contains several similar prolepses to future events in the life of Minerva, the legal slave and pseudo-daughter of Sheriff John Skiffington and his wife, Winifred. Just after she is given to the Skiffingtons as a wedding gift by John’s cousin, Counsel, and his wife Belle, Minerva looks out the window, “thinking that the farm with her sister was just a little look-see beyond the windowpane” (35). The narrator goes on:

Minerva and her sister would not see each other again for more than twenty years. It would be in Philadelphia, nine blocks from the Philadelphia School for Girls. “You done growed,” her sister would say, both hands to Minerva’s cheeks. “I would have held back on growing up,” Minerva would say. “I would have waited for you to see me grow up but I had no choice in the matter.” (35-36)
There are additional prolepses to Minerva’s eventual reunion with her family in Philadelphia throughout the text—each less than a paragraph in length—including one that reveals Winifred’s thoughts as she pays for “posters with Minerva’s picture on them”: “I must get my daughter back. I must get my daughter back” (43). Like many of the prolepses in *Absalom, Absalom!* and *Go Down, Moses*, a fuller articulation of Minerva’s choice to leave the Skiffingtons won’t appear until much later in the narrative progression, within the novel’s last ten pages. The descriptions of more mature characters, too, are interrupted by mentions of events that await them down the road; one informs us that Loretta, Caldonia’s house servant, will “eventually marry” but won’t take her husband’s last name, insisting on “no last name at all” (319). Even relatively minor individuals in the novel’s huge cast of characters, such as an Irish immigrant named Mary O’Donnell Conlon who happens to open the box containing Rita when it arrives in New York, are worthy of prolepses in *The Known World*: “Mary Conlon’s hair stayed all black until her dying day,” the narrator explains. “She would wake one morning as an old woman with a gray hair or two or three and the next morning those gray hairs would be black again” (52). In Jones’s novel, the present moment is never all that matters for its characters, even for those who only seem to matter minimally in the narrative’s course of events.

In many cases, the narrator’s proleptic vision looks even further into the future than in the passages above to reveal what happens at the very ends of characters’ lives. One such prolepsis appears quite suddenly after Fern Elston, visiting Caldonia after Henry’s death and Moses’s disappearance, compliments a slave child named Tessie on the doll made by her father, Elias:

“That’s such a pretty doll,” Fern said.
“My daddy made it for me,” Tessie said. She would repeat those words just before she died, a little less than ninety years later. Her father had been on her mind all that
dying morning, and she asked one of her great-grandchildren to go to the attic and find the doll. (350)

As with many of the prolepses discussed previously, the narration then moves back abruptly into the time at which Tessie is still a child, leaving us with this image of her later self in mind. A more extended prolepsis, which emerges in the midst of John Skiffington’s visit to William Robbins’s plantation during his search for the still missing Moses, looks ahead to Robbins’s death: “Four years and one month from that day,” the narrator relates, “William Robbins would suffer a stroke. This was at a time when his wife had already turned beastly sour because she lived in a house with a man who could not love her anymore” (362). The narrator goes on to show how Robbins’s daughters, Patience and Dora, will factor into this future event:

Not satisfied with the reports about her father’s condition that she received second- and thirdhand, Dora would decide she could not wait any longer and went to her father’s plantation after he had been in his sickbed for three weeks. Her brother, Louis, told her not to go, but she had more of her father in her than he did. Neither child had ever been to the plantation before. (362)

Dora is, of course, the other child resulting from Robbins’s relationship with Philomena, and this prolepsis makes clear that his two families will remain separate until almost his dying day. The narration returns to the “present” moment, wherein Patience insists that Skiffington stay the night, before wavering back into the prolepsis: “That day four years later, Dora would knock on the front door of her father’s mansion and Patience, the half-sister she had never met, would open it…Except for Dora being darker and younger, the two women were identical” (362). After this initial meeting between the two sisters, the narrator explains, “Patience would turn to her mother and say, ‘Please, sweetheart, go to the East,’ the daughter’s name for that part of the

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6 This resemblance between the two sisters is, of course, reminiscent of the one in *Absalom, Absalom!* between Judith Sutpen and Clytemnestra, Sutpen’s daughter with one of his slaves.
mansion where her mother now lived” (363). This snippet of the conversation between Patience and her mother has already been divulged in the text over two-hundred pages earlier, establishing it as a repeating prolepsis in Genette’s terminology. But in terms of effect, these prolepses serve the common purpose of reminding us that, for each of the characters involved, death is an inevitable part of the future: no matter how great a role they may play in the plot—or how many other lives they may own or control while alive—they will all meet a similar fate in death.

One of many striking aspects of *The Known World*’s prolepses is the variety of their lengths in the narrative—especially when compared to the prolepses in Faulkner’s texts. Of course, length is a nebulous concept as applied to narrative anachronies, so Genette’s distinction between reach and extent is again helpful to keep in mind. Though many of Jones’s prolepses last for only one line—that is, though they have very short extents—the degrees to which they reach into the future vary dramatically. Some reach extremely far to events beyond what the narrative itself will actually report in detail, such as one revealing that Minerva would be “the first and last black human being [Winifred] would ever touch” (36) and another stating that “Even after the many years as [his mother] Maude’s nurse, [Calvin] would never see New York” (189). This definitive language concerning what won’t “ever” or will “never” happen provides a succinct yet far-reaching summary of future events, in stark contrast to prolepses whose extents are brief and which don’t reach nearly as far. The latter category includes several prolepses to events that will come to pass only a week or so later in the storyworld; one example emerges during one of the first few nights that Caldonia and Moses become more intimate than simply mistress and overseer when the narrator discloses that “The lovemaking would not happen for another week, with both of them still mostly clothed and the house very quiet, having done all
the settling it would do for that day” (274). An even shorter-reaching prolepsis later in the text informs us that “In less than two hours…Counsel on his horse would come upon Elias and Louis” (371). In addition to these types of prolepses, there are others that combine both a short and long reach within a still brief extent: “It would be late that day, after Skiffington had come and gone, that anyone would notice Gloria and Clement were not about. They would never be seen again” (335). This prolepsis begins by providing a glimpse of only a few hours into the future, then moves seamlessly into a much further-reaching, very conclusive vision. The effect of mixing these types of prolepses—some that extend our narrative understanding well beyond the novel’s more immediate chronology and others that gesture toward events just around the corner—is to give an impression of the “future” as itself varied; it is a tense that holds within it a myriad of different events and possibilities for the novel’s characters. The past and present are never all that exist, a fact we are constantly reminded of by Jones’s narrator.

As in Faulkner’s novels, the future is not the only temporal realm to which The Known World calls attention. The past also permeates the narrative “present” of Jones’s text, at times in a weaving fashion that is reminiscent of Benjy and Quentin’s sections of The Sound and the Fury. One example of an analepsis moving in and out of another scene is when Robbins returns the recently-escaped Elias to Henry’s plantation. In a paragraph that begins with Henry scolding Elias for trying to run away, we can see the past woven throughout:

Henry went to Elias and slapped him. “This is a hurtful disappointment to me. What I’m gonna do with you? If you want a hard life, I will oblige.” “I will oblige” was a favorite phrase of Fern Elston’s during her lessons, heard by Henry the first time as he sat with her in her parlor dominated by trees, a peach and a magnolia, she and her servants had managed to domesticate. Her husband the gambler had seen it done by foreign people in a Richmond whorehouse and brought the technique back to Manchester County. “Is that what you want?” Henry asked. “I will oblige you with a hard life.” The trees in Fern’s
house disoriented most people, those used to the inside always being inside and the outside always being outside. (84)

This passage is indeed quite Faulknerian: something in the narrative present evokes the past, and subsequently, that past cannot be kept at bay. However, an interesting and frequent variation on this in-and-out analepsis in the novel is—perhaps unsurprisingly—the same phenomenon with prolepsis. The text contains numerous instances of this kind of proleptic movement, but a particularly powerful example appears just after Henry’s death when all of the “slaves Henry Townsend left his wife” walk together down the lane (67). Among these individuals, nine are children, and the narrator intersperses visions of their futures throughout the descriptions of their youthful states. We learn that a set of three-year-old twins—named Caldonia and Henry, after their mistress and master—will “live to be eighty-eight years old. Caldonia would die first, and though her brother Henry had a good and happy life with a good wife and many offspring with their offspring, he decided to follow his sister” (68). Another prolepsis within this section reveals the futures of siblings Delores and Patrick, seven and four, respectively, at the time of Henry’s death: though “Delores would live to be ninety-five years old,” her brother Patrick “would die when he was forty-seven, shot three times by a man as Patrick came out of the man’s bedroom window after being with the man’s wife” (68). Coleman remarks on this portion of the text, writing, “Even in the case of Patrick, who dies fairly young and carelessly, obviously the vision of the future that the godlike narrator projects speaks of these children living far beyond slavery” (17). These intermittently surfacing prolepses serve as a reminder that the children’s lives will not always be limited by the label “slave,” giving a much fuller sense of their various futures than an anachrony like the brief flash to Tennie’s later life provided in Go Down, Moses.
As Coleman suggests above, the omniscient narrator’s vision serves the important purpose of calling attention to the future of freedom that awaits many of *The Known World*’s enslaved characters. Some gestures toward a life after slavery take the shape of reminders that the American Civil War is looming: “In Skiffington’s day,” the narrator explains early on, “the sheriff’s office sat next to the general store on Manchester’s main street; it was moved to a larger facility across the street and next to the hardware store after the War between the States” (43). And later, in a passage detailing Philomena’s attempts to leave Robbins to live in Richmond, the narrator relates, “When she saw Richmond that third and final time, it was on a day not long after the Army of the North had burned most of it to the ground” (144). Other references to a postbellum future are more specific and personal, including a brief premonition that surfaces as the narrator describes the children who are kidnapped and sold back into slavery alongside Augustus Townsend: “The children were Spencer and Mandy Wallace. Mandy would go on to become the first black woman to receive a Ph.D. in literature from Yale University” (378). Instead of allowing much suspense to develop surrounding what might happen to a child like Mandy in this horrific situation, the narrator provides information to quell our fears by revealing the successes the someday free Mandy will go on to have. This and the novel’s other premonitions about a future after slavery remind us that—though it can never be erased—a history of being enslaved will not be what defines and delimits these characters; in freedom, there will be many more possibilities.

Though the novel’s narrator may be the only entity with actual knowledge of these future events, *The Known World*’s characters—like Faulkner’s—are certainly mindful of the future. But in their very different circumstances as black subjects—free or enslaved—their speculations
about the future contrast starkly with the perspectives of Faulkner’s white characters. After Henry’s death, for example, Caldonia’s mother, Maude, expresses concerns over her daughter’s “legacy”:

For Maude, the legacy meant slaves and land, the foundation of wealth. Her fear was that Caldonia, in her grief, would consider selling the slaves, along with the land, as if to accomplish some wish Henry, tied to the want and need of a material world, had been too afraid to try to fulfill in life. (180)

To Maude’s mind, the status her family has achieved as black slave owners must be retained at all cost, since, as free blacks, the “foundation of wealth” they have built over time has been much harder to come by than for their white neighbors. Concerns about the future look very different for the novel’s enslaved individuals, for whom the future holds no promise of freedom, security, or even improvement. As was the case for Dilsey in the final section of *The Sound and the Fury*, hope for the future only exists for certain characters as they contemplate a better existence in the afterlife. Describing the sermons of the preacher, Valtims Moffett, the narrator explains:

Moffett, Sunday after Sunday, had but one theme—that heaven was nearer than anyone realized and that one step away from the righteous path could take heaven away forever. “Hang on,” he liked to say, “just hang on, cause heaven is right over there. See it. See it. Close your eyes and see it.” His ending words were that they should obey their masters and mistresses, for heaven would not be theirs if they disobeyed. “One day I want to sit with yall and eat peaches and cream in heaven. I don’t wanna have to lean over and look way way down and see yall burnin in them fires of hell.” (87)

Moffett’s promise of eventual relief in heaven is potentially heartening, but also reinforces the placating logic that being a good and dutiful slave is somehow divinely ordained. Though the many characters in *The Known World* who do gain freedom—whether through purchase or escape—are clearly unsatisfied at the thought of waiting until the afterlife to improve their circumstances, particularly dire situations do reveal them looking to that eternal realm. Just before Willis, another man kidnapped alongside Augustus, is sold back into slavery, the two men
share a few parting words: “Willis said to Augustus, ‘I be seein you. I be seein you in the bye and bye.’” Augustus said, “And I’ll see you, Willis. I’ll see you in the bye and bye. I promise” (279). In their present situation, the “bye and bye” becomes the only promise the men—like Dilsey—have with which to console one another.

Unlike what occurs in Faulkner’s novels, however, The Known World goes beyond simply providing characters’ speculative prolepses about the afterlife to go into that afterlife, detailing what happens to several of them in the moments just after they pass away. The first instance of this appears when Henry is on his death bed, as the narration moves fluidly between his waking thoughts and what comes after:

About nine he fell asleep and woke not long after. His wife and Fern were discussing a Thomas Gray poem. He thought he knew the one they were talking about but as he formed some words to join the conversation, death stepped into the room and came to him: Henry walked up the steps and into the tiniest of houses, knowing with each step that he did not own it, that he was only renting. (10-11)

This bizarre narration continues in the lines that follow:

He was ever so disappointed; he heard footsteps behind him and death told him it was Caldonia, coming to register her own disappointment. Whoever was renting the house to him had promised a thousand rooms, but as he traveled through the house he found less than four rooms, and all the rooms were identical and his head touched their ceilings. “This will not do,” Henry kept saying to himself, and he turned to share that thought with his wife, to say, “Wife, wife, look what they done done,” and God told him right then, “Not a wife, Henry, but a widow.” (11)

Here, the narrative voice moves beyond the bounds of what could possibly be known by any living character—even those existing in a future time—and into a more spiritual realm. The novel contains other passages of this kind, including what occurs following the death of Sheriff Skiffington, who—for all his self-proclaimed devoutness while alive—finds himself condemned to a Sisyphus-like eternity of propping up a Bible “some three feet taller than he was” (369). One
of the novel’s most poignant passages involves the otherworldly reunion of Augustus Townsend and his wife, Mildred, after both are murdered: Mildred’s spirit travels upstairs to find “Augustus in their bed, [asleep], and she got in and made herself comfortable in his arms” (365). Though Henry and Skiffington may indeed become versions of the South’s “garrulous outraged baffled ghosts” in death (Absalom, Absalom! 4), the ghostly reunion of Augustus and Mildred is a more positive spectral moment in the novel. This variation on prolepsis—looking not just forward in time but to a future realm out of time—marks one of the most extreme ways in which The Known World’s narrator displays its omniscience, moving far beyond the kinds of proleptic visions we see anywhere in the three Faulkner texts under discussion. Alongside the omniscient prolepses that detail future liberation, these authoritative visions of the afterlife have the potential to counteract characters’ own dark speculations as we experience the text in its entirety.

A final and very prominent proleptic tendency in The Known World has to do with one of the novel’s major preoccupations: what aspects of the antebellum South will go down in history, and how. Of course, one of the most obvious ways in which The Known World interacts with and revises history is by narrating black slaveholding, a phenomenon most historical and fictional accounts tend to leave out. As Donald Warren writes in “Slavery as an American Educational Institution: Historiographical Inquiries” (2005), slave ownership by blacks in the American south was “a rare circumstance familiar perhaps to historians but few lay people” (50). Writing black slave owners into the story of Manchester is one of many ways Jones’s novel refuses to be reductive of black identity during this historical period. But in addition to including

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7 For a detailed account of The Known World’s interaction with historical accounts of the antebellum South and the institution of slavery, see Katherine Bassard, “Imagining Other Worlds: Race, Gender, and the ‘Power Line’ in Edward P. Jones’s The Known World” (2008).
phenomena that is largely absent from the historical record of slavery—at least in its most widely-known iterations—*The Known World* goes further to enact the ways in which that record is constructed in the first place. In an early passage, for example, the narrator relates:

In 1855 in Manchester County, Virginia, there were thirty-four free black families, with a mother and father and one child or more, and eight of those free families owned slaves, and all eight knew one another’s business. When the War between the States came, the number of slave-owning blacks in Manchester would be down to five, and one of those included an extremely morose man who, according to the U.S. census of 1860, legally owned his own wife and five children and three grandchildren. The census of 1860 said there were 2,670 slaves in Manchester County, but the census taker, a U.S. marshal who feared God, had argued with his wife the day he sent his report to Washington, D.C., and all his arithmetic was wrong because he had failed to carry a one. (7)

This passage brings the constructedness of history into the foreground, revealing it to be heavily (and sometimes, erroneously) mediated through the hands of those who write it down. Jones skillfully weaves the anecdote of his census taker—as related by his all-knowing and authoritative narrator—together with an account of the census itself. Though the census may be the kind of document we often regard as simply “factual,” entirely objective, we are here forced to confront the possibility that factual accounts might themselves be more like fictional texts. Thus, this passage and many others like it enact what historian Hayden White has long argued about all historical narratives: that they are “a mixture of adequately and inadequately explained events, a congeries of established and inferred facts, at once a representation that is an interpretation and an interpretation that passes for an explanation of the whole process mirrored in the narrative” (281). As White explains, “Once it is admitted that all histories are in some sense interpretations, it becomes necessary to determine the extent to which historians’ explanations of past events can qualify as objective, if not rigorously scientific, accounts of reality” (281).
In *The Known World*, the “making” of history is also foregrounded in a series of prolepses that concern Fern Elston’s conversations with a Canadian pamphlet writer named Anderson Frazier. At work on a series called *Curiosities and Oddities about Our Southern Neighbors* in 1881, Frazier asks to interview Fern for his pamphlet on “free Negroes who had owned other Negroes before the War between the States” (106). In his interview, Frazier asks Fern to tell him about Henry Townsend, and she does so—to an extent. As the narrator explains, “Fern did not tell Anderson Frazier, the white man who wrote pamphlets, that Henry Townsend was the darkest student she ever had, but she did tell him that he was the first freed slave and was probably the brightest of all her students” (134). Another of Fern’s omissions is underscored when Frazier asks Fern to clarify why Caldonia’s mother might not have wanted her to marry Henry: “Fern was reminded again that he was white. If he were to come to know things about black people, about what skin was thought worthy and what skin was not, he would not learn them from her” (143). As in the passage regarding the census taker, Fern’s selective reporting to Frazier highlights the methodology through which all history is made: it is pieced together from an available selection of details and points of view, but can never represent all of them in the narrative it records. But in addition, the conversations between Fern and Frazier also contain some of the most uncanny resemblances to Faulkner’s *Absalom, Absalom!* within the novel. As Fern tells Anderson how Henry admired Milton’s Satan for proclaiming “that he would rather rule in hell than serve in heaven” (134), Henry begins to sound very much like his mentor and former master, Robbins, who tries to impress upon Henry that he should take what he wants and “let the world be damned” (141). But if Henry sounds just like Robbins, Robbins’s directive to “take hold of it all” despite the odds sounds even more like the philosophy of Thomas Sutpen
Moreover, because she plays the role of storyteller when it comes to Henry’s—and by extension, Robbins’s—life, there also exists a correlation between Fern and Rosa Coldfield. With Frazier acting as her Quentin-esque interlocutor, Fern even shares an anxiety with Rosa over how the information she divulges will be interpreted and passed on in the future. “‘I did not own my family,’” Fern tells Frazier, “‘and you must not tell people that I did. I did not. We did not. We owned…’ She sighed, and her words seemed to come up through a throat much drier than only seconds before. ‘We owned slaves. It was what was done, and so that is what we did’” (109). Fern’s concern over how she and other free black slaveholders will be remembered is yet another way in which the narrative highlights the making—and editing—of the historical record, a process that dictates how those in future generations will come to understand the past.

When taken together, all of the proleptic inclinations within The Known World make it a unique study in terms of narrative anachrony, since, as Genette reminds us, temporal prolepsis “is clearly much less frequent than the inverse figure, at least in the Western narrative tradition” (67). Jones’s choice to use a narrator with such remarkable proleptic abilities has not gone unnoticed in the scholarship surrounding The Known World. In her chapter on Jones’s novel in Time, Tense, and American Literature: When is Now? (2015), Cindy Weinstein notes the ways in which “the word ‘would’ repeatedly, almost flagrantly stands out as a key term in the novel’s sentences” (109) and provides an excellent overview of how this repeated usage “carries with it the full force, both negative and positive, of the future: a perpetual future of enslavement and/or a potential future of freedom” (130). Weinstein argues that Jones’s harnessing of the future “produces an array of black characters whose potentiality survives and flourishes, despite the ravages of slavery, and enables Jones himself to establish his own authorial mastery in all sorts
of aesthetically fascinating ways” (110). Indeed, the way The Known World’s narrator keeps our eyes on the future habitually reminds us that Jones is the mastermind behind his fictional world, flaunting what Weinstein calls his “utter mastery” over “the text and over the people and institutions that enslave so many of his characters” (112). In her analysis, Weinstein briefly relates Jones’s use of “would” to that in Faulkner’s Absalom, Absalom!, writing that Faulkner as author and narrators like Quentin and Shreve also tend to “gravitate toward the word ‘would’ in the telling of Sutpen’s story, and [bring] to bear all of the hermeneutic and temporal ambiguities that accompany its usage” (131). But, Weinstein argues, there is an important distinction between Faulkner’s and Jones’s uses of “would” in their constructions of the future:

In The Known World, black characters are not only victims of their potential, but also beneficiaries of it. Thus, although, like Faulkner, Jones tells a story of slavery and the generational havoc that it wreaks, and in much the same style, the crucial difference is that Jones takes the Quentin/Shreve thread of Absalom, Absalom! and applies it to his black characters. Against the logic of slaves being sold…is the presence of artistic power and possibility. The word ‘would’ no longer only signifies the likely and damning fate of a slave’s ‘future increase,’ but also registers the potential for freedom, both actual, as in escaping from slavery, and imaginative. (133)

Therefore, Weinstein suggests, in “changing the point of view from which the word ‘would’ might be considered, the black characters in The Known World are released from a devastating past and empowered to realize their future potential” (133). As my analysis has shown, the methods by which The Known World harnesses the power of the future are not limited to grammatical constructions that include the word “would,” and in all the ways the novel guides its readers to consider the future, there is a clear commitment to liberating black characters from the reductive identities placed upon them by existing narratives of the American South.

Thus, when Weinstein writes that Jones and Faulkner tell their stories in “much the same style” (133), she is certainly correct in the regard that Jones’s text is clearly influenced by the use
of narrative anachrony so prominent throughout Faulkner’s oeuvre. However, several
distinctions between the authors’ deployment of these anachronistic techniques do emerge after
close examination. Whereas Faulkner’s anachronies tend to be prompted by the consciousnesses
of characters for whom memories of the past are overpowering and visions of the future are
pessimistic, Jones places control over his narrative progression in the hands of the narrator, an
entity whose unmitigated access to events is not at all limited by the movement of characters’
minds. Even when Faulkner’s narratives do deviate from the memory-elicited analepses and
speculative prolepses I have charted, as in the omniscient prolepses found in Absalom, Absalom!
and Go Down, Moses, these proleptic shifts vary significantly from what we see in The Known
World: any omniscient foresight in Faulkner’s texts rarely brings with it an antidote to the sense
of futility that pervades the lives of his characters. Jones’s prolepses, in contrast, have the power
to offer a much more optimistic view. As Weinstein writes, Jones’s use of prolepsis not only
helps to “[escape] the pain of the present,” but “captures the hope and the reality that every slave
will and would one day be free” (109-110). Coleman also sees the possibility of something
“hopeful and uplifting” in the novel’s proleptic structure (15), especially its ending by which
point we have seen so many characters—black and white, enslaved and free—“evolve to accept
the idea of black freedom and equality” (32). The difference in tonal effect of the authors’
anachronies is, then, facilitated not so much by different techniques as by a different perspective.
Because the narrative anachronies in The Known World are put to use on behalf of the novel’s
black characters instead of its white ones (as in Faulkner), the narrative focuses our attention on
the futures those black characters will experience once liberated rather than the pasts the South’s
defeated whites will continue to mourn the loss of for generations to come.
Perspective is, thus, the crux of *The Known World*’s divergence from Faulkner’s experiments with temporality and narrative progression. Whereas Faulkner’s texts engage only peripherally with the experiences and struggles of black characters, *The Known World*’s narrating perspective makes these characters’ lives its focal point in all tenses: past, present, and future. Black individuals are, of course, always at least implicit in Faulkner’s Yoknapatawpha narratives, but they rarely take center stage, a dynamic that Jones’s narrative of Manchester flips entirely. The final section of *The Sound and the Fury* may focus on Dilsey as its central character, but our understanding of her speculative prolepses is still limited by what sense we can make of her outward interactions with other characters. Of the character-narrators who work to piece together the legendary tale of Thomas Sutpen in *Absalom, Absalom!* , not one of them is a former enslaved person from his plantation; descriptions of Sutpen’s slaves are always focalized through white characters like Rosa Coldfield—who conjures images like a “band of wild niggers like beasts half tamed to walk upright like men” (4)—and absolutely no attention is paid to what might have happened to these slaves once liberated. The one black character who does play a major role in the *Absalom, Absalom!*’s progression—eventually setting fire to the Sutpen mansion where Henry has returned “to die” (298)—is the former slave and Sutpen’s illegitimate daughter, Clytemnestra. However, we are only privy to a few of Clytie’s utterances, all of which are focalized through the guilt-ridden, analeptic imagination of Quentin from his vantage point as a descendent of white slave owners. And for all the omniscient abilities displayed in *Go Down, Moses*, the narrator of that text only minimally departs from the reductive ledger narratives of slaves’ lives in prolepses like the one that looks beyond the novel’s immediate temporal field to Tennie’s future. *The Known World*, on the other hand, includes a far greater range of voices and
experiences in its exploration of the themes of slavery and race, challenging what have 
previously been considered the voices that matter and deserve recording regarding these 
historical facets of the American South. Moreover, Jones’s novel does justice to the diversity 
among its black characters’ lives: some are enslaved, some are free, and some are slaveholding; 
some will attain success and contentment once liberated while others will meet less-than-positive 
ends. The all-seeing and -knowing perspective from which The Known World is told does not 
reduce the “black experience” to one type, but instead sheds light on the richness of different 
experiences to be found among Manchester’s black subjects. The use of narrative anachrony is 
key in achieving the novel’s shifts in tone, perspective, and emphasis when compared to 
Faulkner’s Yoknapatawpha storyworld; through its prolepses in particular, The Known World 
insistently reminds its readers of the positive prospects the future can hold and that the institution 
of slavery will eventually become the past for many of its characters. This commitment to 
looking forward is perhaps best articulated by one of Henry Townsend’s former slaves, 
Stamford, as he reflects on his past in prolepsis to his life as a free man: although they had for so 
long “kept him in chains,” now “It mattered only that those kind of chains were gone” (353-354).

**Faulkner’s Vision Revised: The Known World as a Metamodernist Novel**

At the beginning of Quentin’s section of The Sound and the Fury, as he sits listening to 
the watch that was once his grandfather’s, he remembers what Mr. Compson told him as the 
watch was passed down:

he said I give you the mausoleum of all hope and desire; it’s rather excruciating-ly apt 
that you will use it to gain the reducto adsurdum of all human experience which can fit your individual needs no better than it fitted his or his father’s. I give it to you not that 
you may remember time, but that you might forget it now and then for a moment and not 
spend all your breath trying to conquer it. Because no battle is ever won he said. They are
not even fought. The field only reveals to man his own folly and despair, and victory is an illusion of philosophers and fools. (76, sic)

Mr. Compson’s nihilism in this passage is no surprise. He is a character for whom human actions are meaningless; since we are powerless to alter life’s course of events, relying on time as an ordering system becomes utterly absurd. With these words resonating in his consciousness, we can see how Quentin’s own outlook—and the experience of reading his section, for that matter—is bleak and lacking in hope, as well. Submersion in character consciousness is, of course, one of the mainstays of Faulkner’s modernism, and as I have shown, the temporal movements in his texts are often reliant upon this submersion and what characters are recalling or reflecting upon at any given moment. It is in this respect that Jones’s narrative, and especially his experiments with time, differ from Faulkner’s work. By imbuing his omniscient narrator with full power over the narrative—to show whatever it wants whenever it sees fit—Jones untethers his narrative from the formal bonds of Faulkner’s craft, which eschews this kind of perpetual omniscience in favor of character interiority. This is, then, a key distinction between Faulkner’s modernism and what I have called Jones’s metamodernism: unlike Faulkner’s depressed and defeated characters, Jones’s narrator can and does conquer time, and does so in order to show what Faulkner’s narratives either did or could not. Both authors call attention the ways in which time and history are mediated by human interference; both authors put time to use as a means to structure their experimental texts; but only Jones manipulates temporality for the specific purpose of providing a more robust and potentially hopeful vision of his black characters and their lives.

In his metamodernist engagement with Faulkner’s texts, Jones draws on the American modernist’s arsenal of techniques while simultaneously showing what they and the novels in which they appear fail to take into account. Weinstein helpfully points out that, unlike the
characters he writes about, “Jones knows what is going to happen in ninety years” (112)—with this knowledge at hand, Jones can do and show things Faulkner could not have even if he had wanted to. The ability to fill in, revise, or even overturn aspects of the existing historical and literary records is one of metamodernism’s most crucial contributions. James and Seshagiri write that metamodernist contemporary narrative “consciously engages modernism through the inheritance of formal principles and ethicopolitical imperatives that are recalibrated in the context of new social or philosophical concerns” (92), a description that aptly fits The Known World both aesthetically and thematically. Of course, metamodernism is not the only way to categorize the kind of project Jones undertakes in The Known World; indeed, in discussing the novel and its relation to history and genre, many scholars have applied the label “postmodern” to Jones’s text. Susan V. Donaldson writes that The Known World is both a “historical novel” and “a postmodern one written for a postmodern South and a postmodern age—with all the connotations of a loss of mastery that term ‘postmodern’ carries” (268). While Donaldson does nod to Manchester’s correlation with Yoknapatawpha, the bulk of her analysis focuses on the ways The Known World operates in relation to textual precursors like autobiographical slave narratives and “the long shadow cast by Gone with the Wind” (268). Maria Seger designates the text a “postmodern slave narrative” through “a reading of the novel’s ekphrastic system,” specifically its descriptions of maps and other visual representations that together work toward “problematising language’s representational ability” (1182). Both authors offer sophisticated and compelling analyses of how The Known World participates in postmodernist practices, and by no means do I want to suggest that postmodernism is an invalid lens through which Jones’s novel can be understood. However, I maintain that the relationship to Faulkner’s canon is a key aspect
of Jones’s project and an important factor to consider as we situate *The Known World* in relation to literary history.

Through the redeployment of Faulkner’s radical use of narrative anachrony—that is, of “modernist aesthetics pioneered in the early twentieth century” (James and Seshagiri 89)—Jones both styles *The Known World* after Faulkner and underscores his own departures from Faulkner’s style and commitments. *The Known World* is not a rejection of but rather an “explicit engagement” (James and Seshagiri 87) with Faulkner’s approach. Matthew Dischinger is in line with my thinking here when he writes of his hesitance to agree with the notion “that projects like Jones’s should be read as discontinuous, abrupt shifts away from southern modernism”; instead, Dischinger argues that a work like *The Known World* “should be read as building on the tracks laid by Faulkner, specifically, to take southern literature to a new imaginative place” (226). Dischinger’s overarching interest is in rethinking the term “postsouthern” as applied to texts like Jones’s, but his argument for reconsidering that term works equally well for reconsidering the label “postmodern”: “Jones, by at once extending and redirecting Faulkner’s project, may provide an alternate route, emerging from the shadow of the Faulkner train with a set of tracks headed someplace new, albeit familiar” (220). The emphasis here is on both familiarity and difference, suggesting that the novel’s relationship to “the Faulkner train” is more complicated than simply a dismissal, reversal, or complete departure. James and Seshagiri’s metamodernism is a particularly apt way of conceptualizing Jones’s project, as *The Known World*’s evokes Faulkner’s settings, themes, and forms very purposefully in order to supplement and push back against them. If *The Known World* is indeed a palimpsest narrative, as I have argued at the onset of this chapter, Faulkner’s quintessential brand of American modernism is a major textual
antecedent over which Jones’s text is etched. *The Known World*, like Alice’s multi-media artwork within it, relies on the careful inclusion of preexisting materials to make its powerful statement, and to show the ways of seeing and knowing—having finally arrived at “the future”—we can now no longer return to.
CHAPTER TWO

ITERATIVE NARRATION IN GERTRUDE STEIN AND JULIE OTSUKA

If The Known World can be called a “metamodernist” text according to James and Seshagiri’s terminology, the contemporary text to which I now turn my attention cannot so readily be fitted with that label. In this chapter, the modernist legacy I explore is that of Stein’s Three Lives (1909), a text published several decades before Faulkner’s work but that is similarly regarded as a site of narrative experimentation. Among the formal elements noted most frequently in the scholarship surrounding Stein’s writing is her use of repetition, or, as Pericles Lewis describes it more precisely, her “patterns of repetition and variation at the sentence level” (105). In fact, Marianne DeKoven argues that “The most noticeable feature of Stein’s writing between 1906 and 1911 is its repetitiveness,” and furthermore, that “It is undoubtedly safe to assert that no other writer has ever used repetition as extensively as Stein did in this period” (40). Less discussed than these syntactical repetitions, however, are the many narrations in Stein’s writing that imply a more thematic repetition—in other words, passages that gesture toward actions and experiences that themselves occur time and again in the lives of her characters. These passages are what Genette refers to as “iterative” narrations, wherein “a single narrative utterance takes upon itself several occurrences together of the same event” (116). The many iterative narrations within Stein’s Three Lives illustrate the habitual actions that fill her working-class women’s lives, narrating and even foregrounding the mundanities rarely emphasized in
more conventional narrative texts. This chapter will focus on these iterative narrations—as well as their interactions with other experimental narrative practices—in Stein’s *Three Lives* and Julie Otsuka’s *The Buddha in the Attic* (2011), a contemporary novel whose distinctive style of narration, like Stein’s, also calls attention to the monotonous lives and labor of its female characters. Though not “explicitly” (James and Seshagiri 87), I argue that Otsuka’s narrative recalls not only the trademark repetition of words and phrases in *Three Lives* but also the spirit of Stein’s modernism, employing iterative narration as a way to help illustrate quotidian existence and what Stein calls the “internal history” (“How Writing is Written” 153) of early-twentieth-century American women.

Turning once again to *Narrative Discourse*, we can see that Genette defines iterative narration as just one of narrative’s “capacities for ‘repetition’ on the part of both the narrated events (of the story) and the narrative statements (of the text)” (114). “Schematically,” Genette writes, “we can say that a narrative, whatever it is, may tell once what happened once, n times what happened n times, n times what happened once, once what happened n times” (114). Genette gives name to each of the “types of relations of frequency” (114) in this schema: narrating once what happened once is termed “singulative” narrative (114), narrating n times what happened once is called “repeating” narrative (116), and “narrating one time (or rather: at one time) what happened n times” is designated “iterative” narration (116). Genette writes that singulative narration, “where the singularity of the narrative statement corresponds to the singularity of the narrated event, is obviously far and away the most common” type of narration (114), while “in the classical narrative and even up to Balzac, iterative sections are almost always functionally subordinate to singulative scenes, for which the iterative sections provide a
sort of informative frame or background” (116-117). To put it another way, “The classic function of iterative narrative is thus fairly close to that of description…Like description, in the traditional novel the iterative narrative is at the service of the narrative ‘as such,’ which is the singulative narrative” (117). However, Genette explains that there do exist narratives that elevate the iterative above the status of background and description; in a pronouncement as bold as DeKoven’s regarding Stein’s use of repetition, Genette writes that “no novelistic work has ever put the iterative to a use comparable—in textual scope, in thematic importance, in degree of technical elaboration—to Proust’s use of it in the Recherche du temps perdu” (117).

An examination of the iterative narration at work in Stein’s Three Lives would seem to challenge Genette’s claim. Stein’s novel, composed of three separate narratives focused on working-class women in the fictional Southern town of Bridgepoint, is filled with narrations of events and experiences that happen “regularly, ritually, every day, or every Sunday, or every Saturday, etc.” (Genette 117-118) in the lives of its characters. Moreover, these iterative passages are often repeated multiple times throughout the text as part of Stein’s larger aesthetic of repetition, blurring and overlapping Genette’s categories of narrative frequency. As Stein explains in “Composition as Explanation” (1926), the narratives in Three Lives are marked by a “constant recurring and beginning” that achieves a sense of “continuous present” (5-6), a style she describes later in “How Writing is Written” (1935) as befitting the “time-sense” of the modern era (152):

the Twentieth Century gives of itself a feeling of movement, and has in its way no feeling for events. To the Twentieth Century events are not important. You must know that. Events are not exciting… the novel which tells about what happens is of no interest to anybody. It is quite characteristic that in The Making of Americans, Proust, Ulysses, nothing much happens. People are interested in existence. (157-158)
Existence, *experience*—these, for Stein, are what modernist fiction should take as its subjects and reflect through its form. The “feeling of movement” in *Three Lives* is not that of a plot-driven narrative where major events “happen” one after the other, but is instead an immersion in the more minor, day-to-day experiences that make up the vast majority of its characters’ lives. Along with the use of repetitive syntax, the narration of these mundane occurrences through the iterative is one of the ways Stein’s text illustrates how, as she puts it, “the ‘internal history’ of a country always affects its use of writing. It makes a difference in the expression, in the vocabulary, even in the handling of grammar” (153). Otsuka’s *The Buddha in the Attic*, which relates the experiences of a group of Japanese “picture brides” and their immigration to California during the early twentieth century, expresses its story through a striking first-person plural narration that—much like Stein’s use of repetition—is arguably the novel’s most prominent formal element. But as my analysis will show, iterative narration is just as essential in rendering the intricacies of mundane experience as are the other stylistic features in both authors’ fictions, outpacing “singulatively” narrated scenes and submerging readers in their lower-class women’s lives. Although Otsuka’s text was written a century after *Three Lives*, both novels put experimental forms to work in order to narrate specifically modern experiences, since the influx of picture brides to California was, in fact, historically concurrent with the period in which Stein published her landmark text. Like *Three Lives*, *The Buddha in the Attic* narrates the internal, lived histories of modernist women instead of the period’s events as they are chronicled “externally” by History proper. However, Otsuka adds to the archive of experiences found in Stein’s text through the inclusion of a group of women most likely overlooked in many accounts
of early-twentieth-century America, exploring their individual identities as well as the experiences they share as female members of a larger immigrant community.

“Every day just like the next one”: Stein’s *Three Lives*

A detailed examination of the complex narrational features in *Three Lives* allows for a more thorough appreciation of Stein’s multi-layered use of repetition and what it expresses about her characters’ lives, one that positions us to see how Otsuka’s novel reactivates and revises these narrative impulses. “The Good Anna,” the first of the life narratives that together make up *Three Lives*, is rife with the syntactical repetition of words, phrases, and sentence structures for which Stein’s writing is known. Phrases like “Anna led an arduous and troubled life” (3, 5, 10) and others are repeated frequently in the text, effectively stunting any sense of consistent forward progression. In addition to being syntactically repetitious and instances of “repeating narration” in Genette’s sense, these passages also gesture toward all of the iterative actions and events that fill Anna’s story. The narrative’s first paragraph is itself iterative, describing the frugal marketing Anna conducts each week in the story’s setting of Bridgepoint: “The tradesmen of Bridgepoint learned to dread the sound of ‘Miss Mathilda,’ for with that name the good Anna always conquered…[at Lindheims] the heads of the departments were all her friends and always managed to give her the bargain prices” (3, emphases mine). Further instances of iterative narration can be found on almost every page of the story and are frequently rendered by constructions including the word “always,” as in the examples above. As with the repetition of full phrases in the text, the frequent recurrence of “always” gives Stein’s narration a clunky, hyper-stylized feel, but it also indicates what Anna is “always” doing, saying, thinking, wishing, wanting, and experiencing on a thematic level. “The Good Anna” paints a picture of a particular
working-class immigrant woman’s life, a life the narrative shows to be as repetitious as the rhetorical devices used to narrate it. Notably, Anna’s daily “troubles” and activities are narrated in the first section of her story, before we are given the details of her childhood immigration from Germany or even learn that her full name is Anna Federner (13). This non-traditional placement of such key biographical information puts the particulars of Anna’s identity after her identity as a working-class woman, prioritizing the iterative over the singulative on a structural level. Thus, what Genette says of Proust we can also say of Stein: her text displays an “intoxication with the iterative” (123, emphasis in original) and makes that tendency evident early on.

Anna’s life is made up of the same routines and experiences again and again, year after year. Throughout “The Good Anna,” narrations of habitual action vastly outweigh events related singulatively, and even the events the narrative does relate as singulative contain frequent instances of the iterative within them. One such example is the saga of Anna’s “four different underservants” (5); embedded in the story of the second underservant, the narrator explains, “The kitchen was constantly a battle-ground. Anna scolded and Molly swore strange oaths, and then Miss Mathilda would shut her door hard to show that she could hear it all” (5). The iterative indicator “constantly” suggests that these arguments occur frequently while Molly is underservant, prolonging our sense of Anna’s life during this period despite the fact that this story arc is detailed only once in the narrative’s progression. Iterative passages like this and others are among the elements of the “The Good Anna” that cast Anna’s experiences as both highly repetitive and emblematic of the demographic of which she is a part. Note, for example,
how repetition and iterative narration each function when the narrator describes the house where Anna resides:

Anna managed the whole little house for Miss Mathilda. It was a funny little house, one of a whole row of all the same kind that made a close pile like a row of dominoes that a child knocks over, for they were built along a street which at this point came down a steep hill. They were funny little houses, two stories high, with red brick fronts and long white steps.

This one little house was always very full with Miss Mathilda, an under servant, stray dogs and cats and Anna’s voice that scolded, managed, grumbled all day long. (3)

Here, the most obvious syntactical repetition is of the phrases “little house” and “funny little house.” Although the descriptor “funny” might imply that Miss Mathilda’s home is in some way unique, we learn immediately thereafter that all the houses in the row are “funny little houses,” a revelation that—in addition to achieving an aesthetic of verbal repetition—indicates the homogeneity of the street, its houses, and by insinuation, its residents. If each of the “funny little houses” contains a servant whose life is just as “arduous and troubled” (3) as Anna’s, the phrase “like a row of dominoes that a child knocks over” gives not only a visual impression but also a tonal one: the lives of the street’s inhabitants face a downward trajectory, a depressing sameness rooted in the rote mechanics of their lives. As often in the narrative, the words “always” and “all day long” appear in the second paragraph of the passage above to signal this iterative repetition, as Stein narrates once what we are meant to understand as occurring continually, repetitiously, in Anna and Miss Mathilda’s lives. Of course, Anna and Miss Mathilda are just two of many women living in what the narrator later describes as “the houses of the lower middle class in the pleasant cities of the South” (25); permeating “The Good Anna” and Three Lives as a whole is the implication that many aspects of these “lower middle class” lives are anything but singular.
This is not to say, however, that the narrative does not render certain aspects of Anna’s identity and lived experience to be uniquely her own. Throughout the text, Anna is portrayed as a woman with clear preferences, convictions, and habits, and these, too, are often narrated by way of the iterative. Anna’s moral prudishness, for instance, is indicated by the fact that she “always took great care to seclude the bad dogs from each other whenever she had to leave the house” (4). Furthermore, her ideal employers are described as “large, abundant women, for such were always lazy, careless or all helpless, and so the burden of their lives could fall on Anna…Anna’s superiors must be always these large helpless women, or be men” (14). Stein’s use of the iterative in these and other passages suggests that Anna repeatedly finds contentment in situations where she feels she can “do whatever she thought best” and “scold” those around her, including “other girls and the colored man, and dogs, and cats, and horses and her parrot” (23) and at times even employers like Miss Mathilda and the bachelor Dr. Shonjen. In Anna’s life, power can only be experienced within the parameters of running a household and “scolding” whomever she can for their “own good” (23), beginning with the individuals—like the underservants, workers of color, and even animals—over whom she is positioned in the social and household hierarchies. Anna’s desire to “help” others in this way extends to members of the larger Bridgepoint community, as well; in another series of iterative passages, we learn that Anna “saved and saved and always saved, and then there and there, to this friend and to that, to one in her trouble and to the other in her joy, in sickness, death, and weddings, or to make young people happy, it always went, the hard earned money she had saved” (34). Repeatedly, the narrator explains, “Miss Mathilda had to save her Anna from the many friends, who in the kindly fashion of the poor, used up her savings and then gave her promises in place of payments” (12). Among
these “many curious friends” (12) is the widow Mrs. Lehntman, a woman in the community who helps “deliver young girls who were in trouble” (34) and whom the narrator refers to a number of times as “the romance in Anna’s life” (18). A homoerotic relationship between Anna and Mrs. Lenhtman is never articulated explicitly but only suggested by the narrator, one of many instances in which Stein’s use of verbatim repetition only further obscures narrative content. Despite the opacity of this and other aspects of the narrative’s meaning, however, the iterative nature of Anna’s particular existence is impressed upon the reader with increasing clarity.

As the narrative progresses, the events in Anna’s life—themselves related iteratively—become cyclical and repetitive, a trend about which the narrative is self-reflexive. “So Anna’s serving and her giving life went on,” the narrator explains, “each with its varied pleasures and its pains” (33). This iterative sentiment is reiterated a few pages later regarding the aid Anna provides to Mrs. Lehntman: “So it went on. Sometimes a little girl, sometimes a big one was in trouble and Anna heard of them and helped them to find places” (45), we are told, and then again shortly after, “And so Anna’s life went on, taking care of Miss Mathilda and all her clothes and goods, and being good to everyone that asked or seemed to need her help” (47). In these passages, repetition is not only for syntactical effect: it reflects with building intensity the sameness—the monotony—of Anna’s life. Notably, there even appear iterative passages that acknowledge their own cyclical repetition, like the following:

But Anna always found new people to befriend, people who, in the kindly fashion of the poor, used up her savings and then gave promises in place of payments. Anna never really thought that these people would be good, but when they did not do the way they should, and when they did not pay her back the money she had loaned, and never seemed the better for her care, then Anna would grow bitter with the world.

No, none of them had any sense of what was the right way for them to do. So Anna would repeat in her despair. (43)
The narrative’s acknowledgment of its own repetitiveness eventually extends to the passages of syntactical repetition, as well, as when the narrator heavy-handedly implores the reader on multiple occasions to “Remember, Mrs. Lehntman was the romance in Anna’s life” (20, 35). Thomas Fahy has argued that “reiterated sentences” like these “accumulate ironic force” throughout the narrative, especially as a way to underscore “the absurdity and futility of [Anna’s] actions” and ensure that the reader “becomes critical of Anna’s inability to acknowledge her erotic impulses for other women and the social beliefs she represents” (Fahy 28-29). While Fahy writes that “Anna’s lack of power comes from her inability to acknowledge her homoerotic desires for other women” (Fahy 30-31), we must also take into account Anna’s socioeconomic situation, and in particular how her working-class and immigrant roots place fixed limits on any real power she could hope to exercise over her life. By the end of the narrative, the relentless habitual nature of Anna’s existence begins to exhaust even her: after growing “always more tired,” Anna’s doctor makes her “promise to take care, to rest in bed a little longer and to eat more so that she would get stronger, but really how could Anna eat when she always did the cooking and was so tired of it all, before it was half ready for the table?” (55). Anna’s anticlimactic death following a seemingly minor operation ends the narrative abruptly and dispassionately, and we are left with the image of Anna’s “strong, strained, worn-out body” (56) having simply given up at long last. Only death can after the course of a life like Anna’s, in which, as the narrative takes care to remind us, “[t]here was never any end to [her] effort” (55).

Continual repetition of both syntax and event continues into the middle narrative of Three Lives, “Melanctha.” The novella’s title character is described again and again using the same words and phrases: for example, Melanctha is referred to repeatedly as “pale yellow” (60, 63).
and as having “a break neck courage” (63, 66, 68, 72). However, as in “The Good Anna,” these syntactical repetitions by no means fix clear referents or understanding in place, and in many cases, they encapsulate indications of habitual action within them. Many times throughout the narrative, the narrator reiterates either verbatim or a variant of the following sentiment:

“Sometimes the thought of how all her world was made, filled the complex, desiring Melanctha with despair. She wondered, often, how she could go on living when she was so blue” (60). The use of “sometimes” and “often” in this passage and others like it suggests that Melanctha’s depressive states are a frequent occurrence, although the specific reasons behind her despair are not stated explicitly:

Melanctha Herbert was always losing what she had in wanting all the things she saw.
Melanctha was always being left when she was not leaving others.

Melanctha Herbert always loved too hard and much too often. She was always full with mystery and subtle movements and denials and vague distrusts and complicated disillusions. Then Melanctha would be sudden and impulsive and unbounded in some faith, and then she would suffer and be strong in her repression.

Melanctha Herbert was always seeking rest and quiet, and always she could only find new ways to be in trouble.
Melanctha wondered often how it was she did not kill herself when she was so blue. Often she thought this would be really the best way for her to do. (62)

Versions of the sentences above will be repeated over and over throughout Melanctha’s story, and we can see how instances of the iterative are present within each of them: Melanctha is “always” doing this, “often” feeling that, “would” find herself in one situation or another, and so on. These language constructions gesture toward events that happen continually in Melanctha’s life, events that will be fleshed out more fully—albeit opaquely—as the story moves forward. Melanctha’s identity is narrated using a jumble of complex and contradictory terms, as are her patterns of behavior. However, while Melanctha is indeed characterized as a uniquely complicated young woman, the narrator also takes care to situate her within a particular subset of
Bridgepoint: after her friend Rose Johnson’s baby dies, the narrator explains, “Rose and Sam her husband were very sorry but then these things came so often in the negro world in Bridgepoint, that they neither of them thought about it very long” (59). Soon after, the narrator states that both women are “of the better sort of negroes, there, in Bridgepoint” (60), but then we are also told that Rose drifts from home to home “in the easy fashion of the poor” (61). These generalized statements related to race and class serve as an important counterweight to the singularity indicated by the novella’s subtitle, “Each One As She May”—Melanctha is “one,” but her individual experiences and options are also largely determined by her situatedness in a particular societal group. Like the novel’s opening life narrative, “Melanctha” includes iterative passages that index both Melanctha’s sameness to and difference from those in her immediate Bridgepoint community.

In many ways, “Melanctha” is a narrative about its title character’s sexual awakening, although—in keeping with Stein’s aesthetic approach to the novel as a whole—the details of this awakening are related murkily at best. As a young woman, Melanctha’s blooming sexuality is a puzzle to her, as she “had not yet come to understand what they meant, the things she so often heard around her, and which were just beginning to stir strongly in her” (66). The novel speaks around but never directly about sex, just as Melanctha herself cannot be forced to “say a thing she did not really know” (66) when pressed by her father about her relationship with a young man in the neighborhood. In search of the knowledge she lacks, Melanctha embarks on a series of “wanderings” (68): she repeatedly “wander[s] on the edge of wisdom” (70) in her discussions with the porters, at the railroad and the shipping docks, and while “watching men work on new buildings” (71). In these iterative passages that detail ritual action, the narrator repeats numerous
times that Melanctha always “made herself escape” these encounters, suggesting that it is a struggle for her to walk away from situations that teeter on the brink of sexuality. “And so this was the way Melanctha lived the four years of her beginning as a woman,” the narrator explains. “And many things happened to Melanctha, but she knew very well that none of them had led her on to the right way, that certain way that was to lead her to world wisdom” (72). This striking iterative passage leaves the exact nature of “that certain way” unarticulated, although it is brought into slightly clearer focus when Melanctha’s friend Jane Harden—“a roughened woman” who “wandered widely”—teaches the sixteen-year-old Melanctha “how to go the ways that lead to wisdom” (72-73). The many “wanderings” Melanctha shares with Jane soon give way to a more intimate relationship between the two women:

Then they began not to wander, and Melanctha would spend long hours with Jane in her room, sitting at her feet and listening to her stories, and feeling her strength and the power of her affection, and slowly she began to see clear before her one certain way that would be sure to lead to wisdom…Jane had many ways to do this teaching. She told Melanctha many things. She loved Melanctha hard and made Melanctha feel it very deeply. She would be with other people and with men and with Melanctha, and she would make Melanctha understand what everybody wanted, and what one did with power when one had it. (73-74)

Within the pages that detail their two-year relationship, the narrator repeatedly states that “Melanctha began to really understand” (74)—and at the end of their time together, “Melanctha had come to see very clear, and she had come to be very certain, what it is that gives the world its wisdom” (73). Again, if this “wisdom” and “understanding” are sexual in nature, the narrative refuses to disclose so explicitly; however, the narrative does allow for this interpretation since we are told that, following her coaching from Jane, “Melanctha these days wandered very widely” and “did not need help now to know, or to stay longer, or when she wanted, to escape” (76). Regardless of the opacity with which these events are detailed, Melanctha’s iterative
performances—just like Anna’s before her—are clearly linked to her search for power and the ability to have control over certain aspects of her life.

These early experiences of iterative narration related to Melanctha’s newfound womanhood prefigure what is by far the lengthiest portion of the narrative: her turbulent relationship with a “young mulatto” named Jeff Campbell, a “doctor who had just begun to practice” (76). During the time they spend together, the narration continually circles back to the same phrases and subjects, especially within the couple’s long-winded and meandering dialogues. When Jeff tells Melanctha in one sequence that “the colored people” should “not always have to be doing bad things for new ways to get excited,” her response is full of the syntactical repetition that permeates the narrator’s prose: “Yes I certainly do understand you when you talk so Dr. Campbell. I certainly do understand now what you mean by what you was always saying to me. I certainly do understand Dr. Campbell that you mean you don’t believe it’s right to love anybody” (85). Like many of the narrator’s descriptions, however, note that Melanctha’s dialogue also includes iterative language—that Jeff is “always saying” the same things—emphasizing that their wordy discussions are a recurring event and adding to the sense of “continuous present” in Stein’s text as a whole (“Composition as Explanation” 5). “They now always liked to be with each other,” the narrator explains, “and they now always had a good time when they talked to one another” (88, emphases mine). The adverb “always” appears throughout Jeff and Melanctha’s conversations again and again: “I always mean it what I say when I am talking” (85), Jeff insists more than once, to which Melanctha counters, “All you are always wanting Dr. Campbell, is just to talk about being good, and to play with people just to have a good time, and yet always to certainly keep yourself out of trouble” (86, emphases mine). During
these winding, overlapping conversations, attempts at effective communication bypass each other and meaning is left unclear; to use Jeff’s words, “I certainly do wonder, Miss Melanctha, if we know at all really what each other means by what we are always saying” (90). As DeKoven remarks so aptly of this quality in the novel, “Characters and narrator in Three Lives all speak as their minds work, expressing the sequence of their contradictory, ambivalent thoughts and feelings, coming to no conclusions, using language both to reveal the process of consciousness and to grope toward a connection with its inchoate contents” (41).

The conversational dynamics between Melanctha and Jeff are only one of the iterative aspects of their time together. Throughout their relationship, the couple’s patterns of behavior also become cyclical, repeating and recurring according to the same structures of progression: lengthy and repetitive debates like those above give way to short bursts of contentment, which become complicated by inner turmoil within one or both parties, which eventually lead to more attempts to “talk through” their relationship issues—beginning the cycle yet again. At one point in the narrative, for example, we are told that Jeff feels “uncertain” because “He never knew how much he really knew about Melanctha” (95). After a nearly two-page argument during which Jeff calls this to Melanctha’s attention (98-100), the issue is brushed past quickly with no real explanation or resolution; instead, we are simply told that Jeff once again “loved to talk himself out to Melanctha, and he loved to tell her how good it all was to him, and how he always loved to be with her, and to tell her always all about it” (100). Shortly thereafter, the sequence begins yet again when Jane Harden divulges elements of Melanctha’s past to Jeff that “nearly made him really want to leave her” (105). Thus, their relationship is itself iterative, composed of habitual patterns of behavior that never seem to cease and establish a distinctive—and for readers,
uniquely challenging—narrative progression. This structure is precisely what Pamela Caughie identifies when she writes that “the way the novella moves, the repetition of scenes and phrases…captures the slow emergence of a restless desire without any goal or resolution” (400). In fact, there are even moments in the narrative that seem to acknowledge that this iterative existence will be impossible to escape: as the narrator puts it during one of the couple’s many arguments, “this struggle lay there, strong, between them. It was a struggle, sure to be going on always between them. It was a struggle that was as sure always to be going on between them, as their minds and hearts always were to have different ways of working” (108).

The turbulent cycle of Melanctha’s relationship with Jeff only truly begins to alter at the end of the narrative, when Melanctha begins to “wander” yet again (130, 133, 134) and commences her friendship with Rose Johnson: “And so always Rose and Melanctha were more and more together, and Jeff Campbell could now hardly ever any more be alone with Melanctha” (143). While this development may seem to suggest a new, fresh stage in Melanctha’s life, much of what follows is simply repetition of what has come before—in terms of both syntax and Melanctha’s habits. Melanctha “clings” to her friendship with Rose much like she did with Jane Harden (149), and—although the roles seem almost reversed—her unsuccessful relationship with Jem Richards feels uncannily similar to what occurred with Jeff Campbell. Dan Bauer has noted this cyclical aspect of the story, writing that “we are given the impression Melanctha and Jeff, at least, can never really break out of their set cycles of personality, experience, and emotional states” (41). Adding to our sense that the narrative can only move in circles is the fact that, at the end of the story, many passages are repeated almost or exactly verbatim from much earlier in the text, as when the narrator repeats word-for-word that “Rose and Sam were very sorry” when
their baby died “but then these things came so often in the negro world in Bridgepoint that they
neither of them thought about it very long” (159-160). Melanctha’s death from illness at the end
of the story feels just as sudden and anti-climactic as Anna’s did, leading Bauer to observe quite
rightly that “Melanctha’s story can legitimately be called a tragedy, so filled with sadness and
undiminished disappointment are her life patterns” (31). The narrative’s underwhelming
conclusion is yet another instance of how even the most important singulative “events”—
including a central character’s death—are given much less space and emphasis than the iterative
aspects of experience that dominate that character’s life in a more incessant and undulating way.
Births, deaths, and the milestones in between may well be the events we typically deem
historically relevant, but in Stein’s text, they read like footnotes that are textually subordinate to
the elements her narration imbues with greater import.

By the time we reach “The Gentle Lena,” the final narrative in Three Lives, the life
patterns of its title character are so droning and mechanical as to feel pre-determined—by Stein’s
aesthetics as well as Lena’s total lack of autonomy over her own existence. Lena, we are told, is
“patient, gentle, sweet and german” and “had been a servant for four years” after being “brought
from Germany to Bridgepoint by a cousin” (171). From what we can gather, the four years of
Lena’s servitude have been made up of the same duties and activities each week: “Lena had good
hard work all morning, and on the pleasant, sunny afternoons she was sent out into the park to sit
and watch the little two year old girl baby of the family” (171). Within and outside of her day-to-
day responsibilities, it seems that Lena has little desire to alter the sequence of her life. “Lena
always saved her wages,” we are told, “for she never thought to spend them, and she always
went to her aunt’s house for her Sundays because she did not know that she could do anything
different” (179). As we might expect, these kinds of iterative narrations—as well as syntactical repetition—appear frequently within “The Gentle Lena.” However, there also appear many descriptions of its protagonist and her iterative activities that are infused with explicit references to class and labor:

Lena had the flat chest, straight back and forward falling shoulders of the patient and enduring working woman, though her body was now still in its milder girlhood and work had not yet made these lines too clear.

The rarer feeling that there was with Lena, showed in all the even quiet of her body movements, but in all it was the strongest in the patient, old-world ignorance, and earth made pureness of her brown, flat, soft featured face. Lena had eyebrows that were a wondrous thickness. They were black, and spread, and very cool, with their dark color and their beauty, and beneath them were her hazel eyes, simple and human, with the earth patience of the working, gentle, german woman. (172)

More than either of the other title characters we’ve come to know in the text, Lena is depicted as being of a type: she is heavy-handedly reduced by the narrator to the “middling class of farmers” (175) from which she originates. Furthermore, there are various indications throughout the narrative that other individuals in Bridgepoint—including her own relatives—view “people like that Lena” (178) in a similarly reductive light. At one point, for example, Lena’s uncle Mr. Haydon expresses the vague concern that “All young poor relations, who were brought from Germany to Bridgepoint were sure, before long, to need help and to be in trouble” (177). Soon after, we learn that Lena’s cousin, Mathilda, “would tell her friends how funny her mother was to take care of people like that Lena, and how, back in Germany, all Lena’s people lived just like pigs” (178). These unflattering sentiments reveal how Lena is routinely conceptualized as being a member of a more generalized group, one that is decidedly negative in the eyes of those around her: “Mrs. Haydon’s daughters hated that their mother should take Lena,” the narrator explains. “They hated to have a cousin, who was to them, little better than a nigger, and then everybody on
the steamer there would see her” (176). In these passages and elsewhere, “The Gentle Lena” reveals what the dream of immigration comes to look like in actuality for a lower-class woman like Lena: her life in America is one of sameness and servitude in which she has little control over any of what befalls her.

When Lena’s aunt arranges for her to marry a “young german-american tailor” named Herman Kreder, any shred of personal agency is only further wrested from her grasp (179). Herman, we learn, “did not care much to get married” but “was obedient to his father and his mother” (180)—phrases that appear repeatedly in some form or another throughout the story. Lena also “did not care much to get married” (180), but in keeping with the trajectory of her life thus far, her cares seem to matter very little. Unsurprisingly, iterative narration is used to describe every phase of Lena and Herman’s relationship. As the couple awaits their upcoming nuptials, we are told:

Lena liked the place where she was with the pleasant mistress and the good cook, who always scolded, and she liked the girls she always sat with. She did not ask if she would like being married any better. She always did whatever her aunt said and expected, but she was always nervous when she saw the Kreders with their Herman. (182)

Herman, too, has misgivings about the marital arrangements, causing him to run away to New York “to be with his married sister” and requiring his father to “[coax] Herman a long time” (188). Herman’s father went on whole days with his complaining to him, always troubled but gentle and quiet patient with him, and always he was worrying to Herman about what was the right way his boy Herman should always do, always whatever it was his mother ever wanted from him, and always Herman never made him any answer. (188)

Even in these passages, the repetition of “always” is employed to give a sense of tedious, ongoing iterative action despite the relatively short time periods under discussion. Once Lena
and Herman are married, and especially after the birth of their first child, the narrative—and
Lena’s life—seem to peter out and become all the more monotonous: “She just dragged around
and was careless with her clothes and all lifeless, and she acted always and lived on just as if she
had no feeling. She always did everything regular with the work, the way she always had had to
do it, but she never got back any spirit in her” (198). The narrative repeats versions of this
depressing sentiment multiple times before its end, emphasizing again that though Lena “always
just kept going now with her working” (198), she “always was more and more lifeless and
Herman now mostly never thought about her. He more and more took all the care of their three
children” (199). When Lena dies during the unsuccessful delivery of their fourth child, the text
suggests as its final word that Herman’s life will go on as usual without her: “Herman Kreder
was very well content now and he always lived very regular and peaceful, and with every day
just like the next one, always alone now with his three good, gentle children” (200). In death as
in life, Lena seems to have made only a very small impression; her quiet, repetitive existence
feels destined from the beginning to end even more understatedly than both Anna’s and
Melanctha’s did. Moreover, the suggestion that for Herman and the rest of the characters “every
day” will be “just like the next one” implies that the iterative nature of life in Bridgepoint will
persist long after Lena’s departure from the story. As in the two narratives preceding it, the
iterative narrations in “The Gentle Lena” go beyond mere description, actively immersing the
reader in the tedium its main characters experience daily until their lives come to an abrupt halt.

Upon finishing Three Lives, it is difficult not to come to the same conclusion that Beverly
Hume does about Stein’s text: that due to aesthetic features like “Stein’s use of repetition and of
the ‘prolonged present,’” the portraits of the women therein are “deterministic” ones (Hume).
Hume argues compellingly that while Stein’s repetitive narrations “may give the reader insight into the nature of such fated characters...they nevertheless remain in an uneasy stasis, one restricted, limited and determined largely by Stein’s own prolonged and continuous sense of ‘present’” (Hume). It is true that Stein’s artistic hand remains palpable throughout *Three Lives*, reminding us always of the controlling vision that shapes the contours of the text. This is certainly the case when character dialogue begins to mimic the narrator’s own patterns, as in the repetitious conversations between Jeff and Melanctha and moments like the following when Anna scolds an underservant by way of the iterative: “Can I do everything while you go around *always* thinking about nothing at all? If I ain’t after you *every minute* you would be forgetting all *the time*” (4, emphases mine). Another reminder of Stein’s presence is the entirely unnecessary repetition of character names within and between the three narratives; not only is “Mathilda” the first name of Anna’s employer, but also of Lena’s aunt, Mrs. Haydon (181), and the elder of Lena’s cousins (174).¹ *Three Lives* is riddled with these kinds of crossovers between its three stories. The cook who “always scolded” Lena is reminiscent of Anna (182), and the “little red brick, two story house” (80) where Melanctha lives with her mother cannot help but remind us that Miss Mathilda’s home was described in almost exactly the same way. This blurring and repeating between and within “The Good Anna,” “Melanctha,” and “The Gentle Lena” serves a purpose beyond asserting Stein’s aesthetic control over the novel and its characters, however.

The similarities that run through the narratives form a cohesion between the three women’s lives

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¹ For this reason, I take issue with David Lowenkron’s claim that names in “Melanctha”—because they are “repeated again and again”—function as “beacons that guide us through a chaotic world. Where relationships are constantly forming and fading, it is only the names that are definite and enduring” (Lowenkron 10-11). Across the novel as a whole, I would argue, the repetition of names from one narrative to the next undermines this feeling of “definite,” stable boundaries between them.
that remind us of their shared class status—and, at the same time, underscore the crucial differences that have a hand in determining their lives and experiences, such as Melanctha’s racial difference from the other women. Moreover, the repetitive nature of each woman’s existence is indicative to an extent of the larger groups to which she belongs and which themselves largely define and dictate that existence. DeKoven writes that repetition is “a complex, overdetermined phenomenon in *Three Lives,*” one whose purpose is at least partly “mimetic: it gives a truer representation than standard writing of the raw process of consciousness” (41). By attending to the text’s use of iterative narration rather than focusing solely on its repetitive syntax, as other scholars have done, my analysis illustrates how the former serves a mimetic purpose, as well, extending beyond the level of style to shed light on the ebbs and flows of repetitive human experience that together make up *Three Lives.* The iterative narrations that chronicle the lives in Stein’s novel may be tedious, but they are also true, providing a medium through which the experiences History discards can be expressed, encountered, and restored to the archive.

**Narrating “the invisible world”: Otsuka’s *The Buddha in the Attic***

In his introduction to the 1933 edition of *Three Lives,* Carl Van Vechten wrote that “a vast sea of writers [seemed] to be swimming in the inspiration derived from [Stein’s] prose” (x). I want to turn now to a contemporary text that reaffirms the validity of Van Vechten’s claim in the twenty-first century, Julie Otsuka’s 2011 novel *The Buddha in the Attic.* Otsuka’s text resonates with Stein’s *Three Lives* on both an aesthetic and a thematic level as it details the lives of the Japanese picture brides who immigrate as a group to California during the early twentieth century. Among the distinctive formal qualities of Otsuka’s novel are its frequent syntactical
repetitions and the use of first-person plural—or “communal”—narration, a stylistic element discussed at length in critical conversations about the text. Much like *Three Lives*, however, *The Buddha in the Attic* also weaves into its unique narrational texture many iterative narrations that draw our attention to the routine patterns of behavior stemming from its characters’ roles as laborers and caregivers. While both novels immerse their readers in the minutiae of female experience—and indeed, prioritize that experience over the types of events more conventionally deemed worthy of documentation—Otsuka’s text emphatically underscores the status shared by its modernist-era women as a group set apart from the dominant culture surrounding them. Through the simultaneous use of iterative and communal narrations, *The Buddha in the Attic* more deliberately performs the lived experiences that bond its characters together as well as those that distinguish them from one another, exposing the layers and intricacies of life for Japanese women from immigration to eventual internment.

The first of *The Buddha in the Attic*’s two epigraphs, from Ecclesiasticus 44:8-9, foreshadows the group nature of the narrative to follow:

> There be of them, that have left a name behind them, that their praises might be reported. And some there be, which have no memorial; who are perished, as though they had never been; and are become as though they had never been born; and their children after them.

The “they” implied here who will have “no memorial” are, of course, the Japanese women who immigrate to America only to have the events of WWII eventually jeopardize their newfound stability. Once the novel proper begins, however, the pronouns “we” and “us” are used to narrate

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the women’s experiences throughout, providing a more intimate proximity to the group than
would an observational, “they” perspective. “On the boat we were mostly virgins,” begins the
first line of the narrative. “We had long black hair and flat wide feet and we were not very tall”
(3). The narration goes on:

Some of us had eaten nothing but rice gruel as young girls and had slightly bowed legs,
and some of us were only fourteen years old and were still young girls ourselves. Some
of us came from the city, and wore stylish city clothes, but many more of us came from
the country and on the boat we wore the same old kimonos we’d been wearing for
years—faded hand-me-downs from our sisters that had been patched and redyed many
times. (3)

In this opening sequence, what begins as a first-hand description of shared experience begins to
break off into more individualized experiences denoted by phrases like “some of us” and “many
more of us.” This oscillation between group and individual identity will continue throughout the
novel, as in the three life narratives that make up Stein’s text: much like Anna, Melanctha, and
Lena, Otsuka’s portrait brides are each situated by the narrator within larger communities while
at the same time endowed with characteristics that are uniquely their own. Also as in Stein, the
narration in Otsuka’s novel is riddled with repetition. In “Come, Japanese!,” the novel’s opening
chapter, the phrase “On the boat” appears repeatedly on nearly every page: “On the boat, we
often wondered: Would we like them? Would we love them? Would we recognize them from
their pictures when we first saw them on the dock?” (4). Using the same sentence construction,
the narrating voice relates soon after that “On the boat we crowded into each other’s bunks every
night and stayed up for hours discussing the unknown continent ahead of us” (7). Within these
passages, we can see both syntactical repetition and gestures toward repeated experiences that
are conveyed through language like “often” and “every night.” These narrative phenomena are
indicative of how repetition on thematic and aesthetic levels will abound within Otsuka’s novel,
and—when coupled with the use of communal narration—articulate the tangled web of experiences that index the women’s singular and group identities.

In the novel’s first chapter, much of the narration calls attention to the iterative activities in which the women are engaged during their journey to America, and many of these passages use syntactical repetition while conveying this information. During the evenings the women spend sleeping in steerage on “narrow metal racks stacked one on top of the other” (4), for example, their nightly rituals are related as follows:

At night we dreamed of our husbands. We dreamed of new wooden sandals and endless bolts of indigo silk and of living, one day, in a house with a chimney. We dreamed we were lovely and tall. We dreamed we were back in the rice paddies, which we had so desperately wanted to escape. The rice paddy dreams were always nightmares. We dreamed of our older and prettier sisters who had been sold to the geisha houses by our fathers so that the rest of us might eat, and when we woke we were gasping for air. For a second I thought I was her. (4-5)

The continual repetition of “we dreamed” and the sentence structure in which it is situated achieves an effect of accumulation, underscoring the proliferation of dreams that occur nightly but also the many different women whose individual reflections make up this list. The narration goes on to explain that “often, in the middle of the night” when they are “jolted awake by a violent swell,” the women momentarily “had no idea where we were or why our beds would not stop moving, or why our hearts were pounding with such dread” (5). Each time this occurs,

We reached out for our mothers then, in whose arms we had slept until the morning we left home. Were they sleeping now? Were they dreaming? Were they thinking of us night and day? Were they still walking three steps behind our fathers on the streets with their arms full of packages while our fathers carried nothing at all? Were they secretly envious of us for sailing away? (5-6)

Otsuka makes use of repetitive phrasing and structure once again in the set of questions above as she reveals the thoughts that inhabit the women’s minds night after night on the boat, while also
providing a sense of the iterative experiences that occupied them back home in Japan. This combination of syntactical repetition and iterative narration makes our glimpses of the women’s past lives all the more powerful, with each additional “Were they…?” punctuating the realization that the women will likely never see the mothers they dream of again. Iterative passages recur throughout this first chapter, capturing the monotony of the journey and the women’s increasing frustrations with it: “On the boat we complained about everything” (10)…“On the boat we often stood on the deck for hours with the wind in our hair, watching the other passengers go by” (13)…“On the boat we ate the same food every day and every day we breathed the same stale air. We sang the same songs and laughed at the same jokes and in the morning, when the weather was mild, we climbed up out of the cramped quarters of the hold and strolled the deck” (12). The tediousness of the women’s shared experiences during this period is made more palpable by both the syntactical repetition and iterative narration Otsuka employs, as these aesthetic features belabor the reading process and encourage us to linger in the space of repetitive action.

Another aspect of the women’s experience expressed through iterative sequences are the nature of their relationships onboard the boat, in terms of friendship—“who to trust and who to befriend and how to befriend her” (16-17)—as well as more romantic liaisons. Some of the women, we learn, “could not resist becoming friendly with the deckhands” (14): “One of us on the boat became pregnant,” the communal narrator explains, and another “jumped overboard after spending the night with a sailor and left behind a short note on her pillow: After him, there can be no other” (14-15). For some of the women onboard, we learn, intimate encounters are not limited to the male passengers. “On the boat we sometimes crept into each other’s berths late at
night and lay quietly side by side, talking about all the things we remembered from home,” the narration relates. And then:

Sometimes we found ourselves saying things we had never said to anyone, and once we got started it was impossible to stop, and sometimes we grew suddenly silent and lay tangled in each other’s arms until dawn, when one of us would pull away from the other and ask, ‘But will it last?’ And that was another choice we had to make. If we said yes, it would last, and went back to her—if not that night, then the next, or the night after that—then we told ourselves that whatever we did would be forgotten the minute we got off the boat. And it was all good practice for our husbands anyway. (18)

If the women’s sexual experiences with one another are reduced to “good practice” by the final line of this passage, the narrative quickly complicates that notion in the very next segment of the chapter, set off by itself from the narration before and after for emphasis: “A few of us on the boat never did get used to being with a man, and if there had been a way of going to America without marrying one, we would have figured it out” (18). Notably—and although the exact character of the homoerotic relations between the women are described only vaguely—the fact that they are homoerotic is stated much more clearly than in *Three Lives*; whereas Stein’s text only suggests that sexual encounters have taken place, the internal perspective provided by Otsuka’s narrator leaves no room for doubt. But despite the differences in the particulars they disclose, the two novels share an obvious emphasis on the routine nature of these intimate encounters and the power of iterative narration to help crystallize that ongoing experience.

One final activity the narration stresses repeatedly during the women’s journey is their tendency to muse over what America will be like, a mental process that unearths many overly-optimistic predictions about the fates that await them. Despite their homesickness and fears of the new and unknown,

even the most reluctant of us had to admit that it was better to marry a stranger in America than grow old with a farmer from the village. Because in America the women
did not have to work in the fields and there was plenty of rice and firewood for all. And wherever you went the men held open the doors and tipped their hats and called out, “Ladies first” and “After you.” (7)

These projected hopes about the future color the women’s perceptions of their new husbands, as well, whose pictures, they tell us, are carried in “tiny oval lockets” around their necks and in “the sleeves of our kimonos, which we touched often, just to make sure they were still there” (11). In a passage that once again gestures toward the iterative activities of their pasts, the women explain why they are confident they will “make good wives”:

We knew how to cook and sew. We knew how to serve tea and arrange flowers and sit quietly on our flat wide feet for hours, saying absolutely nothing of substance at all. A girl must blend into a room: she must be present without appearing to exist. We knew how to behave at funerals, and how to write short, melancholy poems about the passing of autumn that were exactly seventeen syllables long. (6)

This passage continues on for several more lines, with the powerful repetition of “We knew” accentuating the lives of dutiful repetition to which many of the women were accustomed back home in Japan. Moreover, these lines indicate the various types of knowledge with which the women have been equipped from a young age: some involving the practicalities of running a household, and others of a more creative nature. Still, and despite their confidence in these wifely abilities, the women find themselves repeatedly asking an Englishman aboard the boat—who has “been to America many times”—a number of questions that belie their apprehension: “Was it true that Americans had a strong animal odor?...And were the houses in America really three times the size of our own?...And did he think we would be happy there?” (13-14). In a striking proleptic passage that ends the text’s opening chapter, we learn that happiness in America will be by no means guaranteed. When they realize they have been misled by the matchmakers with photographs that were “twenty years old” and letters written by “professional
people with beautiful handwriting whose job it was to tell lies and win hearts,” the narrator explains, the women “would lower our heads and smooth down the skirts of our kimonos and walk down the gangplank and step out into the still warm day. This is America, we would say to ourselves, there is no need to worry. And we would be wrong” (18). In America, the women will be faced with both the challenges of their minority status and a whole new set of day-to-day duties that prove their lives of iterative labor have only just begun.

As is evident in many of the excerpts above, the use of communal narration in The Buddha in the Attic by no means reduces the women to one, homogenous identity; rather, the narration explores the traits and experiences they do share alongside the individual qualities that distinguish them. Aside from the very explicit divisions demarcated by phrases like “Some of us” and “One of us” throughout the text, there are moments related through communal narration that are obviously too singular to be applicable to the group as a whole, as in the following early example: “Perhaps the real reason we were sailing to America was to track down a long-lost father who had left the family years before…Or perhaps we were leaving behind a young daughter who had been born to a man whose face we could now barely recall” (11). Even further localizing this second “perhaps,” the narration continues:

On the boat we had no idea we would dream of our daughter every night until the day that we died, and that in our dreams she would always be three and as she was when we last saw her: a tiny figure in a dark red kimono squatting at the edge of a puddle, utterly entranced by the sight of a dead floating bee. (12)

Though expressed with the same “we” narration found consistently throughout the text, we are clearly meant to understand this memory as being unique to a single woman; however, the effect achieved by the “we” is to suggest that there are many similarly heartbreaking stories to be told within the larger group of women. One of the most impactful moments of this movement
between community and individuality appears in “First Night,” the brief chapter that details the initial sexual encounters between the women and their new husbands. Syntactically, repetition of “They took us” runs throughout the chapter, and once again, the “us” that encapsulates the women becomes fractured and multiplicitous with every subsequent instance. “That night our new husbands took us quickly,” the chapter begins. “They took us calmly. They took us gently, but firmly, and without saying a word. They assumed we were the virgins the matchmakers had promised them we were and they took us with exquisite care” (19). This opening passage gives way to experiences that are at times radically—and horribly—different: “They took us before we were ready and the bleeding did not stop for three days” (19), one example relates, and in another,

They took us violently, with their fists, whenever we tried to resist. They took us even though we bit them. They took us even though we hit them. They took us even though we insulted them—You are worth less than the little finger of your mother—and screamed out for help (nobody came). (19-20)

These discomfiting, confessional passages are numerous; in one particularly humiliating example, the narration reveals, “They took us with the assistance of the innkeeper and his wife, who held us down on the floor to keep us from running away” (20-21). In several instances, two experiences are juxtaposed in extremely close proximity in order to underscore their jarring contrast: “They took us in six seconds and then collapsed on our shoulders with small shuddering sighs, and we thought to ourselves, That’s it? They took us forever, and we knew we would be sore for weeks” (21). Importantly, some passages do gesture toward the beginning of more positive encounters between the women and their husbands, as in one that relates, “They took us with more skill than we had ever been taken before and we knew we would always want them” (22). This exhaustive catalogue of the women’s experiences not only nuances the “us” that
narrates the novel, but also restructures the type of repetitive sentence structure that has been employed in the text so far, as the status of subject is transferred from the women to the men who “take” them. This is yet another way in which Otsuka’s repetitive sentence structures help reflect and add gravity to the experiences her novel communicates, experiences that overlap and diverge with regularity within the group at hand, and—in many cases—happen not once but routinely within the lives of the characters.

Much like the drudgery of day-to-day reality faced by Anna and Lena after their immigration to America, the new, American lives of the narrating women in *The Buddha in the Attic* are patchworked together by routine labor. “Home” for the women becomes “wherever the crops were ripe and ready for picking”; “Home was wherever our husbands were. Home was by the side of a man who had been shoveling up weeds for the boss for years” (25). In contrast to what occurs in “First Night,” the “they” that appears regularly in the passages detailing the women’s experiences in America no longer refers to their new husbands but to the employers for whom they now work:

> We settled on the edges of their towns, when they would let us. And when they would not—*Do not let sundown find you in this country, their signs sometimes said*—we traveled on. We wandered from one labor camp to the next in their hot dusty valleys—the Sacramento, the Imperial, the San Joaquin—and side by side with our new husbands, we worked their land. (23)

As is typical in Otsuka’s text, iterative phrasing is used to narrate the women’s continual labor. “We spent our days planting and picking tomatoes from dawn until dusk and spoke to no one but our husbands for weeks at a time” (34), the women relate. This iterative narration of the women’s “days” is followed by a more aerial view of time, wherein “Some years our crops were good and the prices were high and we made more money than we’d ever dreamed of” and “Other
years we lost everything to insects or mildew or a month of heavy rains, or the price of tomatoes fell so low that we had no choice but to auction off all our tools to pay off our debts” (34-35). This cyclical, repetitive existence is not only experienced by those laboring “in their orchards and fields” (29) but also by the women who find work as servants in the country—“quietly mopping their floors, waxing their furniture, bathing their children” (44)—or in one of California’s “Japantowns” (50):

We worked in basement laundries in Japantowns in the most run-down sections of their cities—San Francisco, Sacramento, Santa Barbara, L.A.—and every morning we rose before dawn with our husbands and we washed and we boiled and we scrubbed. And at night when we put down our brushes and climbed into bed we dreamed we were still washing, as we would every night for years. (50)

The duties of work performed daily are followed by those expected of the women by their husbands at home. “We cooked for them,” the women explain. “We cleaned for them. We helped them chop wood. But it was not we who were cooking and cleaning and chopping, it was somebody else. And often our husbands did not even notice we’d disappeared” (37). The toll of this grueling repetition—which is likened numerous times in the novel to a waning sense of selfhood, a “disappearing”—leaves the women utterly devoid of any ownership over their own lives: “We stopped dreaming. We stopped wanting. We simply worked, that was all” (37). The numbing sameness of work becomes the very essence of the women’s lives and the common bond that unites their experience of living in America, regardless of where and for whom they work.

But what these iterations of labor also make clear are the experiences unique to this group of women in particular due to their difference from the white Americans around them. The “Whites,” as they are referred to in the title of the novel’s third chapter, are of a world quite apart
from the women whose voices together narrate The Buddha in the Attic. “Stay away from them,” the women’s husbands warn them. “Approach them with caution, if you must…Be humble. Be polite. Appear eager to please. Say ‘Yes, sir,’ or ‘No, sir,’ and do as you’re told. Better yet, say nothing at all. You now belong to the invisible world” (25-26). Though the women sense that their employers admire them for their “stamina,” discipline,” and “docile dispositions” (29), they are also keenly aware that these same Americans “did not want us as neighbors in their valleys. They did not want us as friends” (35):

We lived in unsightly shacks and could not speak plain English…We were taking over their cauliflower industry. We had taken over their spinach industry. We had a monopoly on their strawberry industry and had cornered their market on beans. We were an unbeatable, unstoppable economic machine and if our progress was not checked the entire western United States would soon become the next Asiatic outpost and colony. (35)

These xenophobic fears motivate routine attacks against the property belonging to the women’s families—via buckshot, dynamite, and arson—attacks that go unpunished by local law enforcement: “when we called the sheriff to come out and take a look he told us there were no clues worth following” (36). Although the women living in J-town “rarely saw [whites] at all” (50), this does not exempt them from acts of hate and discrimination when they do venture outside of their immediate communities:

Their men slapped our husbands on the back and shouted out, “So solly!” as they knocked off our husbands’ hats. Their children threw stones at us. Their waiters always served us last. Their ushers led us upstairs, to the second balconies of their theaters, and seated us in the worst seats in the house. Nigger heaven, they called it. (52)

Though these recurring encounters are frustrating—even terrifying—the women are instructed by their husbands to simply smile and “[step] aside.” “Because the only way to resist,” their husbands insist, “was by not resisting...We learned to live at a distance from them, and avoided
them whenever we could” (52). Taking these stifling limitations into account, it is no wonder why the women dream constantly of leaving America for “some other place” (52). In one of the novel’s most impactful sequences of repetitively-structured questions, the women reflect on the iterative necessities that would go unaccomplished if they were somehow to leave:

Who would pick the strawberries from their fields? Who would get the fruit down from their trees? Who would wash their carrots? Who would scrub their toilets? Who would mend their garments? Who would iron their shirts? Who would fluff their pillows? Who would change their sheets? Who would cook their breakfasts? Who would clear their tables? Who would soothe their children? Who would bathe their elderly? Who would listen to their stories? Who would keep their secrets? Who would tell their lies? Who would flatter them? Who would sing for them? Who would dance for them? Who would weep for them? Who would turn the other cheek for them and then one day—because we were tired, because we were old, because we could—forgive them? Only a fool. And so we folded up our kimonos and put them away in our trunks and did not take them out again for years. (53-54)

The exhaustion that results from doing “the work that no self-respecting American would do” (28-29) is rendered here in all its magnitude—through the content of the passage as well as the lengthy list through which it is expressed—as the women articulate an awareness of how their lives of servitude are dictated in large part by their status as racial outsiders.

In the midst of their ongoing struggles with work and racial prejudice, the women also face challenges related to another iterative activity: raising the children to which they give birth. Otsuka’s novel gives a great deal of space to narrating the iterative responsibilities of parenting, providing an intimate look at both the pleasures and pains of motherhood. Though the women are relieved to give birth “to babies that were American citizens and in whose names we could finally lease land” (58), they are also all too aware that their children’s lives will be riddled with challenges—a reality that is once again emphasized through the use of iterative narration. Until the children can be put to work themselves, the women who work daily in the fields must bring
their infants and toddlers with them, and “when they tired and began to cry out for us we kept on working because if we didn’t we knew we would never pay off the debt on our lease. *Mama can’t come*” (61). In J-town, the children “lived with us eight and nine to a room behind our barbershops and bathhouses and in tiny unpainted apartments that were so dark we had to leave the lights on all day long” (71), and once old enough, they take on their own constant responsibilities:

They chopped carrots for us in our restaurants. They stacked apples for us at our fruit stands…They swept the floors of our boardinghouses. They changed towels. They stripped sheets. They made up the beds. They opened doors on things that should never be seen. *I thought he was praying but he was dead.* (71)

Throughout this section of the novel, it becomes clear that the women receive little parenting help from their husbands, who we are told “never changed a single diaper” or “washed a dirty dish” (63). Further highlighting the gender disparities within these relationships, the women explain that every evening, “no matter how tired we were when we came in from the fields, they sat down and read the paper while we cooked dinner for the children and stayed up washing and mending piles of clothes until late” (63). As childhood gives way to adolescence, we see the women’s children having to learn the same unpleasant lessons about American society that their parents did:

They learned when they could go swimming at the YMCA—*Colored days are on Mondays*—and when they could go to the picture show at the Pantages Theater downtown (never). They learned that they should always call the restaurant first. *Do you serve Japanese?* They learned not to go out alone during the daytime and what to do if they found themselves cornered in an alley after dark. *Just tell them you know judo.* And if that didn’t work, they learned to fight back with their fists. (77-78)

The children learn, in short, “that some people are born luckier than others and that things in this world do not always go as you plan” (78). Naturally, the children dream of “leaving home, one
day, for the great world beyond” (66), of becoming teachers, politicians, doctors, or simply of operating their own businesses “instead of working for somebody else” (78). And though their mothers “let them dream on,” the women can see “the darkness coming” (79), suspecting, quite naturally, that their children’s lives will follow the same trajectories of habitual exploitation and exclusion as their own.

The iterative narrations that fill the first two-thirds of Otsuka’s novel are halted only by the narrative’s inevitable historical conclusion: the onset of WWII and Japanese internment. These major events mark a turning point in the women’s lives and the text’s aesthetic strategies, as singulative narration begins to outweigh the iterative for the first time and increase the narrative momentum significantly. What begins as a series of rumors that reach the women “on the second day of the war”—that there was “a list” and several people had been “taken away in the middle of the night” (81)—quickly materializes into the evacuation orders that will drive them away from their homes and the lives they have built. “Overnight, our neighbors began to look at us differently,” the women explain, “And even though our husbands had warned us—They’re afraid—still, we were unprepared. Suddenly, to find ourselves the enemy” (84-85). During this stage of the narrative, a shift from communal to more individualized narration accompanies the increase in singulatively-narrated events, with the women’s names appearing more frequently than at any point prior: “Chiyomi’s husband began going to sleep with his clothes on, just in case tonight was the night…Hatsumi’s husband whispered a quick prayer to the Buddha every night before climbing into bed” (87-88). As their departures grow ever nearer, even the iterative narrations of the women’s experiences take on a distinctly singulative quality.
As the women and their families leave their homes, the narration again becomes incredibly multiplicitous. “The Tanakas of Gardena left without paying their rent,” we are told, and “The Tanakas of Delano, without paying their taxes” (108). Increasingly, the narrator focuses even more specifically on individual women within the group, revealing how they feel during the departure as well as what they will leave behind: “Toshiko left with a fever. Shiki left in a trance…Haruko left a tiny laughing Buddha up high, in a corner of the attic, where he is still laughing to this day” (108-109).

The erasure the women have felt throughout the novel in terms of self and autonomy becomes literal in the narrative’s closing sequence, as they suspect that “it would only be a matter of time until all traces of us were gone” (104). The final chapter, appropriately entitled “A Disappearance,” punctuates the women’s physical absence with another radical shift in narrative form: rather than the inside, “we” perspective to which we have grown accustomed, it is the voice of the women’s white neighbors that reports that “The Japanese are gone” (116) and provides speculations about what has happened to them. This outside perspective is itself complex; some remaining members of the community take the disappearance of the Japanese “to heart,” while others are “more than a little relieved to see the Japanese go” (118). Notably, and much like what occurs in the final lines of each of the narratives in Three Lives, Otsuka’s novel
does not conclude with the removal of the Japanese families from the text but goes on for several pages to narrate what happens in their absence, from the seasons passing as usual to the creeping appropriation of Japanese culture that includes the rising popularity of “chopstick hair ornaments” and “Oriental rugs” (121-122). The novel’s ending emphasizes that, aside from the lifestyle changes brought on by the war abroad, life for those Californians other than the narrating women and their families—and especially for those within the dominant racial and cultural group—will move on more or less as usual, “as if the Japanese were never here at all” (121). While explaining to these white citizens that they are “part of the battlefront now, and whatever must be done to defend the country must be done,” the mayor of one Californian town insists: “There will be some things that people will see...And there will be some things that people won’t see. These things happen. And life goes on” (124). The things that people won’t see are exactly what *The Buddha in the Attic* dedicates the bulk of its pages to narrating: the everyday experiences that lead up to the internment of the Japanese women and their families; the “invisible” tasks they have performed without pause or complaint; the things that History won’t remember.

“Under the shadow of the past”: *The Buddha in the Attic* as Repetition with a Difference

Through the use of iterative narration, both *Three Lives* and *The Buddha in the Attic* prioritize everyday experience over historically-documented event as they relate the intricacies of their female characters’ lives. That these novels separated by a century make the same kinds of iterative activities their focal point suggests a continuing interest in exploring the lives of the working-class women who inhabited America during the modernist era. Of course, just as Stein asserts that there are differences in expression “between the literature of the Nineteenth Century
and the literature of the Twentieth” (“How Writing is Written” 153), we must not overlook the differences in expression between Stein’s modernist novel and Otsuka’s twenty-first century one. In several cases, The Buddha in the Attic reveals its own contemporaneity in much the same way as Jones’s The Known World; in passages like those that describe homoerotic encounters between the women on the boat, for example, Otsuka’s narrative more explicitly references taboo subjects rather than leaving them interpretively murky. This is also the case in the passages of The Buddha in the Attic that reference attempts to abort unwanted pregnancies, in which certain women give birth “even though we had poured cold water over our stomachs and jumped off the porch many times” or “had drunk the medicine the midwife had given us to prevent us from giving birth one more time” (59). Comparing these passages to Stein’s vague hints that in Mrs. Lehntman’s pursuit to help “young girls who were in trouble” (18) she becomes involved in a controversy surrounding the “mysterious and evil” doctor who “got into trouble doing things that were not right to do” (43), we can see the more direct fashion in which Otsuka’s contemporary narrative names what Stein’s does not.

But more important to my assessment is the relationship The Buddha in the Attic forges to the documentation of experience and identity that Stein models in Three Lives. Otsuka’s novel opens a window through which we can view a particular subset of women at the turn of the twentieth century who are geographically, racially, and culturally distinct from those in Stein’s text. Certainly, the women populating both texts can be considered members of the working class, but the nature of the labor they perform ranges widely depending on the other intersecting aspects of their identities, as do the various other actions and occurrences that make up their day-to-day lives. The Buddha in the Attic highlights the diversity between and within distinct groups
of modernist-era women, and does so from a contemporary vantage point that knows precisely what awaits the Japanese immigrant community at the onset of WWII. Our awareness of the well-known events that loom in the novel’s not-too-distant future makes the women’s quotidian experiences all the more impactful to read, as we come to know their lives on a more intimate and individual level than any sweeping historical account could ever make possible. Coupled with the consistent use of the iterative, Otsuka’s communal narration shifts the narrative perspective from an external to an internal one that enables the picture brides themselves to curate the rhythms of their lived experience, formally endowing them with a more authoritative voice and vision than does the free indirect discourse used in *Three Lives* and many other modernist texts. In this way, and much like what I argue of Jones’s novel in Chapter One, perspectival differences present themselves in contemporary texts as a way to restructure the narrative distribution of power in the literatures of the past.

As noted in my introduction to this chapter, the kind of “legacy” I have sketched within Otsuka’s text cannot be said to fit the parameters of James and Seshagiri’s metamodernism, since it is not—like *The Known World*—a “conscious” (James and Seshagiri 92) engagement with Stein as a literary precursor. Instead, a more fitting way to articulate the relationship between *The Buddha in the Attic* and *Three Lives* might be Stein’s own formulation of repetition with a difference. In “How Writing is Written,” Stein insists that “there is no such thing as repetition. Everybody tells every story in about the same way...But if you listen carefully, you will see that not all the story is the same. There is always a slight variation” (158). Otsuka’s novel, though it also tells the story of modernist-era female lives, tells that story “slightly differently” (158): like Stein, Otsuka implements repetition both formally and thematically, but her particular strategy of
communal narration allows us to better understand the variety of individual experiences situated within the larger one her text explores. Although Stein argues that only “minor poets” write “under the shadow of the past” (158), perhaps what distinguishes a project like Otsuka’s—and Jones’s, for that matter—is the conscious decision to revisit the past from a contemporary standpoint and make new discoveries under its shadow. *The Buddha in the Attic* recalls and builds on *Three Lives* in its harnessing of powerfully experimental narration and a profusion of the iterative to reveal what more conventional, event-driven narratives do not: that the “constant recurring and beginning” (“Composition as Explanation” 5) that accompanies all of life’s mundane patterns is *most* constant for individuals whose circumstances of class, race, and gender have written aspects of their stories before they are even born into them.
CHAPTER THREE
NARRATIVE MELANCHOLIA IN DJUNA BARNES AND GEORGE SAUNDERS

Set fifty years prior to the stories of immigration that inspire Otsuka’s *The Buddha in the Attic*, George Saunders’s debut novel *Lincoln in the Bardo* (2017) is a narrative overflowing with expressions of loss and grief. Centered on the death of President Abraham Lincoln’s son “Willie” in 1862, the novel details the events following Willie’s interment in a Georgetown cemetery—some as they are known historically, but others as Saunders reimagines them. Among the additions Saunders weaves into his account of Willie’s passing are the goings-on that occur among the cemetery’s resident ghosts, who—though they have not fully grasped their departure from life—are in actuality occupants of the “bardo,” a limbo-esque realm in the Buddhist tradition that exists between death and rebirth. Haunted by what they were not able to accomplish while alive, the cemetery’s ghosts fear nothing more than confronting whatever the next state of being might be, and their desire to remain in the bardo drives not only the narrative’s action but its structure and movement, as well. The spirits’ impassioned outpourings of feeling and compulsive need to articulate their losses are symptomatic of melancholia, the psychological state of being to which I turn my attention in this chapter. In particular, I will focus on how the melancholic condition influences the shape and progression of *Lincoln in the Bardo* itself, not just the characters who inhabit it.¹

¹ In this way, although the present chapter departs from the classical, Genettian frameworks I have adopted in Chapters One and Two, its concern is still narratological.
Many scholars have noted the sincere expressions of feeling in Saunders’s texts and have situated them in relation to labels such as “the New Sincerity” and “Post-Irony,” contemporary movements theorized as breaks with literary postmodernism and its “strategies of ironic defamiliarisation” (Morris 120). Rather than examining Saunders’s participation in these recent literary movements, my interest lies in relating *Lincoln in the Bardo* back to an earlier literary tradition—the modernism of Djuna Barnes’s *Nightwood* (1937)—to explore how both novels’ melancholic narrative dynamics reflect the experiences of individuals who have historically been marginalized or overlooked. The melancholic modernism at work in Barnes’s *Nightwood*, which performs its characters’ overwhelming grief through an excessively-dialogic narrative structure, is a valuable lens through which *Lincoln in the Bardo*’s own methodology can be understood and appreciated. The through-line I draw from *Nightwood* to Saunders’s text is not made explicit in *Lincoln in the Bardo* and thus cannot be considered “metamodernism” in James and Seshagiri’s terms. Nonetheless, I argue that *Lincoln in the Bardo* bears a significant resemblance to *Nightwood* and poses important extensions and complications to Barnes’s particular modernist project, establishing a similar relation to modernism as the previous contemporary texts in my discussion. While both novels enact their characters’ melancholia on the level of narrative discourse, a shift occurs in *Bardo* in terms of the authority character dialogue holds over the narrative as well as the degree to which possibilities beyond perpetual melancholia are provided for its characters. Saunders embeds a number of possible antidotes to the melancholic state

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within his text, foregrounding the transformative potential of community, empathy, and other-directed action in the novel’s reimagining of a historical period fraught with widespread sorrow and societal injustice.

Notes from the Underside: Marginality and Melancholia

The relationship between modernism and melancholia has been the subject of much commentary in the scholarship of recent decades. In the long history of critical conversations surrounding *Nightwood* in particular, scholars have thoroughly discussed the melancholic quality of Barnes’s novel in terms of both character psychology and narrative form. In “Melancholic Remedies: Djuna Barnes’s *Nightwood* as Narrative Theory,” Katherine A. Fama writes, “A warped form of mourning, melancholia demands compulsive repetition, while facilitating alternative forms of knowing and telling” (40). She goes on:

> The melancholic’s compulsion to repeat highlights narrative desires to (re)tell and (be) told, the shared desire for stable, imposed meaning. Melancholia parallels and “bucks” the timing, progression, and authority of teleological narrative. It disrupts narrative reception, prompting the reader’s textual awareness and the visibility of desire and drives. (42)

Fama’s description of melancholia can be applied readily to the multiplicity of earnest, confessional narrations found within *Nightwood*, all of which work to articulate the losses suffered by its characters and continually counteract forward narrative momentum. In this way, the text enacts precisely what Freud describes in *Mourning and Melancholia*: the melancholic’s tendency toward an “insistent communicativeness which finds satisfaction in self-exposure” (585). Other “symptoms” of melancholia, as Sanja Bahun explains, include “compulsive self-

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reflexivity, epistemological and affective insecurity, and problematic relation to the ‘logocentric’ and symbolic processes (including, notably, difficulties in expressing what exactly has been lost)” (21-22)—all of which are exhibited within Nightwood’s melancholic performances.

Barnes’s novel gives space and voice to an assemblage of outcasts, including Felix Volkbein the Jew, Robin Vote and Nora Flood the lesbians, Jenny Petherbridge the “squatter,” and of course, Doctor Matthew O’Connor the loquacious transvestite. Together, these marginalized characters exude an air of misery, longing, and frustrated desires, and—with the exception of Robin Vote—are compelled to discuss their losses obsessively. For Felix, Nora, and Jenny, the immediate occasion for this loss is Robin herself; to use Freud’s terminology, Robin is the “object-choice” loved by each of them whose loss initiates the “process” of melancholia (586). Having failed to process their losses successfully, Barnes’s characters are suspended in the limbo of their unfulfilled desires and the narratives through which they attempt to articulate them. Importantly, and as Fama suggests above, these melancholic tendencies also manifest on the level of narrative style and structure, as Barnes’s text famously resists the coherence of a narrative that moves toward a clear or specific end. Victoria L. Smith echoes Fama’s assessment of Nightwood when she writes that “the novel functions through a series of swerves away from plot, convention, received meanings” (195), swerves Smith argues are necessary aspects of the text’s “mechanics of melancholia” (195-196). These narrative mechanics—together with the excessive “communicativeness” (Freud 585) of individual characters and, consequently, of the narrative as a whole—define the melancholic narrative structure I see at work in both Nightwood and Lincoln in the Bardo.

4 Although, importantly, Barnes avoids articulating any labels related to sexual identity in her text.
In addition to the loss of Robin Vote, there is, as Smith notes, “something more elusive and less recognizable” lost to Nightwood’s characters (194). Smith writes:

The narrative shapes itself around a blank space, an absence, that outlines a loss of access to history, to language, and to representation in general for those consigned to the margins because of their gender, sexuality, religion, or color—an awful fate indeed. The complexity, even opacity, of Barnes’s writing—its indirectness, its sustained use of tropes—enables us to see the outlines, the shadows, the psyches of those people, particularly Jews, lesbians, and male homosexuals, that have been previously unremarked, unspoken and unaccounted for. (194-195)

As Smith indicates here, Barnes’s text foregrounds and prioritizes marginalized and non-normative individuals rather than keeping them on the periphery. Indeed, as Marilyn Reizbaum argues, “The mainstream in Nightwood is an imaginary populace, an ‘other’ culture” (181), while the culture in which Barnes immerses her own narrative exists in opposition to this out-of-sight but always looming “mainstream.” In this way, Nightwood explores what we might conceptualize as the “underside” of society and history, a community teeming with the individuals and experiences that the mainstream—whether consciously or unconsciously—keeps out of sight and simultaneously props its own dominance up against. The profusion of melancholic narrations and expressions of feeling that emanate from Nightwood’s character are particularly significant because of this marginal status, this underside relation to the dominant or historically more visible groups that render them “other.” Thus, Julie L. Abraham captures the nature of Nightwood’s contribution quite succinctly when she writes that “implicit throughout [Barnes’s] work is the sense that her texts are themselves additions to history, recording characters, experiences, and perspectives that history usually prefers to ignore” (253).

George Saunders’s texts, too, are full of underside identities like those found in Barnes’s Nightwood; as David P. Rando writes, “George Saunders peoples his stories with the losers of
American history, the dispossessed, the oppressed, or merely those whom history’s winners have walked all over on their paths to glory, fame, or terrific wealth” (437). Certainly, this sentiment is applicable to the characters throughout Saunders’s short fiction. To take the most recent collection *Tenth of December* (2013) as an example, we see therein no shortage of characters downtrodden, marginalized, and helpless: parents like the narrator in “The Semplica Diaries” fail perpetually to meet the economic needs of their families, individuals such as Ted in “My Chivalric Fiasco” are faced with complex situational dilemmas that offer no clear or morally unambiguous solutions, and those whom society has deemed discarded, including narrator Jeff and his fellow prisoners in “Escape from Spiderhead,” are exploited as test subjects to serve corporate interests. Tales of disenfranchisement and dejection persist into the pages of *Lincoln in the Bardo*, not only in terms of Lincoln’s own familial loss and feelings of loneliness but also within the spirit world, as the ghosts inhabiting the bardo are in constant reflection over their own traumas and failures while alive. Hans Vollman mourns having left behind a young wife with whom he was never able to enjoy “the full pleasures of the marriage bed” (5); Roger Bevins III is plagued by remembrances of his unfulfilling life as a closeted gay man, a life that terminated in suicide; and among the bardo’s other ghosts are those who were addicts, enslaved persons, and victims of rape and violence while living. Compounding their regret and sorrow is the fact that these ghosts do not fully comprehend their current state, referring to their coffins as “sick-boxes” (5) and assuming they will eventually be able to return to, make amends for, or overcome what they encountered in what they refer to as “that previous place” (67). Therefore, life itself is one of the “blank spaces” (Smith 194) around which Saunders’s narrative is constructed. The bardo’s spectral inhabitants are indeed “dispossessed” (Rando 437), even
further unacknowledged by the living and forced to relive their dispossession through the storytelling compulsions of melancholia for as long as they remain the bardo—quite literally the underside of life and society.

While critics have located a clear precursor to Saunders’s novel in the collection of spectral voices that make up Edgar Lee Masters’s *Spoon River Anthology* (1915), my analysis departs from this more literal textual comparison. While *Nightwood*’s characters may still inhabit the plane of the living, they share a posture of dejection with *Lincoln in the Bardo*’s departed souls, providing only shadowy impressions of themselves through their protracted meditations on what they long for but cannot have. It is perhaps this very aspect of the novel that led one contemporary reviewer of *Nightwood* to remark: “Its people are ghosts” (Philip Rahv qtd. in Marcus 200). Other initial reviews called attention to the “atmosphere of decay” in the novel (Theodore Purdy qtd. in Marcus 200) as well as its melancholy emotional register: “A grim, sordid, and depressing story, it will be called” (Peter Burra qtd. in Marcus 200). Each of these observations applies equally well to *Lincoln in the Bardo*, whose characters are suspended in a perpetual state of both literal and emotional decay throughout the text. When *Nightwood*’s Doctor O’Connor explains to Nora Flood that individuals of queer sexuality and identity have committed “the unpardonable error of not being able to exist” (100), we might consider how this sentiment maps onto an understanding of the text’s characters as ghostly, more shadow than presence in relation to the dominant culture that excludes them; in other words, *Nightwood*’s characters would seem to exist in a bardo of their own. In their storyworlds and as well as their

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structures, *Nightwood* and *Lincoln in the Bardo* privilege the underside over the mainstream, uncovering and legitimating the many expressions of grief, shame, and exclusion that flow therefrom. But as I will show, Saunders’s novel pushes beyond Barnes’s framework to afford its characters opportunities that *Nightwood* does not, imagining what might happen when melancholic expressions motivate change and compassion within and on behalf of individuals relegated to the margins.

“*I don’t know how to talk, and I’ve got to talk*”: Narrative Melancholia in *Nightwood*

Tracing the performance of melancholia at work in *Nightwood*—and its effects on the characters whose identities and circumstances occasion that performance—positions us to see how Saunders’s text both redeploy and revises Barnes’s techniques. The world inside *Nightwood* is one where marginal identities are brought to the foreground and where feelings of shame and exclusion are the norm. This tone is set early on in the novel’s opening chapter, “Bow Down,” in which we meet a character named Felix Volkbien whose father Guido had to concoct a new identity to conceal that he was “a Jew of Italian descent” (4). In order to marry a Christian woman named Hedvig, Guido went so far as to adopt a “pretence to a barony,” claiming to be “an Austrian of an old almost extinct line” and “producing, to uphold his story, the most amazing and inaccurate proofs: a coat of arms that he had no right to and a list of progenitors (including their Christian names) who had never existed” (5-6). Although Guido dies six months before his son’s birth, Felix carries on his father’s fabricated legacy, inheriting both Guido’s “title” and his sense of being set apart from those around him. Since Hedwig, too, dies before Felix can know her—as she does not survive his birth—Felix is always already “from nowhere” (10), a Baron in
name only with “an obsession for what he termed ‘Old Europe’: aristocracy, nobility, royalty” (11). Others seem to intuit Felix’s outsider status, as the narrator explains:

Many people were familiar with his figure and face. He was not popular, though the posthumous acclaim meted out to his father secured from his acquaintances the peculiar semi-circular stare of those who, unwilling to greet with earthly equality, nevertheless give to the living branch (because of death and its sanction) the slight bend of the head—a reminiscent pardon for future apprehension—a bow very common to us when in the presence of this people. (10-11)

As a result of the “mingled passions,” “diversity of bloods,” and “thousand impossible situations” that make up his history, Felix has become “the accumulated and single—the embarrassed” (11). Taking into account his perpetual embarrassment within mainstream society, it is no wonder that Felix finds himself comfortable in 1920s Paris among “the odd” and at home in “the pageantry of the circus and the theatre” with “their splendid and reeking falsifications” (12-14). It is by way of this eccentric and diverse community that Felix meets Doctor Matthew O’Connor, through whom an even larger circle of underside acquaintances awaits. The Doctor, the narrator relates, is a “middle-aged ‘medical student’ with shaggy eyebrows, a terrific widow’s peak, over-large dark eyes, and a heavy way of standing that was also apologetic” (17).

Drawing on the work of Silvan Tomkins, Julie Taylor refers to this posture as the “downwards pose of shame,” an aspect of the Doctor’s “melancholic attitude” that is “both a marker and producer of shame that must be cast off to avoid yet further humiliation” (110). As Taylor notes, however, this “downwards movement” within the novel is not limited to character affect: “Bow Down,” “The Squatter,” “Where the Tree Falls,” and “Go Down, Matthew” are all chapter headings that include language achieving a “downward” effect (114), imbuing even the narrative structure of *Nightwood* with the shame-inflected posture of its marginalized characters.
Of course, the Doctor’s entrance into the narrative sets into motion much more than simply a plot development: on a formal level, his melancholic verbosity initiates a displacement of the outside narrator’s commentary and authority. At the gathering where Felix first encounters him, the narrator relates that the Doctor is “taking the part of host” and “telling of himself, for he considered himself the most amusing predicament” (18). “Once the doctor had his audience,” the narrator goes on, “nothing could stop him” (18)—and, much to Felix’s dismay, none of the other guests seem to notice that “the whole affair was to be given over to this volatile person who called himself a doctor” (21). As the narrative progresses, it is clear that the same can be said of the text overall: the Doctor’s long, convoluted speeches begin to overtake the narration, rife with opaque yet jarringly personal anecdotes related to the pain of having to hide his queer identity. When Nora Flood interrupts the Doctor’s first conversation with Felix to ask, “Are you both really saying what you mean, or are you just talking?” (21), her question gestures toward a distinction Nightwood will continually endeavor to blur: the line between “just talking” and some kind of more conventionally “meaningful” communication. The “insistent hum of the doctor’s words” (Barnes 31) takes on an increased prominence throughout the novel—despite the seemingly nonsensical nature of much of what he has to say—and his role as both confessor and “model melancholic” (Fama 46) for characters like Nora and Felix helps enable them to “just talk,” as well. It is in these character interactions that we see the dynamics of melancholia at work on both the story and discourse levels through the compulsive “floods of excessive, melancholic, wandering speech” (Fama 40) that outweigh the outside narration and structurally usurp so much of the text.
For Felix and Nora alike, failed romantic relationships with the elusive Robin Vote are what catalyze the melancholia that drives them to seek out the Doctor as an interlocutor. Felix’s short-lived marriage with Robin only ever reaches an intimacy that the narrator calls “pathetic” (48), and when she leaves him shortly after the birth of their son, Guido, Robin is “unable or unwilling to give an account of herself” (54). Despite Nora’s role as a trusted confidant to the outsiders that make up her circle at “the strangest ‘salon’ in America” (55), she, too, finds Robin to be closed off and illegible, telling at once “so much and so little” (63) with her words and behaviors. “In the years that they lived together,” the narrator explains, “the departures of Robin became slowly increasing rhythm,” leading Nora to feel “a physical removal, insupportable and irreparable” (64):

Returning home, the interminable night would begin. Listening to the faint sounds from the street, every murmur from the garden, an unevolved and tiny hum that spoke of the progressive growth of noise that would be Robin coming home, Nora lay and beat her pillow without force, unable to cry, her legs drawn up. At times she would get up and walk, to make something in her life outside more quickly over, to bring Robin back by the very velocity of the beating of her heart. And walking in vain, suddenly she would sit down on one of the circus chairs that stood by the long window overlooking the garden, bend forward, putting her hands between her legs, and begin to cry, “Oh, God! Oh, God! Oh, God!” repeated so often that it had the effect of all words spoken in vain. (67)

Detailed descriptions like these of Nora’s interior anguish and outer affect are given authoritatively and unironically by the narrator, forcing us to spend an extended interval inside her tortured psyche. Nora remains “haunted” by her love for Robin (60), just as the presence of Guido serves as a constant reminder to Felix of the love for Robin that she perhaps never shared. Robin indeed becomes the “lost object” at “the center of the text” for both of these characters, initiating a melancholia that eventually “allows other losses to surface” (Smith 203).
Though these characters’ misery only increases throughout the novel, a noticeable shift occurs in the text’s method of expressing this misery when melancholic character dialogue begins to saturate the narrative structure. In her own eclectic salon, Nora acts as a confessor to everyone, including “poets, radicals, beggars, artists, and people in love; for Catholics, Protestants, Brahmins, dabblers in black magic and medicine” (55); there is no outsider who does not feel welcomed by her “look of compassion” (55) as she listens to each confession “without reproach or accusation” (58). But to whom can one who “[robs] herself for everyone” (57) turn for her own comfort and counsel? In “Watchman, What of the Night?”, the first of the two chapters that Laura Veltman has argued most pointedly “enact the confessional” (209), Nora seeks out the Doctor for this very purpose and asks him to tell her “everything [he knows] about the night” (86). Importantly, however, the traditional dynamics of the confessional do not apply to the conversation that ensues: rather than offering coherent solutions to Nora’s problems, the Doctor—who she finds lying “heavily rouged” in his bed “in a woman’s flannel nightgown” (85)—adopts instead the role of the “model melancholic” (Fama 46) who “teaches his patients to talk, and chaperones them through their misery” (Fama 50). As the Doctor begins his meandering commentary on the topic of the night, it is evident that the relation of his dialogue to Nora’s current predicament will not be terribly clear, and her frustrated interjections become increasingly action-oriented. “But, what am I to do?” (91), she asks more than once, to which the Doctor simply responds that she should “Listen!” (92). Though the Doctor begins before long to tire of his own “tirade” (96), he continues to be steadfast in his role, especially as Nora’s deep affective engagement with their subject of conversation becomes more noticeable. As the Doctor comes to “the night [Nora wants] to know about the most of all” (95)—the evening Robin met
Jenny Petherbridge, the women for whom she left Nora—“Tears [begin] to run down Nora’s face”; soon after, the Doctor directs the flow of speech back to his own melancholic feelings in order “to stop her from crying” (100). As he recalls his own emotions on the night in question, the Doctor relates,

I began to mourn for my spirit, and the spirits of all people who cast a shadow a long way beyond what they are, and for the beasts that walk out of the darkness alone…And I said to myself: For these I would go bang on my knees, but not for her—I wouldn’t piss on her if she were on fire! I said, Jenny is so greedy that she wouldn’t give her shit to the crows. And then I thought: Oh, the poor bitch, if she were dying, face down in a long pair of black gloves, would I forgive her? And I knew I would forgive her, or anyone making a picture. (112-113)

In his role as perpetual confessor, the Doctor’s “forgiveness” extends to all, however indirect and convoluted his counsel may be. And as he insists to Nora, there is “no direct way” to tell her what she wishes to know about Robin. Instead, she will be “put to find” his “narrative” (104)—the narrative of melancholia that can only be told by way of his own, painful performance.

In the course of these conversations, however, there are several indications that the Doctor’s narrational performance does come at a costly personal price: as he explains to Nora, “the reason the doctor knows everything is because he’s been everywhere at the wrong time and has now become anonymous” (89). In passages like these, the novel suggests that there is a connection between the Doctor’s own experiences with sorrow and exclusion, his willingness to share that knowledge for the benefit of others, and a kind of erasure of self—a sacrifice that continues to take its toll as the narrative progresses. Throughout the text, the Doctor exploits his own feelings time and again in order to perform melancholia for others. We can see this progression at work in “Where the Tree Falls” when Felix seeks out the doctor to discuss his failed marriage to Robin and his “Mentally deficient and emotionally excessive” son, Guido.
Though he, like Nora before him, has come to the Doctor for a kind of consolation he can get nowhere else, he is taken aback to find that the Doctor’s melancholic appearance seems to have increased in intensity:

he seemed old, older than his fifty odd years would account for. He moved slowly as if he were dragging water; his knees, which one seldom noticed, because he was usually seated, sagged. His dark shaved chin was lowered as if in a melancholy that had no beginning or end. The Baron hailed him, and instantly the doctor threw off his unobserved self, as one hides, hastily, a secret life. (117)

I want to suggest that this “secret life” of the Doctor’s is the hidden pain of his role as one who must constantly instruct others in the ways of melancholia. We see the increasing cost of this melancholic performance at work yet again within the first lines of “Go Down, Matthew,” in which the Doctor expresses his frustrations with an inconsolable Nora: “Can’t you be quiet now?...Can’t you be done now, can’t you give up? Now be still, now that you know what the world is about, knowing it’s about nothing?” (133). In keeping with the conversational persona she has established thus far, Nora remains preoccupied with what action she can take to overcome the loss of Robin, but instead of answering Nora in the riddles and bizarre generalizations he has employed before, the Doctor’s responses begin to take a more direct and personal turn: “‘Listen,’ the doctor said, putting down his glass. ‘My war brought me many things; let yours bring you as much. Life is not to be told, call it as loud as you like, it will not tell itself’” (137). Despite these urgings, Nora insists that she must tell, explaining, “I’m so miserable, Matthew, I don’t know how to talk, and I’ve got to talk. I’ve got to talk to somebody. I can’t live this way” (138). This is, of course, the melancholic urge to tell one’s narrative, the need to articulate out loud the experience of a painful loss. Though the Doctor succeeds briefly in distracting Nora from her misery by telling tales of his own depressing exploits during the
“dark night” (138), Nora’s anguish only becomes more acute and her exclamations increasingly confessional: “There’s something evil in me that loves evil and degradation—purity’s black backside! That loves honesty with a horrid love; or why have I always gone seeking it at the liar’s door?” (144). In moments like these, it becomes clear that Nora has, in fact, been learning from the Doctor’s “melancholic model of narrative proliferation” (Fama 51)—while his words do have the strangely comforting effect of distracting from the misery of others, they also have the power to guide the listener toward her own performance of melancholic narration.

It is precisely when Nora begins to successfully enact her own narrational melancholia that the cracks in and limits of the Doctor’s melancholic performance begin to show. As a response to Nora’s mounting confessions, the Doctor reveals a keen awareness of exactly the role he has come to play in the lives of individuals like her and Felix:

“Look here,” said the doctor. “Do you know what has made me the greatest liar this side of the moon, telling my stories to people like you, to take the mortal agony out of their guts, and to stop them from rolling about, and drawing up their feet, and screaming, with their eyes staring over their knuckles with misery which they are trying to keep off, saying, ‘Say something, Doctor, for the love of God!’ And me talking away like mad. Well, that, and nothing else, has made me the liar I am.” (144)

This painful realization goes unnoticed by Nora, who has finally found her own footing in the conversation. Despite the Doctor’s attempt to chime in as she tells of the pain Robin caused her and of her attempt to confront Jenny, Nora continues on “as if she had not been interrupted” (149). For the first time in any of their conversations, Nora’s dialogue begins to overtake the Doctor’s considerably. In a bout of intimate confessions, she admits to occurrences like having once “struck [Robin] awake” from a deep sleep—and though she begs the Doctor to “say something, oh, God, say something!” (154-155), the flow of Nora’s words cannot be stopped. “Stop it! Stop it!” he cries in response, and when he does attempt to “say something”—urging
her not to try to “learn anything” but instead to “take action in your heart and be careful whom you love” (156)—Nora again disregards his words as if she hasn’t heard them. As Nora’s impassioned speech persists, the Doctor begins to crumble under the pressure of always “labouring to comfort” others (162): “‘Do you think, for Christ’s sweet sake,’ he shouted suddenly, ‘that I am so happy that you should cry down my neck? Do you think there is no lament in this world, but your own?’” (163). Ultimately, when Nora continues to insist that he’s “got to listen!” (164), the Doctor’s only recourse is to physically remove himself from their conversation—having finally found its stride, Nora’s melancholic performance displaces the Doctor’s own and reveals it to be untenable.

The pain of perpetually modeling melancholia for others and serving as their constant confessor finally reaches to a boil when the Doctor comes apart in the very public setting of the café. “May they all be damned!,” he shouts for all to hear, “The people in my life who have made my life miserable, coming to me to learn of degradation and the night” (171). “Why do they all tell me everything,” he asks, “then expect it to lie hushed in me, like a rabbit gone home to die?” (171). His drunken, emotionally-charged rant becomes a spectacle in front of the café’s other patrons; he is “weeping” and “extremely angry,” thrashing his arms excessively and “[screaming] with sobbing laughter” (174-175). In the Doctor’s final, heart-wrenching speech, he addresses not only those who have added their personal misery to his already unwieldy burden but all those within earshot:

“Now that you have all heard what you wanted to hear, can’t you let me loose now, let me go? I’ve not only lived my life for nothing, but I’ve told it for nothing—abominable among the filthy people—I know, it’s all over, everything’s over, and nobody knows it but me—drunk as a fiddler’s bitch—lasted too long—” He tried to get to his feet, gave it up. “Now,” he said, “the end—mark my words—now nothing, but wrath and weeping!” (175)
This is the last we see of the Doctor in the narrative, as what began as a routine attempt to “take [Nora’s] mind off Robin” (148) ends in a total breakdown. As he himself puts it, “I stand here, beaten up and mauled and weeping, knowing I am not what I thought I was, a good man doing wrong, but the wrong man doing nothing much, and I wouldn’t be telling you about it if I weren’t talking to myself” (172). Ultimately, the melancholic mode of narration has become unbearable for the Doctor, suggesting that it is insufficient as a permanent solution for coping with a lifetime of loss and trauma; in Martina Stange’s words, “talking about [the] pain and suffering of the other people only aggrandizes the doctor’s own unnameable pain and feeling of loss” (144). Jane Marcus argues that the Doctor’s premonition of the “wrath and weeping” to come might also serve as an “anticipation of historical horror” (235)—that is, “a prophecy of the Holocaust” (249). Therefore, the Doctor’s closing speech calls attention to not only his personal abjection but, as Marcus suggests, the larger historical forces that “defined deviance and set up a world view of us and them, the normal and the abnormal, in political, racial, and sexual terms, a world that was divided into the upright and the downcast” (249).

Of course, the Doctor’s depressed and depressing monologue is not the final word of *Nightwood*. In the novel’s famously ambiguous final chapter, Nora and Robin have a reunion of sorts in a “decaying chapel” on Nora’s property in America in which a startled Robin falls down “on all fours” and proceeds to “dash about” alongside Nora’s dog (178-179). As the narrative moves away from character dialogue and back into description provided by the outside narrator, we watch as Robin began to bark also, crawling after [the dog]—barking in a fit of laughter, obscene and touching. The dog began to cry then, running with her, head-on with her head, as if to circumvent her, soft and slow his feet went padding. He ran this way and that, low down
in his throat crying, and she grinning and crying with him; crying in shorter and shorter spaces, moving head to head, until she gave up, lying out, her hands beside her, her face turned and weeping; and the dog too gave up then, and lay down, his eyes bloodshot, his head flat along her knees. (179-180)

These final lines end *Nightwood* on a scene of pure affect, as both Robin and the dog “cry” together in an experience that cannot be expressed or explained through language. Unlike the Doctor, Felix, Nora, and Jenny, Robin does not attempt to “tell” her misery through words, and though the novel by no means endorses this nonverbal tactic as preferable to narrative melancholia, its prominent placement at the end of the novel does suggest that it is at very least an alternative. One other moment that contrasts with the novel’s predominantly melancholic mode occurs in the last scene between Felix and his son at the end of “Where the Tree Falls.” Though Felix has spent significant time confiding in the Doctor his fears about Guido’s affective sensitivity, the chapter ends on a tender moment between Felix and Guido that takes place later in Vienna: upon entering his carriage and finding his son to be cold, Felix “[pours] a few drops of oil and [begins] rubbing Guido’s hands” (131). This small act of interpersonal intimacy—communicated not through words but through physical touch—can perhaps be considered a counterpoint to the extreme sorrow and isolation found elsewhere in the novel, however slight. Still—and the despite the shift back into the outside narrator’s voice and authority in the novel’s last chapter—a melancholic narrative dynamics is at the heart of Barnes’s text, illustrating in all its longwinded and excessive verbosity what cannot be communicated adequately through conventional methods of articulation.

None of the characters within *Nightwood* can be said to have successfully overcome their melancholia by the novel’s end—and, to be sure, narrating successful mourning is by no means the goal of Barnes’s text. Fama points out quite rightly that “*Nightwood* is ultimately more
invested in *using* its melancholia than in curing it,” employing its “melancholic dialogue as both a disruption and a displacement of narration” (42). This creative potential, which Mark Wollaeger and Kevin J. H. Dettmar argue can thus transform melancholia into “a productive force” (x), is also highlighted in Smith’s analysis of *Nightwood* when she writes that “Critics have overlooked the positive aspects of the melancholic mechanics of the text” (202). Smith explains:

> I have sought to show that Barnes's beautiful and elusive text offers a way to see its melancholia as a gift and not simply a curse. The awful fate of being unprovided for in history, culture, and language—of being and living an obvious absence—propels Barnes's search for new uses of language. What Barnes discovers suggests that finding a speech for loss converts loss into gain. (203)

In this way, Smith argues, Barnes’s text “calls our attention more generally to those who have lost and the content of their losses” (203). Indeed, these critical voices articulate how effectively Barnes uses melancholia as a narrative dynamics that draws the reader’s focus to the very real and very marginalized identities peopling the world outside of her text. But while I agree with these existing readings of *Nightwood*’s melancholia and acknowledge its generative potential on an aesthetic level, I think it is also crucial to note that for the characters within the world of *Nightwood*—especially if viewed in terms of James Phelan’s “mimetic” consideration of fictional characters as “possible people” (116)—the melancholic existence would seem to follow an exhausting and painful trajectory. If the Doctor is in fact the text’s “model melancholic” (Fama 46), he models for us and the text’s other characters a form of melancholia that proves to be unsustainable, ultimately leading him to a devastating end.

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6 In Phelan’s definition, this mimetic component is one aspect of character that can be more or less foregrounded by a text, along with the thematic (characters as “representative entities”) and synthetic (characters as “artificial constructs”) components (*Reading People, Reading Plots* 120, 117).
“One must be constantly looking for opportunities to tell one’s story”: Melancholic Narration in *Lincoln in the Bardo*

“You know what none of us know until we have died. You were dead in the beginning,” Nora tells Doctor O’Connor in “Go Down, Matthew” (161). Throughout *Nightwood*, trauma, loss, and the ensuing melancholia are time and again equated with a kind of death; when Nora catches sight of Robin with another woman, for example, the narrator describes her audible reaction as one uttered with “the intolerable automatism of the last ‘Ah!’ in a body struck at the moment of its final breath” (70). In Saunders’s *Lincoln in the Bardo*, the death experienced by the text’s characters is the literal one that brings them to the graveyard. Though dead, the ghosts upon whom the narrative centers are still plagued by the misfortunes that befell them while alive, painful histories with which we become well acquainted through the spirits’ constant need to articulate them aloud. As of yet, there is a paucity of critical scholarship surrounding Saunders’s novel, although its reviews provide a window into critics’ initial assessments and analyses. For instance, before eventually declaring *Lincoln in the Bardo* an indicator of Saunders’s “fruitful transition from the short story to the long-distance form of the novel,” Michiko Kakutani remarks, “The supernatural chatter can grow tedious at times—the novel would have benefited immensely from some judicious pruning—but their voices gain emotional momentum as the book progresses” (Kakutani). Shifting her assessment away from the text’s ghostly voices, Kakutani argues that *Bardo* “is at its most potent and compelling when it is focused on Lincoln: a grave, deeply compassionate figure, burdened by personal grief and the weight of the war, and captured in the full depth of his humanity.” This particular critique—one that is dismissive of the novel’s cacophonous quality and instead favors the more straightforward Lincoln storyline—misses how the proliferation of spectral dialogue functions as a necessary excess within the text.
Like the immense amount of character dialogue in *Nightwood*, the incessant flow of confessions and deeply personal narratives that emanate from Bardo’s spirits point to a melancholia that pervades even the narrative dynamics; in both texts, I argue, the “floods of excessive, melancholic, wandering speech” (Fama 40) perform the excessive grief within in a manner more fitting than would a more conventional style of narration. What distinguishes the narrative structure of *Bardo* from *Nightwood* is the absence of an outside narrator to present and curate its characters’ dialogue, intensifying the melancholic form to the extent that their conversations and monologues are *themselves* the text’s narration. In the course of articulating these many tales of woe—and in a clear departure from the progression of *Nightwood*—Saunders also imagines alternatives to continued melancholia for his characters, infusing *Lincoln in the Bardo* and the historical moment it revisits with a hopefulness that is absent from Barnes’s text.

*Bardo*’s uniquely dialogic narrative dynamics are made evident from the novel’s opening chapter, which begins with the ghost of Hans Vollman relating the story of his death and what preceded it. His narrative—and the novel as a whole—begins:

> On our wedding day I was forty-six, she was eighteen. Now, I know what you are thinking: older man (not thin, somewhat bald, lame in one leg, teeth of wood) exercises the marital prerogative, thereby mortifying the poor young—
> But that is false.
> That is exactly what I refused to do, you see. (3)

Vollman goes on to explain how he and his young wife, Anna, proceeded to live as “dear friends” until the point at which she expressed her desire to be “together in that intimate way” to which she was still “a stranger” (3-4). However, before they were able to indulge in this physical intimacy, an accident occurred: “A beam from the ceiling came down, hitting me just here, as I sat at my desk” (5). “Per the advice of my physician,” he goes on, “A sort of sick-box was
judged—was judged to be—” “Efficacious,” offers Roger Bevins III, a fellow ghost and Vollman’s closest friend in the graveyard who has—as his interjection implies—heard Vollman’s story many times before (5). This “sick-box” is in reality, of course, a coffin, a fact about which the ghosts seem to be in communal and perpetual denial: “it seemed we must wait until my recovery was complete” (5), Vollman insists regarding his unfulfilled intimacy with Anna, referring to his present location not as a cemetery but as a “hospital-yard” (6). Before long, Bevins also relates the tale that explains his own reasons for remaining in the bardo:

Early in my youth I found I had a certain predilection which, to me, felt quite natural and even wonderful, but to others—my father, mother, brothers, friends, teachers, clergy, grandparents—my predilection did not seem natural or wonderful at all, but perverse and shameful, and hence I suffered: must I deny my predilection, and marry, and doom myself to a certain, shall we say, dearth of fulfillment? (25)

Despite the disapproval of those around him, Bevins “undertook an innocent—well, a rather innocent—friendship with a fellow in my school”—but when this companion eventually “stated his intention to henceforth ‘live correctly,’” Bevins explains, “I took a butcher knife to my room and…I slit my wrists rather savagely over a porcelain tub” (25). Just after inflicting these fatal wounds, however, Bevins “changed [his] mind” about dying after realizing “[he] was on the brink of squandering a wondrous gift, the gift of being allowed, every day, to wander this vast sensual paradise” (26). Still believing himself to be on the kitchen floor where he is yet “waiting to be discovered” (26-27), Bevins, too, is in a state of denial about the permanence of his present circumstances, insisting that when “revived” he will begin to follow his “predilection” with “gusto” (27). This resolution to rectify what he did not experience fully in life is, of course, the product of many years of reflection in the bardo, where each ghost dwells on their losses and regrets perpetually. Throughout the novel, Bevins, Vollman, and many more characters will
relate the story of what motivates them to stay in their transitional spiritual state; in this way, they and the text they inhabit enact the same “mechanics of melancholia” (Smith 196) at work in *Nightwood*.

Another critical framework that can be mapped onto *Lincoln in the Bardo* is Abraham’s suggestion that “implicit throughout [Barnes’s] work is the sense that her texts are themselves additions to history” through the inclusion of material “that history usually prefers to ignore” (253). In *Bardo*’s case, however, the text’s additions to history are made explicit through the direct inclusion of excerpts from History proper. Saunders explicitly highlights competing notions of historical truth within chapters of the novel that contain snippets of documentation about the Lincolns—“some genuine and some invented” (Crain)—reminding us at every turn that there are “official” narratives of Willie’s death and Lincoln’s subsequent grief to which Saunders’s narrative acts as the underside. The first set of these historical accounts details the lavishness of the party that the Lincolns threw on the evening Willie’s condition took a fatal turn. Various accounts of the party describe its “exotic flowers” (10) and the “magnificence of the repast” (12), indulgences that one excerpt criticizes as “A piggish and excessive display, in a time of war” (13). In these historical accounts, death permeates—on both a national and personal level. Reminders of the war abound—a war “less than a year old” at the time of Willie’s death (12)—as well as of Willie’s illness: “Yet there was no joy in the evening for the mechanically smiling hostess and her husband,” writes one author. “They kept climbing the stairs to see how Willie was, and he was not doing well at all” (15). However, the “factual” records Saunders incorporates into the text are far from unanimous when it comes to narrating this historical moment; in fact, on more than one occasion, they directly contradict one another. One group of
excerpts, which together describe the night sky on the evening of the gathering, is particularly revealing: certain accounts describe the moon as “full,” “beautiful,” and “golden,” while others assert that “There was no moon,” stating instead that the night “continued dark and moonless; a storm was moving in” (19-20). These contradictory descriptions call into question the veracity and primacy of the “historical” narrative over Saunders’s imagined, more personal one; both are narratives, constructed using and subject to interpretation. As in both Jones’s The Known World and Otsuka’s The Buddha in the Attic, then, history—and in particular, the selection of information and experiences that are included as part of the dominant historical record—plays a considerable role in Lincoln in the Bardo. Through the inclusion of the “historical” chapters described above, Bardo makes its relation to history explicit, thereby drawing our attention to the voices situated alongside those chapters that mainstream History so often excludes.

As the newest member of the bardo, Willie Lincoln—recently arrived in the cemetery following his death due to illness—becomes the unwitting recipient of the ghosts’ many melancholic narrations; he is the “you” addressed in Vollman’s first few lines of dialogue, as we discover shortly thereafter. But in addition to reinvigorating their participation in the narrative-telling compulsions of melancholia, Willie’s presence in the graveyard also inspires a newfound sense of hope in the bardo’s ghosts regarding a change to their current state. This shift in attitude is a direct result of the kernel of historical “fact” from which the novel’s plot is developed: President Lincoln’s visit to the cemetery to see his son’s body. This kind of visit, occurring so soon after the body’s interment, is, the ghosts point out, “extraordinary” and even “unprecedented” (41)—though the timing is nothing in comparison to the nature of the visit itself: Lincoln opens Willie’s coffin and proceeds to touch his son’s corpse—not just touching
“the face and hair fondly” (46), but “[lifting] the tiny form” out of its coffin and sobbing “unreservedly, giving full vent to his emotions” (57-58). As Lincoln begins to speak to his son’s body, Willie in his spirit form proceeds to enter his former shell in order to receive his father’s embrace. In addition to hearing the spoken sentiments directed toward him, Willie finds that he can also

feel the way [Lincoln’s] long legs lay How it is to have a beard Taste coffee in the mouth and, though not thinking in words exactly, knew that the feel of him in my arms has done me good. (61)

Here, through this spiritual communion between Lincoln and Willie, the novel introduces a kind of literal empathy between characters: Willie is not only feeling for his father, but feeling as him, both physically and in a more mental and emotional way. The ghosts meet what Vollman calls this “troubling and unseemly display” (57) with mixed feelings. It is uncomfortably poignant, “too much, too private” (60), but also “vivifying” to the spectral community (67). As Vollman and Bevins’ friend the Reverend Everly Thomas explains, “It was the touching that was unusual” (67). Though individuals from “that previous place” may occasionally come to the graveyard—with their “rumors, their discomfort, their hissing of things having nothing at all to do with us” (67)—the kind of physical engagement enacted by Lincoln is exceptional. “The holding, the lingering, the kind words whispered directly into the ear? My God! My God!” exclaims the Reverend, “As if one were still worthy of affection and respect…It was cheering. It gave us hope” (70). This unheard of tenderness allows for the possibility that, as Bevins puts it, “We were perhaps not so unlovable as we had come to believe” (70); much like the tender moment of physical contact between Felix and Guido in Nightwood, Lincoln’s embrace of his son’s corpse acts as a bright moment of contrast to the otherwise dismal atmosphere within the text, even
elevating the spirits of its melancholic characters. “How had it felt, being held like that?” they ask. “Had [Lincoln] offered any hope for the alteration of the boy’s fundamental circumstance? If so, might said hope extend to us as well?” (73).

Importantly, however, this newly felt hopefulness only strengthens the spirits’ resolve to remain in the bardo—and in doing so, to engage in melancholic storytelling. Rushing forward to shout their stories and confessions into Willie’s crypt, the ghosts convey their many woes: the people they have left behind, the achievements they were unable to accomplish before passing away, and—described with equal magnitude—the details of daily life to which they can no longer attend. The widowed Mrs. Abigail Blass provides a detailed account of the wealth she managed to save in the earthly realm as well as the catalogue of items—“dead-bird parts, twigs, pebbles, and motes” (81)—she collects and hoards in the graveyard; the pugnacious Lieutenant Cecil Stone tells of the many times he “pounded [his] Lust out in the Night,” a feat that involved the habitual rape of the enslaved women on his plantation (82); and addicts Eddie and Betsy Baron relate their questionable behavior as parents to two children who have “never once” come to see them (86). Willie himself offers a keen observation of this vast and varied throng of spirits:

Faces thrusting into the doorway to blurt their sad     This or that     None were content
All had been wronged     Neglected     Overlooked     Misunderstood     (82)

For many of the ghosts, the melancholic impulse to relate their stories is even strong enough to withstand a bizarre phenomenon involving a swarm of entities—though it is not clear whether they are angelic, demonic, or something else altogether—aimed at motivating the inhabitants of the bardo to cross over. Despite the fact that several of their compatriots “succumb” to this
onslaught” (96, 101), the Reverend, Vollman, and Bevins—among many others—remain firm in their decision to stay put, even applying what Vollman refers to as “the ultimate antidote”:

To whom do you speak? I said. Who is hearing you? To whom do you listen? Whose hand do you now follow, as it lifts to point to the heavens? What is the source of the voice causing those looks of consternation to appear even now upon your faces? Here I am. I am here. Am I not? (99)

Here as elsewhere, the ability to speak and be heard is asserted as essential to the ghosts successfully remaining in the bardo. They may be miserable, melancholy, and in a perpetual cycle of expressing their grief, but they are also proud of and steadfast in their ability to remain in this intermediary state: as Vollman puts it, “Our path is not for everyone” (103). Like Doctor O’Connor, whose tendency to “talk too much” (Barnes 172) is closely tied to the desire to stave off his own and others’ inevitable deterioration, Bardo’s ghosts are in a transitional state that both fuels and is fueled by the melancholic performance they enact. It is an unpleasant existence, to be sure, but one they nonetheless cling to in order to avoid what they fear will be an even worse fate.

Still, the prolonged melancholic existence takes effort and a toll on the ghosts in Bardo, revealing itself—just as it did for Nightwood’s Doctor O’Connor—to be less than an ideal or long-term remedy for their grief. The ghosts must withstand a lackluster, repetitive existence, the “devastating sameness” with which each evening in the graveyard passes (124). “In truth, we were bored, so very bored, so continually bored,” explains Bevins (124). Not only have they “read and re-read every stone” and traversed “every walk, path, and weedy trail” many times, but as Bevins goes on, “I had heard Mr. Vollman’s story many thousands of times, and had, I fear, told him my own at least as many times” (124). “In short,” Vollman explains, “it was dull here, and we craved the slightest variation” (124). In part to seek a respite from this perpetual
boredom, Vollman and Bevins decide to become further entangled with the Lincolns—and in doing so, experience glimmers of what might be possible beyond the monotony of melancholia. Though they are aware that the Reverend would “not approve” (145), Bevins and Vollman “enter” Lincoln in the same way they saw Willie do; and, just as Willie did, they begin to feel with Lincoln and know his thoughts. During these moments of spiritual oneness, the ghosts experience not only the painful, tender remembrances of Willie but also Lincoln’s realization that the loss he feels is shared by many other parents at this particular historical moment: the fallen soldiers are all “someone’s boys,” Lincoln admits to himself, connecting his own grief to that shared by those on both sides of the conflict (155). Certainly, this portrait of Lincoln—a “sculpture on the theme of loss” (145) who is deeply conflicted about his role in the war and its many casualties—could be accused of participating in the same kind of idealization perpetuated by many historical accounts of his character. However, what the novel privileges in this moment is the experience of literal empathy and the powerful effect the encounter has on Vollman and Bevins. They know very well that, despite what Lincoln hopes, “His boy was not ‘in some bright place, free of suffering’” (159), and, as a result of their confluence with Lincoln, the ghosts together decide to help “save” Willie’s soul by trying to influence his father to return to the crypt and convince Willie to cross over (161); after all, as they repeatedly insist, “young ones are not meant to tarry” in the bardo (31). Once Lincoln does exit them, however, Bevins and Vollman experience their own moment of deep communion: “Because we were as yet intermingled with one another,” Bevins explains, “traces of Mr. Vollman naturally begin arising in my mind and traces of me naturally began arising in his” (171). As was the case inside President Lincoln, the effect is “an astonishment”: Vollman sees for the first time “the great beauty of things of this
world” as Bevins sees it and knows what it is to desire “the man-smell and the strong hold of a
man,” and Bevins is able to feel Vollman’s deep love for Anna and his “reluctance to leave her
behind” (171). This literal empathy has a profound effect on both ghosts, who, though close
friends in the graveyard for years, feel they have “never really known” each other until now
(172). The novel’s exploration of a spiritual “co-habitation” (173) that enables this unmitigated
experience of another’s physical, mental, and affective state provides another counterweight to
the novel’s overwhelming melancholic performance.

But if this close communion between Bevins and Vollman acts as one of the strongest
antidotes to the novel’s melancholia, its seeming positivity is complicated and destabilized
almost as soon as it is initiated. First, the Reverend, the third in Bevins and Vollman’s ghostly
trio throughout the text, is notably excluded from this encounter; he has been left behind with
Willie, who is now held fast to the roof of the crypt by “vine-like” tendrils of stone (110). The
Reverend explains,

> My feelings had been hurt by the juvenile, deceptive actions of Mr. Bevins and Mr.
> Vollman, who, in their rush to chase after the slightest amusement, had left me in a very
> bad position indeed…Like some sort of primitive gardener I worked, bent at the waist,
> seizing at tendrils with both hands. (185)

As he attempts to aid Willie, the Reverend ruminates inwardly about what makes him “different”
from the other ghosts: “Unlike these (Bevins, Vollman, the dozens of other naïfs I reside here
among), I know very well what I am” (187). The Reverend recalls the “state of acceptance and
obedience” in which he spent his final moments of life and remembers acting on the “urge to go”
at the moment of death (186). However, what he subsequently encountered was a scene of utter
horror: after walking through a “sun-drenched meadow” to a diamond palace alongside two other
deceased men, his was judged by a “Christ-emissary” to be fated not for a heavenly feast with
Christ but for a hellish one with “a beast, bloody-handed and long-fanged, wearing a sulfur-colored robe” who tortures each newcomer on a “flaying table” (191-192). After viewing this grotesque and shocking display, the Reverend “turned and ran,” was “not pursued,” and, after falling asleep, woke up to find himself back in the graveyard (193). The Reverend’s encounter with what might lurk beyond the bardo sheds light on why he is “so deeply grateful” to continue on in his present state (193). Moreover, having heard whispers as he fled from the diamond palace instructing him to “Tell no one about this” or “it will be worse upon your return” (193), the Reverend is forced to bear the burden of this awful knowledge alone. “Many times I have been tempted to blurt out the truth to Mr. Bevins and Mr. Vollman,” the Reverend relates. “A terrible judgment awaits you, I long to say. Staying here, you merely delay. You are dead, and shall never regain that previous place” (194). Remaining silent about these matters is, the Reverend explains,

the worst of my torments: I may not tell the truth. I may speak, but never about the essential thing. Bevins and Vollman consider me an arrogant hectoring pedant, a droning old man; they roll their eyes when I offer council, but little do they know: my counsel is infused with bitter and excellent experience. (194)

Thus, while his confederates remain in the dark about the severity of their condition and what the future might hold, the Reverend must live with the deeply disturbing secret that stems from his upsetting encounter. In this section of the novel, then, we see an interesting variation on melancholia: although he is just as compelled to share his personal narrative as the spirits around him, the Reverend is confined to the possibly even worse fate of perpetual listener—of having to keep his own narrative contained within.

But, importantly, the Reverend is not the only ghost whose story is excluded, silenced, or deferred in Lincoln in the Bardo. This inequity becomes evident when the throng of spirits—who
have noted Willie’s sharp decline—reassemble around the crypt in order to achieve “the slightest participation in the transformative moment that must be imminent”: “They had abandoned any pretext of speaking one at a time,” explains Bevins, “many calling out desperately from where they stood, others darting brazenly up to the open door to shout their story in” (205). The “cacophony” of confessions that follows becomes—as Nora’s did in Nightwood—increasingly personal: “It was me that started that fire,” one ghost says, and another confesses, “I steal every chanse I git” (206). Other spirits relate stories of long-silenced trauma, such as the following from a ghost named Vesper Johannes:

Mr. Johns Melburn did take me to a remote part of the manse and touch me in an evil way. I was just a boy. And he an eminence. Not a word of protest did I (could I) speak. Ever. To anyone. I should like to speak of it now. I should like to speak of it and speak of— (207)

Each story is interrupted by the next as the ghosts attempt to “[bellow] their stories into the doorway” of the crypt (224). But in the midst of this bedlam, an “unhappy murmur” arises when “several men and women of the sable hue, having boldly followed the Barons over from the mass grave on the other side of the fence,” approach the crypt and insist that they, too, are entitled to “have their say” (213). Here, as in other passages suggesting that certain divisions persist into the afterlife, we see plainly the racist dynamics among the bardo’s spirits as slurs like “black beasts” and “damnable savages” are hurled at the ghosts of black individuals who wish to participate in the “momentous occasion” (213). Three of the “black contingent” (223) in particular are foregrounded during this exchange: Elson Farwell, a polite and well-spoken young man who “did always try” to stay positive despite being “born to an unlucky fate” (214); Thomas Havens, who insists that his master and his family “were like family to me,” having made Havens’s and his own family’s enslavement “a happy arrangement, all things considered” (219);
and Litzie Wright, a “young mulatto woman” of “startling beauty” who was raped and abused so frequently by white men that she was driven to “leap off the Cedar Creek Bridge” (221-222). The time Farwell and Havens have spent in the bardo has led them to reflect on their complacency and acceptance while alive: only now does Elson realize that “only a beast would endure what I had endured without objection”—now when it is “too late” (217)—and as Thomas recalls the “free, uninterrupted, discretionary moments” he feels fortunate to have had while alive, the thought “that other men enjoyed whole lifetimes comprised of such moments” is what “bothers [him] most” (220). Elson and Thomas tell these narratives of tragic realization over and over again in the bardo, but in Litzie’s case, what was encountered in life is so atrocious as to be beyond articulation; she is rendered mute by her traumatic experiences and must be spoken for by her spectral friend in the cemetery, Mrs. Francis Hodge. The experiences of these black characters reveal shades of the melancholic condition beyond what characters like Bevins, Vollman, and even the Reverend undergo, as the compulsion to tell one’s story becomes physically subdued by the continuance of racism and racial segregation in the bardo or even arrested completely when a trauma is too horrific to be spoken at all.

These configurations of melancholia—some familiar and some that emphatically underscore its potential variety—make the melancholic landscape of *Bardo* a complex one. But there are further complications to come for the text’s characters when the novel moves toward its close, as many of them eventually overcome the confines of the bardo and the melancholic existence that accompanies it. Two interrelated developments give rise to these transformations: the ghosts’ combined effort to help Willie cross over, and a more earnest confrontation with what has kept them in the bardo for so long. During a communal attempt by many of the graveyard’s
ghosts to keep Lincoln in the crypt, they enter his body with “so many wills, memories, complaints, desires, so much raw life force” (252) and experience the pleasure of being “united in positive intention” (254). This setting aside of “all selfish concerns” makes room for remembrances of happiness that their melancholy has hitherto inhibited, since, as Bevins explains, “To stay, one must deeply and continuously dwell upon one’s primary reason for staying; even to the exclusion of all else” (254-255). “One must be constantly looking for opportunities to tell one’s story,” Vollman agrees, to which the Reverend adds, “If not permitted to tell it, one must think it and think it” (255). Only when their self-obsessed telling is interrupted by this other-directed thought and action do the ghosts begin to break the cycle of melancholia, remembering “all else [they] had been and known” and even feeling “restored somewhat to [their] natural fullness” (256). By the novel’s end, the Reverend, Vollman, and Bevins all depart from the bardo in the process of ensuring that Willie and another young ghost, Elise Traynor, are freed from a new onslaught of perverse and ill-willed spirits—but not before confronting the uncomfortable truths they have been using their melancholia to keep at bay. For the Reverend, this means letting his affection for Willie outweigh his anxieties about returning to “that dreadful diamond palace” (275); for Bevins, it means recalling the memory of seeing his lover, Gilbert, with another man on the day of his suicide; and for Vollman, it means acknowledging that his widow, Anna, once came to visit his grave to thank him for allowing her to “deliver [herself], unsullied, to he who would prove to be the great love of [her] life” (327). After willingly confronting these painful remembrances and making the conscious choice to stop “looking for opportunities to tell [their stories]” (255), the three ghosts each leave the narrative in a more purposive and less isolated state than the one in which we found them.
Of course, another major transformation at the novel’s end involves Lincoln himself, for whom, we learn, the ghosts’ mass co-habitation results in a mind “freshly inclined toward sorrow” (303). In a narration worthy of Doctor O’Connor that is clearly influenced by the ghosts’ many melancholic narratives, Lincoln finds himself facing the realization “that the world was full of sorrow; that everyone labored under some burden of sorrow; that all were suffering; that whatever way one took in this world, one must try to remember that all were suffering (none content; all wronged, neglected, overlooked, misunderstood)” (303). On the heels of this powerful grief, however, comes the subsequent realization that in the midst of the world’s suffering, “one must do what one could to lighten the load of those with whom one came into contact” (303). Lincoln is well aware that—unlike individuals like Doctor O’Connor or the many marginalized individuals in the bardo—his “position in the world situated him to be either of great help or great harm, it would not do to stay low, if he could help it” (303-304); “His sympathy extended to all in this instant,” the narration goes on to explain, “blundering, in its strict logic, across all divides” (304). Here, we see Lincoln’s meditation move from sorrow to the potential mitigation of that sorrow by individuals like himself who occupy positions of power and influence. Lincoln cannot help but relate this newly-felt knowledge to his ongoing internal struggle regarding the war: “Did the thing merit it. Merit the killing,” he wonders, before arriving at the conclusion that “Willie would not wish us hobbled” by “a vain and useless grief” (308). Though the narrative immediately reveals Lincoln to be aware that he is “positing from [Willie] a blessing he could not possibly verify,” he decides he must nonetheless “believe it,” or else be “ruined” (309). But Willie is not the only spectral presence to have a lasting impression on Lincoln’s consciousness. As he leaves the chapel, Lincoln passes through the ghosts of the many
“black folks” lingering there, including Thomas Havens (310-311). Feeling a “kinship” with Lincoln, Havens decides to “stay a bit”: “I was comfortable in there. And suddenly, wanted him to know me. My life. To know us. Our lot” (311). Though Havens perceives that Lincoln had at one time “an aversion” to people of his race, he is now “an open book. An opening book. That had just been opened up somewhat wider. By sorrow. And—by us” (311-312). Feeling Lincoln’s deep sorrow, Havens thinks,

Well sir, if we are going to make a sadness party of it, I have some sadness about which I think someone as powerful as you might like to know. And I thought, then, as hard as I could, of Mrs. Hodge, and Elson, and Litzie, and of all I had heard during our long occupancy in that pit regarding their many troubles and degradations…thinking, Sir, if you are as powerful as I feel that you are, and as inclined toward us as you seem to be, endeavor to do something for us, so that we might do something for ourselves. We are ready, sir; are angry, are capable, our hopes are coiled up so tight as to be deadly, or holy: turn us loose, sir, let us at it, let us show what we can do. (312)

In this scene of mental and emotional enmeshment, the novel posits that Havens’ racially-specific sorrow will go on to inform Lincoln’s own thoughts and actions on behalf of those whose ability to help themselves has been severely and systemically delimited. Saunders’s intervention into history in this section of the novel is, thus, a powerful one, underscoring the importance of truly listening to the discontents of the marginalized—as articulated by the marginalized—as an essential facet of working on their behalf. The novel’s final lines gesture toward a continued spiritual connectedness between the two men as Havens remains “within” Lincoln as the latter leaves the cemetery: “And we rode forward into the night,” Havens explains, “past the sleeping houses of our countrymen” (343).

Certainly, the novel’s ending could be said to romanticize both the historical figure of Lincoln and the transformative possibilities of empathetic feeling and self-sacrificial action. However, in keeping with the pattern he has established thus far in the novel, Saunders
complicates the narratively-satisfying closure of these developments with some notable loose ends. Although many spectral characters let go of their storytelling impulses and leave the bardo, for others the journey beyond melancholia is far from complete. Among the ghosts who do not “succumb” (318) by the novel’s close are Elson Farwell and the racist Lieutenant Stone, who become engaged in a heated physical altercation that shows “no sign of abating” and suggests that “the two might well fight on into eternity” (321). In the aftermath of so many ghosts’ mass exodus from the bardo, the “survivors” who remain maintain the viewpoint that those who have gone are “fools,” expressing thanks for the “great mother-gift” of “More time” (338-339). The novel further problematizes its own ending through the inclusion of a handful of peripheral living characters, including Manders the cemetery night watchman and a house-bound young woman named Isabelle Perkins who lives adjacent to the graveyard. Although we see both Manders and Perkins display an intensified ability to feel at the close of the novel—the former finding the prospect of his own young son’s death “unbearable” (342) and the latter imagining “the extent of [Lincoln’s] heartache” (315)—the narrative also gestures toward the limits of these living characters’ abilities to feel for and with others. In a letter to her brother, for example, Perkins writes that her caretaker, Grace, has been in “bad temper” about being “at the beck & call of one so immobilized”; although Perkins admits that she “cannot blame” Grace for this frustration, she then quickly points out that “[Grace] is no friend—Of this I must constantly remind myself—She is hired, by us, to care for me—And that is ALL” (315). Textual passages like this one remind us that human feeling has its very real limits—often based on the very divisions of class and race the text has consciously explored—and that the “literal” empathy Saunders imagines for his characters remains an impossibility in the world outside of the text. Importantly, though, the
novel does not portray even the unmitigated access to the feelings of others as a simple or overly sentimental experience. After all, as Havens explains on the text’s final page, “It was hard. Hard for him. Hard for me. To be in there. I resolved nevertheless to stay” (343).

Like much of Saunders’s fiction, then—and certainly like Nightwood—Lincoln in the Bardo ends on a complex note in terms of both plot and feeling. Still, while the novel actively complicates any sense of tidy or entirely uplifting narrative closure, on the whole it is undeniably more hopeful than Barnes’s text—especially in terms of the paths provided for its melancholic characters. Although both authors explore the dynamics of melancholic narration, their narratives have inarguably different trajectories: while, as Kenneth Burke argues, Nightwood aims at a “transcendence downward” (qtd. in Baird), Bardo’s central characters do transcend their melancholia and move—if not “upward”—at least forward beyond their present circumstances. Moreover, melancholia itself takes on a new efficacy in Saunders’s novel: although it is too late for the lives of those in the bardo, Lincoln’s decisions and influence still have the potential to reach (and historically speaking, did reach) the world of the living and still marginalized. Lincoln in the Bardo provides a rendering of history that is both speculative and sympathetic regarding Lincoln’s actions and motives at the time of his presidency, but in Saunders’s reimagining, Lincoln’s increased compassion is the direct result of being immersed in the melancholia of those populating an underside that would otherwise have remained unseen and unheard.

**Melancholic Metamodernism**

Both Barnes’s Nightwood and Saunders’s Lincoln in the Bardo draw a clear correlation between marginal status and melancholia, and both explore the ways that melancholia can find expression through and thus shape narrative form. In another telling similarity, the narrative
experimentation of both novels was met, at least initially, with critical confusion and even
disdain. To return to Kakutani’s review, it is true that Bardo’s dialogic chapters might seem
“tedious” in contrast to the more narratively-conventional and straightforward Lincoln storyline;
however, early reviewers of Nightwood, too, called attention to the way the text flouted
conventional structures of plot and progression. A. Desmond Hawkins’ review is just one
example, and is worth quoting at length:

Miss Barnes’s method is curious. A brilliant opening of concrete description presents the
Volkbein family, but this in some ways loses momentum and for the rest of the book
Volkbein is always in danger of being forgotten. The centre of the stage is taken over by
the lesbians and the Doctor, an oracular figure who exists to be consulted. The book goes
into a stream of prodigious analysis, the characters sitting like bridge-fiends in an
elaborate post-mortem on how the cards were played. But the cards have been played,
that is the point. Whatever action there is occurs as something now being relived in
dialogue. The book is a work of sibylline sensibility, a relentless confession
counterpointed with oracular pronouncement. Once the stage is set we do not know what
has happened until the characters involved begin their post-mortem. (Hawkins qtd. in
Marcus 201)

As a result, Hawkins declares, Barnes’s writing style in Nightwood is “a method to which we are
not accustomed” (qtd. in Marcus 201). In addition to the uncanny parallels with Bardo’s subject
matter evoked by phrases like “post-mortem,” Hawkins’s review resonates with Kakutani’s
assessment of Saunders’s novel in its uneasiness with the unfamiliar methodology of Barnes’s
narrative—a narrative we now have the frameworks to approach more thoughtfully after nearly a
century of critical discussion. In another notable review of Bardo, Caleb Crain takes issue with
what he terms the novel’s “sentimentality”: “There’s quite a bit of schmaltz in Lincoln in the
Bardo,” Crain argues, before offering the final assessment that “if you like a salty-sweet mix of
cruelty and sappiness, you’ll enjoy your visit” (Crain). The clearly negative connotations of
words like “schmaltz” and “sappiness” are indicative of Crain’s disdain for the more emotive
aspects of the text. Here, too, lies an important similarity between these comments and the reception of *Nightwood*, as Barnes’s novel has also been accused of being “too emotional” (Caselli 156). As Daniela Caselli so aptly puts it, *Nightwood* “[skirts] a little too close for comfort to what is possibly the biggest of Modernist no-nos: sentimentality” (176). Also writing on the modernists’ discomfort with sentiment, Suzanne Clark explains, “From the point of view of literary modernism, sentimentality was both a past to be outgrown and a present tendency to be despised” (2).7 Just as much of the scholarly work on *Nightwood* addresses the book’s relation to sentimentality and affect, many contemporary scholars seek to relate Saunders to movements like the New Sincerity, Post-Irony, and Post-Postmodernism that reject what they consider to be a postmodern avoidance of sincere emotion. While readers like Crain reveal their own discomfort with the affective aspects of Saunders’s fictions, others, like Alex Millen, argue that “the affective, or, emotional appeal of [Saunders’] stories…deserves adequate theorization” (128). Barnes’s and Saunders’s novels are not only alike in their narrative structures and subject matter, then, but also in terms of the vexed positions they occupy within the critical debates of their times—especially those relating to the narrative portrayal and evocation of earnest feeling.

As I read these critical conversations and the dismissive attitude toward “sentimentality” in particular, the underlying assumption for many scholars seems to be that a text cannot simultaneously be full of feeling and appeal seriously to readers as real, political subjects. But as so much of the scholarship that has flourished around *Nightwood* shows, the novel is actually “a

7 In *Djuna Barnes and Affective Modernism*, Julie Taylor connects this skepticism toward sentiment to its underlying gender dynamics, writing that “the sentimental” is “a historically specific, maligned, feminised and supposedly anti-modern discourse” (22); although “male modernists did not jettison the body entirely from their poetics, they attempted to ensure that the bodies in question were quite different from the apparently female, passive, emotional bodies of the sentimental novel” (23).
profundely political work, for the effects of Barnes’s experimental fiction—her public display of private loves and losses—are, paradoxically, recuperations of those losses” (Smith 194-195). I argue that the same can be said of *Lincoln in the Bardo*, but that Saunders makes his narrative’s political thrust more explicit, not just finding “a speech for loss” (Smith 203) but showing what can happen—between subjects and within the social structures they inhabit—when the sharing of that loss is heard and met with empathy and compassion. In this way, Saunders’s text extends *Nightwood*'s project, recasting and remobilizing the melancholic narrative form for a new time, place, and set of readers. Though its action is set in a period historically prior even to *Nightwood*'s, *Bardo*'s concerns are very much of our contemporary moment: Saunders’s narrative renews *Nightwood*'s commitment to expressing feeling, but also emphasizes the importance of relating that feeling to other-directed action, especially for those in positions of power and privilege. The shape of Saunders’s narrative—specifically, its insistence on foregrounding character dialogue as the novel’s authoritative voice—is itself a testament to this more explicit appeal to the reader, a twenty-first century reader likely situated in a volatile social and political climate where marginalized identities are under continued and even intensified threat. For this reason, I disagree with Layne Neeper when she writes that, “Beyond any other consideration, Saunders’s work asks us to only empathize” (297, emphasis in original), as this view strikes me as too apolitical. Though there is certainly no guarantee that the intimate readerly experience facilitated by *Bardo* will lead to action that betters society, it seems too hasty to assume it might not in some way or other inform our ways of being and acting in the world—a possibility of which Saunders seems palpably aware throughout his oeuvre. James Phelan’s theorization of character is again illuminating here, as it reminds us that while literary characters
may be “synthetic,” “their creators are likely to be doing something more…than trying to bring another possible person into the world. They are likely to be increasing the population in order to show us something about the segment of the population to which the created member belongs” (121). Bringing this thematic dimension of character to bear on *Lincoln in the Bardo* means considering how the text aims to affect its audience on more than just an emotional level. A true engagement with the experiences of marginality and suffering in Saunders’s novel—as well as in Barnes’s—demands from readers a more robust intellectual and historical understanding of the circumstances and power structures that brought those experiences into existence.

In a conversation with Saunders at a day conference entitled “George Saunders and the Fiction of Radical Humanism” in March of 2018, I was surprised to discover that he had never read *Nightwood*, since its cast of melancholic outsiders seemed to me to be such a clear antecedent to the misfits peopling Saunders’s own work. However, the arguments I make here are by no means predicated on the notion that the resonances between Saunders’s novel and *Nightwood* must be intentional. *Lincoln in the Bardo*, like *The Buddha in the Attic*, is a “metamodernist” text only if one uses a more capacious understanding of the term than James and Seshagiri’s original conception of metamodernist fiction as forging a relationship to modernist literature that is “self-conscious” (88). Regardless of James and Seshagiri’s parameters, the relationship I have drawn between Saunders’s work and *Nightwood* does strike me as a metamodernist one in terms of Saunders’s “inheritance of formal principles and ethicopolitical imperatives that are recalibrated in the context of new social or philosophical concerns” (92). Inheritance is, of course, not always a conscious process, and without the “modernist aesthetics pioneered in the early twentieth century” (89) it is difficult to imagine the
experimental fiction of an author like Saunders coming into existence at all. In my view, a novel like *Lincoln in the Bardo* lends credibility to the argument that “the central experiments and debates of twentieth-century modernist culture have acquired new relevance to the moving horizon of contemporary literature” (James and Seshagiri 88). In fact, it is perhaps even more significant that these resonances and overlaps exist in a text that does not purport to address or recast modernism directly. What the narrative dynamics shared between *Nightwood* and *Lincoln in the Bardo* reveal is that the same concerns represented in Barnes’s melancholic modernism persist into our contemporary moment for individuals on society’s margins. History may not have acknowledged these individuals, but as the recipients of their melancholic narrations, we have both the ability and responsibility to do so now.
CHAPTER FOUR

NABOKOV’S AFTERLIVES:

THE META-LATE MODERNISMS OF W. G. SEBALD AND ALEKSANDAR HEMON

In the previous two chapters, I have pushed the boundaries of James and Seshagiri’s metamodernism to consider contemporary texts that engage the legacies of modernism without explicit reference to their modernist literary precursors. Here, I return to the kind of conscious engagement outlined in James and Seshagiri’s categorical definition and explore the legacy of Vladimir Nabokov in two contemporary novels about emigration and historical recovery, W. G. Sebald’s *The Emigrants* (1992) and Aleksandar Hemon’s *The Lazarus Project* (2008). Thus, this chapter presents a constellation rather than a comparison, identifying a relationship between the three authors in which Sebald scaffolds elements of his text around Nabokov and Hemon, in his turn, constructs his text on the foundations laid by both literary precursors. Nabokov moves in and out of these contemporary novels as a historical figure—who, like Sebald and Hemon, was no stranger to the experiences of emigration and exile—as well as a literary influence associated with a particular set of aesthetic practices and thematic concerns. To be sure, the appearances and evocations of Nabokov offer readers well-acquainted with the details of his life and work the pleasures of a more intertextually intricate reading experience. But as I will demonstrate, the incorporations of Nabokov in *The Emigrants* and *The Lazarus Project* serve a purpose beyond playful cameos or homages to his influential narrative techniques. While they call attention to
their literary ancestry more assertively than any of the other metamodernist authors I have discussed, the novels of Sebald and Hemon also depart from aspects of Nabokov’s craft in several key ways. I argue that *The Emigrants* and *The Lazarus Project* engage with Nabokov’s legacy in a manner that is distinctly meta-*late* modernist, actively remobilizing his well-known metafictional techniques but challenging the concepts of artistic autonomy and wholeness associated with his late-modernist approach.

The various determinations of what and when exactly constitute late modernism can be dizzying, with Alan Wilde (1981) describing the movement as a shift “to surface” in the 1930s that occasions “a change in attitudes toward character and characterization” (qtd. in Whitworth 278), Fredric Jameson (1991) arguing that “late moderns” can “persist into postmodernism” and are “the last survivals of a properly modernist view of art and the world after the great political and economic break of the Depression” (305), and Tyrus Miller (1999) considering late modernist authors to be those writing in the late 1920s and 1930s who attempted, in the wake of “high modernism’s dissolution,” to “[reassemble] fragments into disfigured likenesses of modernist masterpieces: the unlovely allegories of a world’s end” (14). More recently, Robert Genter (2010) has argued that the period took place in the 1940s and 50s as many literary texts became “calls to action on the part of the artist as rhetorician” writing “in order to produce a commitment or at least a response from the viewing audience” (4). Although the present chapter does not offer any stability to these shifting sands of definition, I do find it important to retain late modernism—however nebulous—as a distinct category, a late phase of modernism that holds on to many modernist aesthetic impulses while also initiating practices typically associated with the postmodernist fictions that appear after it. For my purposes, this view of late modernism
as an “in-between” movement provides the most appropriate literary context in which to situate Nabokov’s texts—in accordance with what critics like Jameson have suggested1 —while enabling us to more precisely understand the literary interventions of Sebald and Hemon, as well.

As Duncan White writes in the recent study *Nabokov and his Books: Between Late Modernism and the Literary Marketplace* (2017), “in accounts of literary history Nabokov is repeatedly figured as being out of season or, to switch metaphors, lost in the no-man’s-land between modernism and postmodernism” (23). Nabokov’s in-betweenness is also noted in Brian McHale’s *Postmodernist Fiction* (1987) when McHale writes that “The crossover from modernist to postmodernist writing” can be traced “during the middle years of Vladimir Nabokov’s American career” (18). For this reason, Nabokov is among the key figures in McHale’s configuration of “limit-modernist” fiction (13), a category he correlates with Wilde’s model of late modernism and uses to describe texts that hesitate “between an epistemological and an ontological focus” (18-19). Indeed, Nabokov’s maneuvers in this regard are legendary, as his thoroughly self- and author-reflexive texts put questions of knowledge and reliability in play alongside those concerning the nature of being and reality itself. In *Lolita* (1955) and *Pale Fire* (1962), for example, readers must contend with extreme cases of unreliability from narrators Humbert Humbert and Charles Kinbote, and in the latter text, how much truth we ascribe to Kinbote’s narration can alter our interpretation of whether certain aspects of the world he describes—such as his homeland of Zembla—really exist at all. This oscillation between epistemological and ontological concerns is intensified in *Ada, or Ardor* (1969), in which the

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1 In *Postmodernism* (1991), Jameson writes that “a literary frame of reference” for what Charles Jencks calls late modernism “throws up names like Borges and Nabokov, Beckett, poets like Olson or Zukovsky, and composers like Milton Babbitt, who had the misfortune to span two eras and the luck to find a time capsule of isolation or exile in which to spin out unseasonable forms” (305).
modernist issues of “memory and perspectivism” (McHale 19) related to Van and Ada Veen’s dueling roles as narrators of their family and personal histories vie for our attention alongside the ontological puzzle of the novel’s setting in “Antiterra,” a parallel earth described as “a distortive glass of our own distorted glebe” (Ada 18). Another element of Nabokov’s fictions typically associated with postmodernist aesthetics are the many metafictional moments that call attention to the constructedness of the texts in which they appear, to be discussed in greater detail below. But importantly, these attributes we have come to call postmodernist are nonetheless situated within works that strive for a larger aesthetic wholeness—or, as Nabokov himself describes them, “riddles with elegant solutions” (Strong Opinions 26). Although they employ many of the same narrative techniques for which Nabokov is well known—and in Sebald’s case, even underscore his influential presence by including him as a character—it is this very possibility of textual completeness, as well as Nabokov’s oft-expressed view that his texts could be detached from a “social purpose” or “moral and human elements” (Strong Opinions 26, 314), that The Emigrants and The Lazarus Project challenge and resist. Comparing their aesthetic approaches to those within the Nabokov fictions above and his revised version of the autobiographical Speak, Memory published in 1966, I reveal how the novels of Sebald and Hemon function as responses to Nabokov’s brand of late modernism through both an intensified focus on the impossibility of constructing a single, authoritative account of the past and a heightened concern and engagement with the world outside of their texts.

“all he could see were fragmented or shattered images”: Sebald’s The Emigrants

In W. G. Sebald’s The Emigrants (1992), an unnamed narrator\(^2\) attempts to piece together

\(^2\) A narrator whose identity and experiences, as Sebald has confirmed in interviews with both Carole Angier and James Wood, are largely influenced by his own.
the histories of four emigrants whose stories of exile and displacement overlap in numerous ways—with each other’s experiences and with his own—at various intervals throughout the text. The narrator, himself a German emigrant, provides a number of photographs to accompany the written accounts of his four subjects’ lives and his interactions with their histories, achieving a hyper-realistic “scrapbook” effect—at least initially. But one’s experience of reality, we soon discover, is posed as something slippery and debatable in *The Emigrants*, as are memory, truth, and the very idea of historical recovery itself. Compounding the destabilization of these concepts is one of the novel’s most peculiar features: its incorporation of Vladimir Nabokov, who appears regularly during the course of the four narratives within. Nabokov’s appearances have been thoroughly examined by scholars of Sebald’s novel, who have explored among other elements the parallels between the two authors’ own emigrant roots, their relationships to the Jewish Holocaust, and their exploration of the themes of memory and history.³ Below, I trace Nabokov’s presence in *The Emigrants* in order to show the intertextual dimension it opens up, one that points to the ever-present shadow of Nabokov over Sebald’s narrative but also Sebald’s ambivalence toward certain elements of Nabokov’s late-modernist approach.

Nabokov first appears in the opening section of *The Emigrants*, which focuses on Dr. Henry Selwyn, the landlord on whose property the narrator lived in Hingham, England between September of 1970 and May 1971. Selwyn, who was seven years old in 1899 when he and his family left their small village in Lithuania to settle in London, tells the narrator how he

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concealed the “secret” of his Jewish origins for as long as possible, even from his wife (21).

“The years of the second war, and the decades after,” Selwyn explains, “were a blinding, bad time for me, about which I could not say a thing even if I wanted to” (21). The “blinding” quality of Selwyn’s painful past prohibits him from fully recalling the memories associated with it, although he takes great pains to preserve the memories of happier times like the trip he took to Crete ten years before the narrator meets him. As the narrator and Selwyn look through the latter’s many photos from the trip, we are told the images include Selwyn’s friend Edwin “with his field glasses and a container for botanical specimens” and Selwyn “in knee-length shorts, with a shoulder bag and butterfly net” (15). “One of the shots,” the narrator goes on, “resembled, even in detail, a photograph of Nabokov in the mountains above Gstaad that I had clipped from a Swiss magazine a few days before” (15-16). This picture of the butterfly-hunting Nabokov is then provided in Sebald’s text, situated among the written descriptions of the photos the narrator and Selwyn are actually in the process of viewing. The photograph of Nabokov is the first of its kind in the text, as the images thus far have correlated more directly to the surrounding narrative: the “grassy graveyard” near the church on the way to Hingham (3), the “tennis court” and “tumble-down Victorian greenhouses” in disrepair on the Selwyn property (7), and a picture of the Swiss mountains where Selwyn once adventured with “an alpine guide by the name of Johannes Naegeli” (13). The Nabokov image is all the more notable when we consider its placement in the text, as it inhabits a position we might more reasonably expect to be occupied by Selwyn’s photograph of “the Lasithi plateau, held so long till it shattered,” that the narrator explains “made a deep impression on [him] at the time” and would even return to his mind years later (17). The question emerges: why include the photo of Nabokov instead of the Lasithi photo,
which is described at much greater length and has a much more immediate connection to the story of Henry Selwyn? One aspect of the answer lies in the authorial mechanisms underscored by such an inclusion, as the focus is shifted from the emigrant story at hand to the narrator’s own memories and mental processes. By revealing the mediating layers of its own internal constructedness, the text becomes dual-tracked: it is never only about the four emigrants in question, but also about the narrator’s attempts to relate their histories in a way that approaches the truth and brings some sense of logic to bear on the events of their lives (such as Selwyn’s eventual suicide). Throughout the novel, the narrator reflects actively on the challenges and limitations that arise in relation to the recovery of his subjects’ personal histories, often in ways suggestive of how his own experiences and memories cannot be separated from the content he attempts to curate. The dead may be “ever returning to us” (23), but what returns is only a trace of what once was there, just as the photograph of Nabokov gives an impression of—but quite conspicuously is not—the actual Selwyn image.

The Emigrants’ incorporation of Nabokov is developed further in the section of the novel centered on the life of the narrator’s third-grade teacher, Paul Bereyter. Bereyter, like Selwyn, ultimately ends his own life—by “[laying] himself down in front of a train” (27)—a fact that the narrator notes is glaringly absent from the public reports of his death. The obituary makes “no mention of the fact that Paul Bereyter had died of his own free will, or through a self-destructive compulsion,” but does include the vague detail that “during the Third Reich Paul Bereyter had been prevented from practising his chosen profession” (27). This “curiously unconnected, inconsequential statement” and Bereyter’s violent suicide cause the narrator “to think more and more about Paul Bereyter” until, he explains, “I had to get beyond my own very fond memories
of him and discover the story I did not know” (27-28). But as the narrator tries “belatedly” to “get closer to [Paul]” and “imagine what his life was like” (29)—even returning to the hometown where Bereyter taught him, which he refers to simply as “S”—he is increasingly wary of his own motives and interpretations of Bereyter’s life:

Such endeavors to imagine his life and death did not, as I had to admit, bring me any closer to Paul, except at best for brief emotional moments of the kind that seemed presumptuous to me. It is in order to avoid this sort of wrongful trespass that I have written down what I know of Paul Bereyter. (29)

In order to supplement his own “fragmentary recollections” and try to “understand [Paul’s] desolation even in part” (42), the narrator seeks out Lucy Landau, a friend of the late Bereyter who met him in the summer of 1971 “at Salins-les-Bains in the French Jura” (43). It is only through discussions with Landau that the narrator learns of Bereyter’s removal from his teaching post due to his Jewish heritage, his forced service during WWII despite being “only three-quarter Aryan” (55), and the increasing blindness he experienced in the years before his death. Landau serves as a necessary link between the narrator and Bereyter’s past, but importantly, even she does not have access to the information required to provide a complete picture of him. The limitations of her knowledge are emphasized whenever Landau uses the language of supposition, such as saying that Paul “doubtless saw more than any heart or eye can bear” during his military service (56) or that “perhaps” what motivated Paul to return to Germany in 1939 and 1945 was “the fact that he was a German to the marrow, profoundly attached to his native land in the foothills of the Alps, and even to that miserable place S” (57). Much like Bereyter’s own compromised vision near the end of his life, any portrait of him the narrator attempts to construct can only result in a series of “fragmented or shattered images” (59), partial accounts from multiple sources that together only gesture toward a coherent whole.
Nabokov is woven into this second section of the novel in a manner quite different than
in the first: here, Nabokov’s written work is the link that first connects Bereyter to Landau.
Describing their meeting to the narrator, Landau explains that “she had been reading Nabokov’s
autobiography on a park bench on the Promenade des Cordeliers when Paul, after walking by her
twice, commented on her reading” (43). Far from functioning as a mere plot device to bring these
two characters together, the appearance of Nabokov’s autobiography—which readers acquainted
with the author’s oeuvre will identify immediately as Speak, Memory, first published in 1951 but
revised and expanded with a number of photographs in 1966—opens up a wealth of intertextual
connections and interpretive possibilities. One obvious distinction between the two texts stems
from their shared interest in recovering and commemorating the past. While Nabokov seeks to
convey as accurately as possible his own memories of life before emigrating to America in
1940—including those of the pre-Soviet St. Petersburg that provided the backdrop for his
“perfect childhood” (Speak, Memory 24) as well as the years he spent in exile in Berlin and
Paris—Sebald’s narrator aims to articulate personal histories he does not know firsthand, and
therefore must work from his own scant recollections and whatever information he can gather
from the peripheral individuals he interviews. The impossibility of retelling the past exactly as it
occurred is implied in Speak, Memory—for instance, when Nabokov makes such distinctions as
the one between memories that are “plastic” and “can be set down with hardly any effort” and
those that cause the remembering consciousness to “get choosy and crabbed” (25)—but Sebald’s
text more actively calls attention to these flawed mental processes and the absences and missing
links that are their inevitable result. Although showcasing unreliable or less-than-authoritative
narration is one of the trademarks of Nabokov’s fictional approach, his nonfictional personal
history is marked by a strenuous desire to avoid any inaccuracies: as he writes in the foreword to the revisited *Speak, Memory*, part of what motivated his revised edition was the “almost complete lack of data in regard to family history” with which he was faced the first time around, “and, consequently, by the impossibility of checking my memory when I felt it might be at fault” (11). Quite to the contrary, the faultiness of memory is precisely what is flaunted in *The Emigrants*, as Sebald brings a sense of doubt to bear on the idea of ever constructing a “true” historical narrative, emphasizing a key difference in the authors’ approaches to history overall.

In the third section of the novel, the emigrant subject under investigation is an individual from within the narrator’s own family: his great uncle Ambros Adelwarth. Nabokov’s appearance in this section is also of a more personal nature, as he emerges not in the form of a paratextual image or character’s reading material but as an actual, historical figure. Adelwarth—of whom the narrator has only one faint recollection from a family gathering when he was seven years old—emigrated from Germany around 1910 to work as “a major-domo and butler with the Solomons” (87), one of “the wealthiest of the Jewish banking families in New York” (88), and served as a traveling companion to their son, Cosmos. The narrator learns about the particulars of Ambros’s life—including the detail that he “was of the other persuasion, as anyone could see, even if the family always ignored or glossed over the fact” (88)—from his Aunt Fini and Uncle Kasimir, after an old family photograph, which is included as a paratext (71), prompts him to visit them in New York in 1981. Here again, the novel underscores the fact that retrieving the past of a deceased individual requires seeking out the available stories and recollections of those closest to them, although Fini and Kasimir readily admit that there are limits to the information they can provide: “I no longer remember exactly what he told me” (79), Fini says, for instance,
regarding Adelwarth’s time spent in Japan. Although the “true facts of the matter” (79) remain nebulous, the events toward the end of Adelwarth’s life are fairly well-documented. Following Cosmos’s mental decline after the onset of WWII—the atrocities of which he “claimed that he could see clearly, in his own head…the inferno, the dying, the rotting bodies lying in the sun in open fields” (95)—Adelwarth, too, falls into “a deep depression,” and, according to Aunt Fini, “although he plainly felt a great need to talk about his life, he could no longer shape a single sentence, nor utter a single word, or any sound at all” (103). Like the other emigrants featured in the novel, Adelwarth is deeply affected by the events of the Jewish Holocaust, albeit indirectly. The predicament of being “one step removed from” yet “indelibly marked by” the Holocaust is one with which Sebald and Nabokov were both familiar, as well: as Adrian Curtin and Maxim D. Shrayer explain, Nabokov witnessed the rise of the Nazi regime and the “increasingly perilous situation of the Jewish people” including his wife, Véra, in Berlin and later lost a younger brother to the concentration camps, while Sebald inherited the generational guilt of one “whose father had been a soldier in Hitler’s army” (259).

It is at the sanatorium to which Adelwarth ultimately commits himself in Ithaca, New York that he and Aunt Fini look out the window to see “a middle-aged man…holding a white net on a pole in front of him and occasionally taking curious jumps” (104). This “butterfly man,” who Adelwarth tells Fini “comes round here quite often” (104), is, of course, Nabokov himself: as Leland de la Durantaye notes, the fall of 1953 indeed “saw Nabokov in Ithaca, New York, teaching Russian and European literature at Cornell University and hunting butterflies in his spare time” (429). This introduction of Nabokov as a historical personage comes at a particularly disquieting point in the text, as we learn that Adelwarth’s stay in the sanatorium included the
regular administering of shock treatments. When the narrator travels to Ithaca in 1984 to see the sanatorium for himself, he speaks with a Dr. Abramsky who remembers that on the last day of Adelwarth’s life, he missed the “appointed time” for his treatment, offering only the explanation that “It must have slipped [his] mind whilst [he] was waiting for the butterfly man” (115). These glimmers of Nabokov in the section might leave the reader, and the Nabokov fan in particular, feeling a kind of satisfaction not unlike the one accompanying a celebrity sighting or chance run-in with an old friend—if not for the highly disturbing contrast of Adelwarth’s shock treatments, which Abramsky describes in vivid detail immediately thereafter: “I see him lying before me, said Dr Abramsky, the electrodes on his temples, the rubber bit between his teeth, buckled into the canvas wraps that were riveted to the treatment table like a man shrouded for burial at sea” (115-116). Although a metafictional moment like the entrance of Nabokov could potentially achieve a playful effect, it is here placed alongside the text’s more sobering confrontation of human suffering and the related complexities of memory, belonging, and origin. The text’s interplay between its synthetic qualities and thematic and mimetic ones brings into focus another of the novel’s key insights: that even the exertion of artistic control in a text as stylized and structured as *The Emigrants* cannot fill in the gaps and mysteries that emerge when we attempt to arrive at a full and accurate version of history, especially the personal histories of individuals. Although Dr. Abramsky shares his suspicion that Adelwarth’s “docility” in the face of the shock treatments was “due simply to your great-uncle’s longing for an extinction as total and irreversible as possible of his capacity to think and remember” (113-114), Adelwarth’s actual motives will remain forever unknowable. Likewise, the narrator is unable to “get closer” (29) to Adelwarth in a personal sense, even after retracing the steps of Adelwarth and Cosmo in Europe.
and reading the former’s “pocket diary” for the year of 1913 (126). Ultimately, the artist can only approximate the experiences of the past and hope to provide impressions of them; while Nabokov attempts to overcome this barrier in Speak, Memory, The Emigrants not only accepts it but foregrounds it repeatedly. As Adelwarth remarks in his journal, memory can be “a kind of dumbness”: “It makes one’s head heavy and giddy, as if one were not looking back down the receding perspectives of time but rather down on earth from a great height, from one of those towers whose tops are lost to view in the clouds” (145).

The painter Max Ferber is the final emigrant whose life is explored in Sebald’s novel. The narrator recalls meeting Ferber during one of the many long walks he took through Manchester after his own emigration from Germany in 1966, walks taken “purely in order to preserve an illusion of purpose” (156) during “a time when [he] felt a deep sense of isolation” (154-155). At the onset of their friendship, Ferber provides only an “extremely cursory version of his life” (166), but when they meet again “a quarter of a century” later (179), the narrator is privy to a much more thorough account of Ferber’s complicated personal history:

Following this late reunion, which neither of us had expected, we talked for three whole days far into the night, and a great many more things were said than I shall be able to write down here: concerning our exile in England, the immigrant city of Manchester and its irreversible decline…Ferber commented that, purely in terms of time, I was now as far removed from Germany as he had been in 1966; but time, he went on, is an unreliable way of gauging these things, indeed it is nothing but a disquiet of the soul. There is neither a past nor a future. At least, not for me…To me, you see, Germany is a country frozen in the past, destroyed, a curiously extraterritorial place, inhabited by people whose faces are both lovely and dreadful. (180-181)

In the course of these conversations—which, as the narrator acknowledges above, he is only able to render partially for the reader—Ferber tells the narrator of his youth during the rise of the Nazis and the havoc that was wreaked on his family as a result. Ferber’s father was forced “to
hand over the management of his gallery across from the Haus der Kunst, which had opened only the year before, to an Aryan partner” (183); Ferber’s grandmother Lily Lanzberg “took her own life” (183); and after “bribing the English consul” for a visa to send their son out of the country in 1939 (187), Ferber’s parents were deported and murdered by the Nazis in 1941. Much like the narrator himself, Ferber “decided to move to Manchester on [his] own” in order to escape being “reminded of [his] origins”; however, he was soon to discover that since Manchester was an “immigrant city” home to many Germans and Jews, it only reminded him of “everything [he] was trying to forget” (191). Ferber escapes neither his family history nor the pain that accompanies it through emigration, instead living out his days immersed in a “mental suffering” that is “effectively without end”: as he tells the narrator, “One may think one has reached the very limit, but there are always more torments to come. One plunges from one abyss into the next” (170-171).

In the midst of this account of Ferber’s ongoing trauma, Nabokov returns. When Ferber tells the narrator about a trip to Montreux, Switzerland in 1936 on which he once accompanied his father, we can already feel Nabokov looming—Montreux being, of course, the author’s place of residence from 1961 until his death in 1977. Upon returning to Montreux thirty years later, however, Ferber encounters Nabokov in person while climbing Grammont. Looking down at the landscape below, Ferber tells the narrator, he “was afraid he might leap down into it, and might really have done so had not a man of about sixty suddenly appeared before him – like someone who’s popped out of the bloody ground” (174):

He was carrying a large white butterfly net and said, in an English voice that was refined but quite unplaceable, that it was time to be thinking of going down if one were to be in Montreux for dinner. He had no recollection of having made the descent with the
butterfly man, though, said Ferber; in fact the descent had disappeared entirely from his memory, as had his final days at the Palace and the return journey to England. (174)

Like the earlier appearance of Nabokov in 1950s Ithaca, the timing of this meeting coincides quite accurately with the facts of Nabokov’s actual biography. And just as elsewhere in the text, the encounter with Nabokov is far more complicated than a playful cameo: in fact, it ultimately brings Ferber to the brink of mania, as his attempts to capture the likeness of Nabokov in his portrait of “Man with a Butterfly Net” continue to fail. “This he considered one of his most unsatisfactory works,” we learn, “because in his view it conveyed not even the remotest impression of the strangeness of the apparition it referred to” (174). Ferber’s “despair at his lack of ability” leads to “increasingly sleepless nights” and fits of weeping that require “powerful sedatives, which in turn gave him the most horrific hallucinations” (174-175). Ferber’s tortured relationship with this “faceless portrait” (174) gives Nabokov’s presence here a more ominous quality than in the previous sections, one that emphasizes the impossibility, for Ferber, of expressing his impressions of the past through art with any exactitude. While in Nabokov’s own work, as Curtin and Shrayer have written, “imaginative pursuits may allow the subject to enter the realm of the otherworld, with Sebald they merely reveal the characters to be trapped within themselves and within the nightmarish events that constitute their lives” (275). In this way, the contrast between Nabokov’s own emigration story and those in Sebald’s novel is also made particularly stark: Speak, Memory may express Nabokov’s “intense mourning for his lost home,” as de la Durantaye points out, but it also tells of how he “thrived under the difficult circumstances of multiple emigrations, and of how he wrote works and founded a family of which he was proud and which rendered him, to all appearances, exceptionally happy” (427). The emigrants in Sebald’s novel, as it becomes painfully clear, are not so fortunate.
But this is not the last we see of Nabokov in Sebald’s text. To supplement the story of his family history, Ferber gives the narrator “a brown paper package tied with string, containing a number of photographs and almost a hundred pages of handwritten memoirs penned by his mother in the Sternwartstrasse house between 1939 and 1941” (192). Among Luisa Lanzberg’s memories of her early life, which include lengthy descriptions of her Jewish religious and cultural traditions, is the recollection of an event that occurred on a walk through Kissingen with her beau, Fritz:

not far out of town, just where the sign to Bodenlaube is, we overtook two very refined Russian gentlemen, one of whom (who looked particularly majestic) was speaking seriously to a boy of about ten who had been chasing butterflies and had lagged so far behind that they had had to wait for him. This warning can’t have had much effect, though, because whenever we happened to look back we saw the boy running around the meadows with upraised net, exactly as before. Hansen later claimed that he had recognized the elder of the two distinguished Russian gentlemen as Muromzhev, the president of the first Russian parliament, who was then staying in Kissingen. (213)

As R. J. A. Kilbourn and others have noted, this sighting of the young Nabokov, accompanied by his father and “majestic old Muromtsev” (Nabokov, Speak, Memory 130), lines up precisely with Nabokov’s own account of this 1910 outing in the sixth chapter of Speak, Memory—although Sebald’s version “‘allows’ the youthful Nabokov to chase the butterflies, thereby affording Luisa a memory of this occasion that would come back to her three summers later” (Kilbourn 58). This memory resurfaces in Lanzberg’s mind at the moment Fritz proposes to her: “though everything else around me blurred, I saw that long-forgotten Russian boy as clearly as anything, leaping about the meadows with his butterfly net” (214). “I saw him as a messenger of joy,” Luisa recalls, “returning from that distant summer day to open his specimen box and release the most beautiful red admirals, peacock butterflies, brimstones and tortoiseshells to signal my final liberation” (214). However, the “final liberation” promised by this “messenger of joy” proves to
be a false premonition; Lanzberg’s fiancé dies shortly thereafter, as does another love interest she nurses during WWI before eventually marrying Ferber’s father in 1921—and we already know the terrible fate that awaits them. Although Lanzberg indeed “exploits memory for its redemptive power” in much the same way Nabokov does, as Kilbourn has argued (59), she writes from a point at which there no longer exists the possibility of a physical escape from the consequences of being told she and her husband have “no right to the German heritage” (Sebald 186). In this way, Nabokov’s final appearance in The Emigrants is suggestive of the liberation that could have been, the happier outcomes that might otherwise have existed for individuals like Ferber’s parents had not the events of history foreclosed them entirely. The biographical comparison to Nabokov is certainly available here, since he, unlike the characters in Sebald’s novel, was able to transcend certain aspects of his painful past in life and in art. But there is also a crucial distinction to be acknowledged between the authorial approaches of Nabokov and Sebald, one that Rachel Trousdale sums up aptly when she writes that Sebald seems suspicious of the “elements of escapism” in Nabokov’s body of work and, ultimately, “never decides that such an escape is a viable solution” (12). Rather, The Emigrants confronts readers with the horrors experienced by its characters in a way that unavoidably points to the world and history outside the text, regardless of whether a full or “true” account of that history can ever be constructed at all.

Nabokov’s appearances in The Emigrants are thus an integral part of the novel’s larger interests in understanding the experiences of exile and emigration, problematizing the concepts of truth and memory, and acknowledging the challenges involved in unearthing individual histories and rendering them narratively. The intertextual dimension Sebald creates between his
project and Nabokov also helps situate *The Emigrants* in relation to the late modernism with which Nabokov’s work is associated. In Nabokov’s writing, “the text is often constructed around a definitive controlling vision that the reader can decode, often not unsuccessfully, bestowing a higher unity upon the logic of the whole” (Curtin and Shrayer 272). In Sebald’s novel, however, things are “much more ambiguous and undecided”: the details “do not always cohere to make perfect sense,” and the text “dismisses, indeed defers, finite insights or conclusions” (272-273).

A comparison of the use of visual paratexts in *Speak, Memory* and *The Emigrants* helps elucidate this conclusion. In the 1966 version of *Speak, Memory*, each photograph Nabokov includes alongside his written remembrances—of his childhood home (18), of his parents (129), of himself “in the act of writing” (257)—is accompanied by a caption clarifying its exact relation to the text. This is not the case in Sebald’s novel; on the contrary, we are often left to determine the nature of the photographs for ourselves. To be sure, certain images are referenced directly in the narration—like the photograph of the butterfly-hunting Nabokov, for instance—but others are more difficult to place, as in a hazy photograph of what might be but is not directly identified as the “white clouds drifting in from the Irish Sea” described in one of the paragraphs that comes after it (179). Along these same lines, there are also the photographs on which the text comments at length but does not include, such as Selwyn’s shot of the Lasithi plateau and the unshown image the narrator recalls in the novel’s final paragraphs of three young women seated behind “the perpendicular frame of a loom,” laborers for “the ghetto works that were essential to the wartime economy” (236). An even more curious photographic phenomenon occurs within Adelwarth’s section, where there is a picture of the young “dervish” wearing “a very wide gown,” “close-fitting jacket,” and “high brimless camel-hair toque on his head” whom Ambros
mentions having encountered in Constantinople (134-135). This photograph should give the reader pause, since there is no mention that Ambros’s diary, which the narrator receives from Aunt Fini, contains any photographs whatsoever. What is the ontological status of such a photograph? Are we to assume it was taken by Ambros himself, or that the narrator chose to include a similar image he felt approximated Ambros’s description in the diary? In instances like these, Sebald leaves loose ends that cannot be gathered up into one interpretation of the text, withholding the kind of “elegant solution” Nabokov’s textual puzzles typically embed. Indeed, more important than any “higher unity” (Curtin and Shrayer 272) in The Emigrants is exposing the processes that make accounts of emigrant history—however compelling—irrevocably incomplete.

**In “the haze of history and pain”: Hemon’s The Lazarus Project**

Aleksandar Hemon’s The Lazarus Project (2008) is a novel also dedicated to the recovery—or as the biblical narrative implied by its title suggests, “resurrection”—of the past. In Hemon’s text, a present-day Bosnian immigrant named Brik seeks to capture the story of Lazarus Averbuch, a young Jewish immigrant who was killed by the police chief of Chicago a century before. Averbuch’s death, indeed a historically-documented event, is related in the first section of the novel: he attempts to deliver an envelope to the home of Chief George Shippy on the morning of March 2, 1908, is told to come back later by a maid who finds his foreign appearance “very suspicious” (1), and returns shortly thereafter only to be physically restrained and shot to death. Interspersed into this account are snippets of a Chicago Tribune article about the incident by one William P. Miller, which includes the claims that Averbuch was “clearly a Sicilian or a Jew,” looked to Shippy “like an anarchist,” and “fought on doggedly” while Shippy
defended himself (7-9)—the last of these being glaringly at odds with what happens in the narrative account. The excerpts from Miller’s article, full of xenophobic language and misinformation, expose the existence of competing versions of the historical “fact” of Averbuch’s death. But in addition to the doubt cast by these dueling accounts of history is the fact of their placement in the larger context of Hemon’s novel, since, as we soon discover, the sections focusing on Lazarus’s death and its aftermath are the very “project” of Brik’s that is referred to in the text’s title. The chapters of The Lazarus Project move back and forth between the historical narrative of Averbuch and the story of Brik himself—not only his attempts to recover the truth of Averbuch’s history, but also his own feelings of displacement as a “reasonably loyal citizen” of both America and Bosnia (11) who found himself stranded in Chicago after visiting from Sarajevo just before the onset of the Bosnian War. Brik’s narration of Lazarus is necessarily a mix of careful research and imaginative speculation, a fact about which the text is quite transparent: “The time and place are the only things I am certain of;” Brik admits in the novel’s first few lines. “Beyond that is the haze of history and pain, and now I plunge” (1). In what follows, I will illustrate how Hemon adds to this already complex narrative situation through intertextual engagements with both Nabokov and Sebald, building on their aesthetic and thematic legacies through such means as self-reflexivity, photographic paratexts, and scenes and situations that recall both earlier authors’ works. As we shall see, these engagements provide The Lazarus Project with a method of underscoring its indebtedness to and artistic departures from the literary ancestors it evokes, in terms of aesthetic practices and the larger themes they explore.

The novel first acquaints us with Brik at the celebration of Bosnian Independence where he has gathered with other Chicago Bosnians, a setting that brings his entwined personal and
writerly insecurities to the foreground. Regardless of how long they’ve been away from Bosnia, Brik relates, “whatever meager Americanness has been accrued in the past decade or so entirely evaporates for the night; everybody—myself included—is solidly Bosnian, everybody has an instructive story about cultural differences between us and them. Of these things I sometimes wrote” (13). However, Brik’s “Bosnianness” in comparison to those around him is soon called into question, when inevitably, “over the dessert, the war is discussed” (12). Brik explains:

I knew from experience that if I—I who had left just before the beginning and missed the whole shebang—were to ask a Bosnian about the war, my question could easily lead to a lengthy monologue about the horrors of war and my inability to understand what it was really like. (18)

The self-consciousness Brik feels over having avoided experiencing the Bosnian War firsthand coexists alongside his anxieties about his life in America, and particularly his attempts to measure his own success by American standards. Though he has grown used to telling others a version of his immigrant story that has a tidy and compelling “narrative trajectory”—the “odd jobs” he performed just after emigrating, then teaching English as a second language to other immigrants, then working as columnist and marrying an American surgeon named Mary Field—a more accurate account includes the loss of his teaching job and subsequently being “pretty much supported by Mary” (31-32). Brik hopes to overcome this situation and the feelings of inadequacy surrounding it by writing a book on Lazarus Averbuch, an undertaking that will not only bring authorial success but also, as he puts it, “show Mary that I was not a wastrel or a slacker or a lazy Eastern European, but a person of talent and potential” (17). The more we learn of Brik’s interest in Averbuch’s story, the clearer it is that his project is motivated by personal reasons as well as professional ones:
I wanted my future book to be about the immigrant who escaped the pogrom in Kishinev and came to Chicago only to be shot by the Chicago chief of police. I wanted to be immersed in the world as it had been in 1908, I wanted to imagine how immigrants lived then. I loved doing research, poring through old newspapers and books and photos, reciting curious facts on a whim. I had to admit that I identified easily with those travails: lousy jobs, lousier tenements, the acquisition of language, the logistics of survival, the ennoblement of self-fashioning. (41)

Brik’s desire to render immigrant experience as more than “a costumed parade of paper cutouts performing acts of high symbolic value” (41) compels him to retrace the steps of Averbuch’s life with the help of his photographer friend and fellow Sarajevan, Rora, first in Chicago and then abroad. “I needed to follow Lazarus all the way back to the pogrom in Kishinev,” Brik explains, “to the time before America. I needed to reimagine what I could not retrieve; I needed to see what I could not imagine. I needed to step outside my life in Chicago and spend time deep in the wilderness of elsewhere” (46). As in The Emigrants, this ambitious goal of achieving immersion in the past in order to articulate it in narrative terms brings with it a number of complications—some due to external constraints and circumstances, and others of Brik’s own making.

Despite the project’s historical framework and his concern for accuracy throughout, Brik’s narrations regularly employ devices that call attention to his project’s status as a carefully wrought fictional construct, devices we can indeed identify as Nabokovian. In one particularly self-reflexive passage, for instance, Brik explains that he paid a Ukrainian cab driver “and wished him good luck on his way back, and thus he completed his purpose and exited this narrative” (123). A similar passage occurs as Brik and Rora cross the border between Moldova and Romania when Brik comments that “it might be useful to give [the border guard] some kind of a face: pale, mustached, squeezed between two large ears” (259-260). These passages, which inject the narration with Brik’s writerly presence, also occur in the sections of the novel that tell
Lazarus Averbuch’s story. On several occasions, character names recognizable from Brik’s own life appear within the world of his Lazarus project: like the author of the Tribune excerpts about Averbuch’s death, the “American war reporter” with whom Rora spent a great deal of time during the war is named Miller (83); the preacher who the 1908 Miller quotes as speaking out against anarchy is named “Father George Field” (137-138), which just happens to be the name of Brik’s father-in-law; and a teacher at the Maxwell Street Settlement House who “describes Lazarus Averbuch as a faithful and persevering student of a very good character” is identified as a “Mr. Brik” (61). Physical descriptions of characters are overlaid in a similar way, with Lazarus’s sister, Olga, and Rora’s sister, Azra, both having “frail ankles” (191, 279) and Lazarus and Brik sharing the same “low forehead” and “large, apish ears” (88, 105). Even further entwinements of the 1908 and present-day narratives include a version of what James Phelan terms “crossover narration,” in which “an author links the narration of two independent sets of events by transferring the effects of the narration of one to the narration of the other,” thus encouraging “the affective responses evoked by the narration of one set of events [to] influence not just the audience’s perception of the other set of events but the motivation of characters involved in those events” (168-169, emphases in original). In one example of this “departure from the mimetic code” (Phelan 168), a thought divulged while the narration inhabits Lazarus’s focalization—“All the lives I could live, all the people I will never know, never will be, they are everywhere” (2)—is repeated while in both Olga’s and Brik’s focalizations later in the text (91, 264). Another case occurs when Brik thinks to himself while waiting for the bus to Chișinău, “If you wait long enough, something will happen—there has never been a time when nothing happened” (175), a line that resurfaces while Olga is comforting Lazarus’s friend, Isador, who is
a suspected anarchist in hiding from the police: “We will think of something, Olga says and
strokes his cheek. Something will happen. There was never a time when nothing happened”
(194). Crossovers like these appear repeatedly throughout the text, all asserting Brik’s role as
narrator and reminding us of the creative control he wields over both the past and present
sections of the narrative.

In addition to the narrative phenomena that call attention to Brik’s presence, however,
there are also moments in the novel that gesture outside the text toward Hemon’s own
authorship—and along with it, the influence of Nabokov on his authorial style. As Curtin and
Shrayer note, the “Chinese-box like structure” that features “a text within a text within a text”—
like William P. Miller’s newspaper article within Brik’s narration of Lazarus’s death within
Hemon’s fictional narrative of Brik’s travails and research—is itself a favorite Nabokovian form
(276); consider, for example, John Shade’s poem “Pale Fire” within Charles Kinbote’s narration
of Pale Fire (1962) and John Ray, Jr.’s fictive “Foreword” to Humbert Humbert’s narration in
Lolita (1955). Another Nabokovian reminder of Hemon’s presence appears when Brik recalls
having once told his blind Uncle Mikhal the lie that there was a “subatomic particle named
pronek” (207), which readers well versed in Hemon’s work will immediately recognize as an
allusion to the protagonist of his first novel Nowhere Man (2006) and the titular character of his
earlier short story “Blind Jozef Pronek & Dead Souls” (2000). This overt reference to other texts
within his own oeuvre achieves the same function as what Brian Richardson has called “authorial
interpolation” in Nabokov’s texts, a form of “self-presentation” whereby Nabokov includes
characters whose names are anagrams of his own solely “to inject the alphabetical presence of

4 The name appears once more in the novel when Brik and Rora visit a cemetery in Krotkiy, where one of the graves
they see in passing belongs to an “Oleksandr Pronek” (105).
the author into the text of the fiction” (87). Hemon even seems to welcome the comparison to Nabokov when Brik’s first name is revealed, in only two brief passages, to be Vladimir (49, 285).

But the presence of Nabokov in The Lazarus Project can also be detected on a subtler level. In a memorable chapter from Nabokov’s Ada, or Ardor: A Family Chronicle (1969), lovers (and siblings) Van and Ada Veen share an emotional, clandestine goodbye in the forest before Van leaves the family estate to return to school. Van arrives at their meeting in “the family motorcar,” but when his departure from the scene is described a few pages later, the motor car has transformed into a more romantic method of transportation:

Stumbling on melons, fiercely beheading the tall arrogant fennels with his riding crop, Van returned to the Forest Fork. Morio, his favorite black horse, stood waiting for him, held by young Moore. He thanked the groom with a handful of stellas and galloped off, his gloves wet with tears. (159)

Here, Nabokov characteristically draws attention to the fictionality of his narrative, manipulating the setting at his leisure in order to better serve the emotional and artistic register of the scene at hand. An uncannily similar passage appears in The Lazarus Project when Brik narrates what happened when he parted ways with Rora in Bosnia before the onset of the war:

His last words to me were of advice about the U.S. of A. Over there anything is true, he said, and turned away, walking back into a blizzard—or so I like to picture it, creatively, retroactively. In reality, however, he walked me to the Pofalići intersection, where he flagged a cab and I waited for a streetcar. In both versions, he dropped a glove without noticing. I picked it up and took it home, where it was to disappear in the war. (22)

Though perhaps not a direct allusion, this passage bears a striking resemblance to the one from Ada; in both, narrative reality is treated as something flexible, able to be altered mid-stream

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5 A classic example is the name “Vivian Darkbloom,” an anagram of Vladimir Nabokov that appears in the text of Lolita; another is the mention of a town named “Lolita, Texas” in Ada, or Ardor (16).
according to the creator’s artistic whims. Brik’s “or so I like to picture it” destabilizes the retrospective, dramatic version of Rora’s departure that precedes it in the sentence and, in true Nabokov fashion, reinforces the fictionality of the narrative overall. Of course, there is a noticeable difference in approach between the two artistic intrusions: whereas Nabokov slyly replaces the horse for the motorcar and trusts that his ideal reader will be observant enough to notice, Hemon calls attention to Brik’s narrative rerouting at the instant it occurs, foregrounding Brik’s power as the narrative’s creative authority in a manner that is impossible for the reader to overlook. An even more important distinction involves the content of the passages, particularly the fates of the gloves that appear in each. While Van’s gloves become damp with the tears of an estranged lover’s sorrow, Rora’s glove is lost in the devastating and bloody conflict of the Bosnian War, an outside context that, when referenced in the passage, demands the reader’s attention and consideration. Despite his arsenal of Nabokovian tricks, Hemon’s text—like Sebald’s—nonetheless insists on bringing us back to the unsettling historical contexts surrounding the experiences it relates, oscillating between what Phelan would refer to as its synthetic and thematic dimensions.\(^6\) In this way, the intertextual realm carved out by *The Lazarus Project* enables Hemon to simultaneously underscore and push back against Nabokov’s influence, insisting on the relevance of the world outside the text while also engaging in the kind of radical textual play for which Nabokov is legend.

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\(^{6}\) Another striking example of this oscillation occurs when Brik narrates Olga’s “memories” of one of the Kishinev pogroms in horrific, visceral detail, but tells us in the process that the pogromchiks “smashed the jars of sardines” (241-242), an obvious reference to the can of sardines in Brik’s own kitchen described at length earlier in the text (73).
This bifurcated relationship with Nabokov’s legacy is quite similar to the one enacted by Sebald in *The Emigrants*, another text with which *The Lazarus Project* is intertextually engaged. One of the most obvious ways in which this is the case is through the inclusion of photographic paratexts related to Brik’s historical project. As in *The Emigrants*, some of these photos are primary research materials—images from the Chicago Historical Society of Shippy’s home (x) and Averbuch’s corpse (52), for instance—while others capture aspects of the researcher’s own journey. Several of the pictures in the latter category are clearly identified in the text surrounding them, including the image of a “mangy dog” outside a Ukrainian hotel (122) and one of two actors in a Moldovan park wearing “nineteenth-century costumes” who posed with “their arms across each other’s shoulders and faced Rora smiling” (211-212). Just as in Sebald’s novel, however, there also exist photographs of a much less referential variety. One example is a hazy photograph of the Chicago skyline that appears in the novel’s first present-day section (10), an image whose only direct connection to the narration emerges when Brik describes the “choir of kids of uneven height and width (which always reminds me of the Chicago skyline)” attempting to sing “a traditional Bosnian song” (13) at the Independence Day celebration. Several other blurry photographs of urban and rural settings—which seem to have been taken from within a moving vehicle (98, 174)—appear in the sections of the novel that detail Brik and Rora’s travels through Eastern Europe, but the closest we come to an explanation of them is when Brik tells us that Rora takes pictures “lazily” on their drives through the “verdant, depopulated landscape” (102). While Sebald’s novel calls the validity of its photographic evidence into question, as we have seen, *The Lazarus Project* makes this predicament even more explicit. In several cases, there are even indications that Brik’s most personal, vivid memories of the trip do not align with
Rora’s actual photographs: the “gray swirl around [a cab driver’s] bald spot, not unlike a satellite picture of a hurricane” (67) and “a close-up” of a casino dealer’s hand (81)—images Brik himself lingers over—will remain only his mind, as Rora insists that “What needs to be photographed will be photographed” (67). Brik and Rora’s disagreement over what should be captured visually is likely the result of their divergent philosophies about photography itself; when asked what he sees when he looks at one of his photographs, Rora simply replies, “I see the picture;” to which Brik retorts, “When I look at my old pictures, all I can see is what I used to be but am no longer. I think: What I can see is what I am not” (76). For Brik, at least initially, the photographic image is a way to hold on to what has been lost—to capture the past in a way that restores it at least somewhat for the present viewer.

Among the photographs of various types included in The Lazarus Project are several that can be compared fruitfully with images similar to them in The Emigrants. One of these is a picture we can assume to be one of Rora’s portraits of Brik taken while the two are still in Chicago. In the photo, Brik’s head is lowered, but his eyes meet the camera steadily and intensely, with lips pursed in what is almost a grimace (29). Although the image does not line up precisely with any one description in the narration, we are told that Brik poses “pensively, frowning, freezing” as Rora photographs him, “pursuing the nobility” of an earlier photo of himself taken during the Bosnian Independence gathering (35). In a sense, then, the photograph of Brik included in the text is not an original but a copy, an attempt on Brik’s part to recapture a fleeting essence: “I liked that picture a lot—that was me in it, as I envisioned myself” (34). We can compare this portrait of Brik against the photograph Uncle Kasimir takes of Sebald’s narrator on the day the two drive out to the Atlantic coast:
I often come out here, said Uncle Kasimir, it makes me feel that I am a long way away, though I never quite know from where. Then he took a camera out of his large-check jacket and took this picture, a print of which he sent me two years later, probably when he had finally shot the whole film, together with his gold pocket watch. (89)

There is no question that the photo that follows—of the narrator standing on the beach in a dark overcoat—is the one described in the narration directly preceding it, and in stark contrast to what occurs in Hemon’s text, we are even provided a clear explanation for how it comes into the narrator’s possession. Another telling comparison between the novels involves the photographs that are described at length in the narration but are not shown visually, in particular the aforementioned photograph at the end of *The Emigrants* featuring three women, “perhaps aged twenty,” laboring at a loom (237). Sebald’s narrator explains:

> Who the young women are I do not know. The light falls on them from the window in the background, so I cannot make out their eyes clearly, but I sense that all three of them are looking across at me, since I am standing on the very spot where Genewein the accountant stood with his camera. The young woman in the middle is blonde and has the air of a bride about her. The weaver to her left has inclined her head a little to one side, whilst the woman on the right is looking at me with so steady and relentless a gaze that I cannot meet it for long. I wonder what the three women’s names were – Roza, Luisa and Lea, or Nona, Decuma and Morta, the daughters of night, with spindle, scissors and thread. (237)

The narrator’s reading of this photograph, and of the doomed women as a kind of reimagined Three Fates, is a one-way interaction: the women, presumably long dead, remain frozen in the past and, though open to interpretation, ultimately unknowable. In *The Lazarus Project*, however, Hemon recasts this implied image as well as the context surrounding it while Brik and Rora sit next to three young women at a coffee shop in Lviv:

> The three graces were holding their cigarettes in an identical manner; their palms facing upward, the cigarettes downward, the fingers slightly bent, the smoke crawling around their long painted nails. Rora took a picture of them, and the click made the blondest one turn toward us, her face pale, her cheeks rouged—she smiled, and Rora smiled back. (75)
In Hemon’s photograph, the Three Fates become the “three graces”; rather than reminders of what has already come to pass, they gesture toward the creative possibilities of the present, as we—like Brik—witness the birth of the photograph as it is taken in the present time. This redeployment of such a well-known moment in *The Emigrants* highlights a shift in focus for Brik from the excavation of the past to the experience of the present, one that comes to affect his later relationship to Rora’s photographs as well: “Now I didn’t care about the future in which I would be looking at Rora’s photos,” he explains. “The pictures would offer no revelations; I would have seen all that mattered already, because I was present at the moment of their creation” (228).

While the goal of resurrecting history’s dead is what drives Brik’s project throughout, the present—and those still inhabiting it—take on an increased emphasis as the novel progresses. Moreover, we see a shift in Brik’s conceptual understanding of the past as something photographs can capture authentically at all, as visual representations become just as powerless to provide “revelations” (228) as the other historical sources on which Brik draws.

Aside from these actual and implied photographic paratexts, there are other methods through which Hemon maps his text onto *The Emigrants* and its treatment of history and memory. The narrators in both texts attempt to “get closer” to their emigrant subjects in part by revisiting the geographical locations they once traveled (Sebald 29), but just like Sebald’s narrator, Brik discovers that this approach cannot be counted on to yield the results he desires. In Chicago, Brik and Rora find that “Nothing from the days of Lazarus survived” (44); as Brik explains, “So many things had vanished that it was impossible to know what was missing” (45). Averbuch’s past is similarly difficult to locate at the various sites Brik visits in Eastern Europe, which he had hoped would help him “see what [he] could not imagine” (46). These visits in
particular contain echoes of specific moments in *The Emigrants*, including the trip Sebald’s narrator is compelled to make to Kissingen and Steinach after reading Luisa Lanzberg’s memoirs. “I felt I should make the journey” (218), the narrator explains, but finds that Steinach “retained not the slightest trace of its former character” (225) and that the synagogue in Kissingen had been “vandalized during the Kristallnacht and then completely demolished over the following weeks” (221). At the town hall in Kissingen, Sebald’s narrator is referred to a “panic-stricken bureaucrat” who “listened with incredulity to what I had to say and then explained where I would find the Jewish cemetery” (221)—but once there, even locating the Lanzberg/Ferber family plot among the “wilderness of graves, neglected for years” (223) feels anticlimactic: “I stood before it for some time, not knowing what I should think; but before I left I placed a stone on the grave, according to custom” (225). In *The Lazarus Project*, Brik encounters similar issues in Chernivtsi—formerly Czernowitz, where Lazarus spent several years as a refugee after the Kishinev pogroms—when his visit to the Museum of Regional History and conversation with a man named Chaim Gruzenberg at the Jewish Center yield no information about Lazarus or his family. “Chaim said he was not an expert in history,” Brik relates, “for history fed nobody. His job was to provide food and care for the elderly Jews in the town, those who had no family left” (156). Challenging Brik’s interest in the past, Gruzenberg insists that “God will take care of the dead” and so “We need to take care of the living” (156), a rebuke that ultimately detracts very little from Brik’s research on Averbuch since he readily admits he “didn’t really know what to ask” (157). Similar challenges occur in modern-day Kishinev (now Chișinău), where Iuliana, the docent at the Chișinău Jewish Community Center, gives an overly-rehearsed speech about the pogroms before giving Brik the same recommendation that Sebald’s
narrator received in Kissingen: “There are no living Averbuchs here,” she explains, “But you could go to the cemetery. There must be a lot of Averbuchs there” (233). Once in the cemetery, however, Brik’s emotional response is less the result of discovering a grave bearing the name “Averbuch” than of the realizations he begins to face about his own life and reasons for taking on the Lazarus project. As Brik explains, “Everything I had been was now very far away; I reached elsewhere…Some part of my life ended there, among those empty graves; it was then that I started mourning” (234-235). This epiphanic moment is followed by a revealing series of questions in which Brik asks Iuliana, “Tell me, what is this world about, life or death?…What are we to do with all the death? Who is going to remember all the dead?” (236). That this articulation of Brik’s desperation to pursue Averbuch’s story occurs in the graveyard is particularly appropriate, as it aligns with what Karen Jacobs has argued about the “public sites of memory” that appear in The Emigrants—that “the affective density of those sites is thoroughly eclipsed by the power of their marginal and private counterparts, and indeed, by those privatized dimensions that simply co-exist within them” (Jacobs 151). In both texts, public venues like graveyards, museums, and cultural centers cease to commemorate history in a way that speaks meaningfully to the narrators, who turn instead to the private accounts of individuals or—in Brik’s case—the more personal narratives he can conjure and connect to in his writer’s imagination.

The closing chapters of The Lazarus Project contain some of its most “meta-Sebaldian” moments, and—creating an even more richly-layered narrative situation—these moments evoke the passages of The Emigrants when Sebald is at his most “meta-Nabokov.” In one of these, Brik remembers that Mary “carried a picture of her seven-year-old nephew in her wallet, talked about
him all the time; how he thought that the point of a lacrosse game was to catch a butterfly…He was Mary’s little lamb: when we baby-sat him, she told him fairy tales” (255). The image of their nephew attempting to catch a butterfly with a lacrosse net is Hemon’s own version of the “butterfly man,” unmistakably calling to mind Nabokov as he is presented in the specific context of Sebald’s novel. A final sequence of meta-Sebaldian passages has to do with a memory Olga recalls within the novel’s last 1908 section of Lazarus on “the day before his bar mitzvah” (270). In this memory of life before the pogroms, imagined by Brik as he attempts to bring the Averbuchs’ story to life, Olga and Lazarus “stopped by Mr. Mendelbaum’s store so she could buy him sweets, but Mr. Mendelbaum gave him a swirling-candy stick for free. They sat outside on the bench, and he licked it seriously and strenuously, as if disposing of it quickly was the first task of his manhood” (270). This scene of pure happiness—occurring on the “last day of [Lazarus’s] childhood” (269) but called to mind on the day of his funeral—achieves much the same effect as Luisa Lanzberg’s memory of the young butterfly-chasing Nabokov, the memory of a time untouched by the despair that eventually befalls her and her loved ones. Just as Ferber’s memory resurfaces during her engagement and again when she composes her memoirs, the scene of Olga and Lazarus in Kishinev also reappears, this time in the novel’s last present-day chapter when Brik and Rora have arrived in Sarajevo. The two are visiting Rora’s sister, Azra, at the hospital where she works when the narration shifts abruptly back to Olga and Lazarus “outside Mr. Mendelbaum’s store”; the earlier passage is repeated almost verbatim, but goes further to add that Lazarus was “unable to be still, swung his feet and fidgeted, loaded with life and spirit. People walked by and greeted them…A bright day it was, everybody seemed to be enjoying the
fact that they were alive” (280). One last imaginative addition to this imagined memory enters Brik’s mind when he returns to the hospital to see Azra in the novel’s final pages:

Between the licks of his swirling candy-stick, Lazarus asks Olga if she loves someone. Yes, she says. He asks her if she is going to marry him. Probably not, she says.

Why not?

Because sometimes you have no control over life and it keeps you far away from who you love.

Do you ever imagine a different life from this one?

Yes, all the time.

A better life?

Yes, a better life.

I imagine my life to be big, so big that I cannot see the end of it. Big enough for everyone to fit into it. You will be in it, Mother and Father will be in it, people I have never met or known will be in it. I will be in it. I can see it. I have a picture of it in my head. It’s a field in bloom so deep you can swim in it. I can see it now, and I cannot see its end. (288-289)

Like the feelings of freedom Lanzberg associates with her memory of the young Nabokov, Lazarus’s optimistic view of the future in this passage is devastating to encounter at this late point in the novel when his actual fate has been laid out in grisly detail. But importantly, this series of passages also performs the incremental construction of the narrativized version of that fate, with their placement in the present-day chapter serving as a final reminder that the “Lazarus” sections—though based on the handful of historical facts that inspire them—are nonetheless Brik’s own creations.

Of course, there is another important distinction between the ways Luisa Lanzberg and Olga Averbuch’s memories are presented in these passages, one that highlights a vital difference between the approaches of Sebald and Hemon’s texts overall: while Sebald’s narrator simply presents what Lanzberg’s memoirs themselves relate, Hemon flaunts not only Brik’s creative control over every aspect of his Averbuch narrative but also how Brik’s own emotions and experiences shape what that narrative contains. After all, Olga’s poignant “memory” comes back
to Brik when he has reached his most desperate and vulnerable state, since the return to Sarajevo occasions both Rora’s death from what appears to be a senseless act of violence\(^7\) and Brik’s coming to terms with the reality that Sarajevo—and not America—is “where [his] heart [is]” (283). The novel makes no secret of Brik’s personal influence on the historical situation he relates, nor its influence on him. Sebald’s narrator is also deeply affected by the histories in which he is immersed, admitting at one point that “the mental impoverishment and lack of memory that marked the Germans, and the efficiency with which they had cleaned everything up, were beginning to affect my head and my nerves” (225). Toward the end of the novel, he even begins to experience the same difficulty capturing his subject that Ferber once described regarding his paintings:

> During the winter of 1990/91, in the little free time I had…I was working on the account of Max Ferber given above. It was an arduous task. Often I could not get on for hours or days at a time, and not infrequently I unravelled what I had done…I had covered hundreds of pages with my scribble, in pencil and ballpoint. By far the greater part had been crossed out, discarded, or obliterated by additions. Even what I ultimately salvaged as a ‘final’ version seemed to me a thing of shreds and patches, utterly botched. (230-231)

These artistic difficulties, Sebald’s narrator tells us, were the result of “scruples that were taking tighter hold and steadily paralysing me,” concerning “not only the subject of my narrative, which I felt I could not do justice to, no matter what approach I tried, but also the entire questionable business of writing” (230). These “scruples” related to truth and authenticity bring us back to the idea of “wrongful trespass” that Sebald’s narrator is desperate to avoid in approaching his subjects’ lives (29); in The Lazarus Project, however, it is exactly this kind of trespass that Brik

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\(^7\) Although Brik suspects that Rora’s murder is the result of his affiliation with Rambo—a criminal in whose unit he served during the war—Azra insists that the killer was simply “A boy with a gun”: “He wanted the camera, he wanted to show off his gun, the gun went off and he kept shooting. That’s what he told the police. He was high as a balloon. He sold the camera and bought drugs” (291).
ultimately embraces in order to construct a vivid and emotionally moving narrative that highlights the experiences and injustices that remain much the same from Averbuch’s time period to his own. Hemon allows Brik to imaginatively inhabit the actual, historical individuals on which the novel focuses in order to identify meaningful links between the past and the present: the perpetual xenophobia experienced not only by the Averbuchs and their circle but by Brik and Rora, as well; the feelings of “perfect helplessness” shared by Lazarus while in Shippy’s grasp and a young woman named Elena while in the clutches of a pimp who intends to traffic her to Bucharest (259); the disappointment Lazarus feels with “themeaninglessness of his egg-packing job” and the sadness that seems to Brik to be “spread wide and thick” over modern-day Lviv (73); and the list goes on. Among the most notable of these connections is Olga’s decision at the end of the text to help smuggle Isador to safety despite her desolation over Lazarus’s death, an act of “resurrection” she imagines writing about to her mother in the following terms: “You must forgive me for what I have done, but I chose life over death. God will take care of the dead. We have to take care of the living” (272). We know the source of these words to be one of Brik’s own, present-day conversations, but this knowledge makes them no less impactful in the context of Olga’s narrative—a narrative, I would argue, that is no less impactful because of its overtly fictionalized elements. In this way, the crossovers between the novel’s sections are as much a way of bringing the worlds of past and present together as they are a nod to Nabokov’s legacy, part of an intricate web of (inter)textual play that—somewhat paradoxically—augments the truths they communicate about the human experiences of past and present. Though the novels of Sebald and Hemon both bear obvious traces of Nabokov while rejecting his aesthetically sealed-off impulses, Brik as a narrator does not become entangled in
the same “scruples” about historical appropriation that plague Sebald’s narrator. Instead, and
despite the limitations it foregrounds in terms of both public and private memory, *The Lazarus
Project* equips Brik with the full range of Nabokovian and Sebaldian techniques as he constructs
what is ultimately a powerful and moving account of Lazarus Averbuch’s story.

**History, Memory, and Nabokov’s Late Modernism**

As Brik and Rora drive through the parts of Chicago that Averbuch once inhabited but
find that no trace of the past remains, Brik thinks to himself, “Here it was now, the future, it had
arrived; here was the vacuum of profitable progress; here it was” (44). The obvious sarcasm in
Brik’s observation indicates that the “progress” ostensibly made since Averbuch’s time is in
many ways a myth, a point felt ever more strongly after completing *The Lazarus Project* in its
entirety. Yet, there is something redemptive about Brik’s project—and thus, Hemon’s novel—if
considered in terms of the Nabokovian influence under which they are constructed. Kilbourn
writes that *Speak, Memory* “stands as one of the modern period’s most successful attempts to
represent the redemptive power of memory as an art in the service of life, while consistently
avoiding the trap of a sentimentalizing nostalgia for its own sake” (59-60). This assessment can
be applied to Hemon’s novel, as well, with the critical caveat that the “memories” Brik employs
for this purpose are in large part those he has fabricated on behalf of the historical individuals
about whom he writes. Thus, what ultimately “resurrects” the Averbuchs is not the historical
material Brik recovers but the generative powers of fiction he uses to shape that material into a
narrative, one that can immerse readers in the darker realities experienced by its historical
characters. Although Brik, like Sebald’s narrator, finds that his attempts to recover history yield
only additional questions and empty spaces, he embraces what Sebald’s narrator avoids and uses
his writing to fill in these gaps. This embrace of authorial power for the benefit and possible enrichment of the reader is indeed the only modicum of hope the novel’s ending can provide, as summed up by its final lines: “Let’s take care of your hand now,” Azra says to Brik as she tends to his recent injury. “You will need it for writing” (292).

Although the many incorporations of Nabokov in *The Emigrants* and *The Lazarus Project* can certainly be viewed as homages in many respects—as they indicate a clear admiration of and indebtedness to his narrative innovations—they also go beyond this status to invite a more complex consideration of the literary legacy with which they engage. Nabokov’s own views on his work, published in his collection of interviews and articles, *Strong Opinions* (1973), are especially illuminating in this regard. In an interview conducted in 1962, for instance, Nabokov insists, “Nothing bores me more than political novels and the literature of social intent” (9). He echoes this sentiment when asked why he wrote *Lolita*—a novel in which I, like many other readers, do locate an important ethical dimension—responding simply that “It was an interesting thing to do. Why did I write any of my books, after all? For the sake of the pleasure, for the sake of the difficulty. I have no social purpose, no moral message; I’ve no general ideas to exploit” (26). Nabokov’s insistence that his novels possess neither an “ethical side” nor “moral and human elements” (314)—whether or not we choose to believe him—says a great deal about his conception of literature’s relationship to broader contexts, as he repeatedly suggests that it is not only possible but preferable to keep fiction detached from its social and political surroundings. It is in this way that the fictions of Sebald and Hemon discussed here depart most emphatically from their Nabokovian influence. By constructing their contemporary novels as active engagements with the world around them, Sebald and Hemon draw our focus to
individuals within that world who have been displaced and persecuted on the basis of national or ethnic identity. Whereas Nabokov aims to “create alternate worlds for himself and his readers” (Trousdale 11), Sebald and Hemon immerse their readers in the world as it was and in many ways still is, at the same time as they foreground the necessarily discursive nature of any historical accounts of those experiences. Conceptually, then, these contemporary novels move beyond the artistic goals of Nabokov’s fictional and autobiographical texts, rethinking his ambitions toward textual insularity and completeness as well as the very notion that historical events can be understood and documented in a single, “objective” way.

The relationships between Sebald’s *The Emigrants*, Hemon’s *The Lazarus Project*, and the texts of Vladimir Nabokov offer some salient observations about how late modernism has come to be understood in literary history. While, as Duncan White explains, late modernism was of course always entangled in “the fields of social and political power it had initially sought to reject” (31), Nabokov avoids acknowledging these entanglements within his fictions as well as in discussions about them. If we view Nabokov’s “insistence on [a text’s] aesthetic autonomy” (White 38) and disinterest in the “problems of a writer and the future of the novel” (*Strong Opinions* 273) as paradigmatic of late modernism, it becomes clear why that movement provides an intriguing opportunity for contemporary authors who wish, as James and Seshagiri put it, to “move the novel forward” by “looking back” to their modernist influences (93). It is the very enmeshment in sociohistorical contexts that Nabokov disdains which the contemporary fictions explored here address head on, be they the Holocaust, the Bosnian War, or the difficulties those displaced by these conflicts encounter in their wake. At the same time as they venerate his legacy, Sebald and Hemon “recalibrate” (James and Seshagiri 92) Nabokov’s late modernism to
challenge the ethical viability of disconnecting art from its extra-textual contexts. For Sebald and Hemon, then, perhaps to be meta-late modernist means to embody the very in-betweenness associated with that movement, participating in its practices while at the same time questioning its premises—however belatedly.
CODA

REVISITING THE PAST, RETHINKING THE PRESENT

“As a historical antecedent, a cultural trope, and an archive of stylistic and technical possibilities,” James and Seshagiri write, “twentieth-century experimental modernism exerts considerable force on the vision and voice [of] contemporary novels” (93). The contemporary texts I have considered here each lend support to this argument in some fashion; it has been among my goals to showcase the variety of recent remobilizations of American modernist forms, feelings, and figures, and indeed, to reveal how broadening the theoretical conception of metamodernism itself allows us to discover an even more meaningful array of contemporary engagements with modernism’s myriad legacies. Faulkner’s temporal experiments are resurrected in Jones’s *The Known World*, but are used as a means of emphasizing the perspectives and experiences of black characters instead of white slaveowners and their descendants. Although Otsuka’s *The Buddha in the Attic* deploys iterative narrations to reveal women’s quotidian experiences in much the same manner as Stein’s *Three Lives*, Otsuka shifts the focus onto a group of female immigrants typically overlooked in narratives of modernist-era women. In *Lincoln in the Bardo*, Saunders’s melancholic narrative structure, like that of Barnes’s *Nightwood*, gives voice to characters on society’s margins, but pushes beyond Barnes’s framework to provide those characters with alternatives other than interminable melancholic existence. Finally, in *The Emigrants* and *The Lazarus Project*, Sebald and Hemon pay tribute to
Nabokov’s late-modernist influence throughout their narratives while simultaneously calling aspects of his aesthetic—including hermeneutic totality and insularity from social contexts—into question. In my comparative textual analyses, I have demonstrated how these contemporary texts engage with American modernist literature—and history itself—as resources on which to draw for their own creative pursuits, as well as entities that require ongoing scrutiny. These texts return to the inventive techniques of modernist fiction while also finding ways to negotiate the aspects of those legacies they find problematic or incomplete, enacting a productive tension between embracing their modernist influences and emerging from their shadow in new and generative ways.

But if the experiences and sociopolitical concerns attended to in these metamodernist fictions resonate with contemporary readers, it is precisely because they are still of urgent importance to the world around us—regardless of how far we may sometimes feel we have evolved beyond them. Xenophobia, racism, dehumanizing treatment on the basis of class status, gender, or sexual orientation, and the escalating threat of fascism are all issues that connect the modernist period to our own, even a hundred years after the moment of modernism “proper.” Thus, the intervention of metamodernism is all the more necessary as a way not only to supplement the literary and historical records and identify their embedded injustices but to use the past as a lens through which we can confront what remains unchanged. As Margaret Atwood has said of her own historical fiction, “the past belongs to those who claim it, and are willing to explore it, and to infuse it with meaning for those alive today. The past belongs to us, because we are the ones who need it” (1516). As the metamodernist fictions I have gathered here show, we need the past to help us see our present for the moment of historical crisis it is, one that demands
our intellectual, affective, and political engagements if we are to open up alternative possibilities for the future.
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VITA

Shelby Sleevi received a Bachelor of Arts in English from Wheeling Jesuit University in 2010 and a Master of Arts in English from Georgetown University in 2012. At Loyola University Chicago, Dr. Sleevi studied twentieth and twenty-first century literature and narrative theory. From 2014-2019, she held the Crown Fellowship, the Graduate School’s most distinguished award, before serving as a Teaching Scholars Fellow during the 2019-2020 school year. In addition to teaching literature and writing courses, Dr. Sleevi spent 2017-2020 as co-manager of the Loyola Community Literacy Center, a free ESL tutoring service for adults in the Chicago area.