

Forecasting the Past and Recalling the Future: Lemniscate
Narratives in the Work of Richard Powers

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Abstract

Richard Powers's multifaceted accounts of individuals navigating turbulent histories are relayed via nonlinear timelines, situating the future in relation to an imminent past. The characters' reassembly of pre-existing compositions, patterns, and traditions in self-styled configurations, engages with interlocking legacies whilst asserting their individual perspective on reality. Multiple analyses of Powers's texts have focused on the permeable borders between interconnected genres, eras, and disciplines in relation to spliced or stereoscopic images of society. The six texts analysed in this comparative study depict twofold timelines intersecting in the present, creating a lemniscate form with a seemingly endless course of expansion. This comparative approach assesses the converging and diverging lemniscate narrative form and content of six texts written at different stages in Powers's career. The thesis explores the purpose of each text's proposed lemniscate temporal frame in relation to the reoccurring depictions of transmedial utopian fictions and a neocolonial US history. This synthesis of pre-existing forms, modernist, and post-modernist world views resembles a metamodernist or transglossic literary style. The tensions between individual and hegemonic ideologies are explored within the three comparative chapters, evaluating the similarities and differences between Powers's treatment of music and science, innovation and neocolonialism, and individual and collective responses to autonomy in the Atomic Age US.

Introduction

“Into the briefest crack in the side of sound... a place so far off, it couldn’t even really be called the future, yet.”¹

“Only through this crack can you see where things lead. You step through the forsaken symbols, into something brighter.”²

Richard Powers’s expansive, encyclopaedic novels are shaped by the mutual interactions between the elaborate form and content of each text. The interwoven thematic networks of repeating histories, discordant realities, and unrealised visions, illuminate varied aspects of the past, present, and anticipated future. The epigraphs which precede this introduction illustrate Powers’s enduring use of imagery which marries the permeability of borders and eras with the possibility of change. In these narratives, Powers traces unresolved traumas and echoing unfulfilled ideals back and forth through an expansive US history whilst aligning pictorial, written, and musical forms of storytelling with the quest for a quasi-utopic future. The vast temporal frame encompasses contemporary issues surrounding commodification, neocolonialism, and globalisation alongside the changing role of the author and forms of cultural production. Powers considers the role of art and the author in relation to the potential realisation of a utopian or dystopian US, elaborating on his belief in the worth and political potential of art: “Fiction, when it remembers its innate priority over other human transactions, can deal not in price but in worth. And that seems to me an act filled with political potential, as well as pleasure.”³ Powers articulates a range of anxieties associated with the mid-twentieth century and beyond whilst engaging with early twenty-first century contemporary literary styles and highlighting the enduring value of fiction.

In this study, six of Powers’s texts are analysed in three comparative pairings. The similarities in the form and content of *The Gold Bug Variations*⁴ (1991) and

¹ Richard Powers, *The Time of Our Singing* (London: Vintage, 2004), 135.

² Richard Powers, *Plowing the Dark* (New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 2000), 401.

³ Jim Neilson, ‘A Conversation with Richard Powers’, | Dalkey Archive Press’, <https://www.dalkeyarchive.com/a-conversation-with-richard-powers-by-jim-neilson/>.

⁴ Richard Powers, *The Gold Bug Variations* (Harper Perennial, 1991).

*Orfeo*⁵ (2014), *Operation Wandering Soul*⁶ (1993) and *Plowing the Dark* (2000), and *Prisoner's Dilemma*⁷ (1988) and *The Time of Our Singing* (2002), will be assessed in the three chapters which follow this introduction. Despite being monomedial works of fiction, these six novels are replete with intermedial references⁸ and contain multiple instances of intermediality.⁹ This will be explored throughout in relation to the narrative, or compositional, impulses of the characters. The protagonists in each text employ creative forms to fashion alternative narratives or speculative histories, often imagining the possibility of large-scale societal transformation whilst highlighting the diverse elements and range of institutions that have designed narratives and influenced large-scale perceptions of society. Despite the significance of specific media to these written narratives, the intermediality which facilitates each character's engagements with the role of storytelling and expressions of utopianism defies a singular origin in one medium. The articulation of the same theme via multiple forms coheres with Rajewsky's definition of transmedial phenomena: "The appearance of a certain motif, aesthetic, or discourse across a variety of different media... not bound to a specific medium".¹⁰ Powers interrelates a range of creative media, tracing persistent motifs throughout human history and examining the role of the artist and author in the promotion or creation of alternative futures.

The interlocking modes of composition in these texts create a network-image of communication. This network of signs and symbols is frequently depicted as undermining or reinforcing hegemonic identity narratives. The protagonists' creative endeavours generate counter-narratives that project to the future whilst engaging with a spectral past. Despite the repetitions found within these counter-narratives,

⁵ Richard Powers, *Orfeo* (London: Atlantic Books, 2014).

⁶ Richard Powers, *Operation Wandering Soul* (London: Atlantic Books, 1993).

⁷ Richard Powers, *Prisoner's Dilemma* (New York: HarperCollins, 1988).

⁸ "The media product itself is firmly located in one medium, whereas it is the *relationship* to the foreign medium that is intermedial... These intermedial relations can be seen within the media product itself, whether through reference to (thematization) or imitation of that other medium." Emily Petermann, *The Musical Novel: Imitation of Musical Structure, Performance, and Reception in Contemporary Fiction* (Rochester, New York: Camden House, 2018), 12.

⁹ Intermediality, as opposed to multimediality where more than one medium exists within the same artistic work or space, can be understood as a: "means of expression and exchange, [whereby] different media refer to and depend on one another, both explicitly and implicitly; they interact as elements of various communicative strategies; and they are constituents of a wider social and cultural environment." Jefferson D. Pooley and Eric W. Rothenbuhler, *The International Encyclopedia of Communication Theory and Philosophy*, (John Wiley & Sons, 2016), 973.

¹⁰ Irina O. Rajewsky, 'Intermediality, Intertextuality, and Remediation: A Literary Perspective on Intermediality', *Intermedialités* 2, no. 6 (10 August 2011): 43–64, 46.

the temporal frames are not an endless cyclical form: the depiction of transmediality within each text's specific contemporary setting engages with pre-existing and emerging forms, generating multiple temporal and spatial scales. Powers repeatedly employs the historic present to narrate real or imagined past events in the present to create a sense of immediacy, highlighting interlocking events and engaging with past traditions and emerging futures to persuasively enmesh past, present, and future innovations: "drunk on birthing up this first-time thing, he saw the future, and he recognized it from way back when."¹¹ The remapping of converging and diverging spliced timelines and traditions enhances the respective texts' thematic statement. The movements through time intersect during the present and resemble a lemniscate narrative structure.

The lemniscate form is a curved plane shape, often associated with the infinity symbol, and consists of two symmetrical loops meeting at a central node. The figure-of-eight form returns to the past and projects to the future in the same instance. This assessment of Powers's lemniscate narrative structure engages with the pre-existing analysis of the form of Powers's texts. Scholars have previously suggested that the temporal structures of Powers's texts are a design influenced by James Joyce's parallax narrative, a stereoscopic form, the double-helix structure of DNA, or a potentially endless recursive loop. The recursive nature of Powers's texts has been acknowledged by several scholars. In an article on the ultimate disconnection of the Artificial Intelligence Helen in Powers's novel *Galatea 2.2*¹² (1995), Nicolas Laudadio explores the "recursive nature of Helen's undoing and the crucial role that sound and song play in that process."¹³ Although the lemniscate form is a similarly endless structure with seemingly infinite outcomes, a recursive linguistic 'nesting' is not the equivalent to this temporal frame. Artworks, compositions, and other creative forms are tied to both fixed memories from multiple subject positions and unrealised speculative futures. Charles Harris's description of Powers's encounter with Joyce's parallax structure posits another perception of the content and form of these texts: "The concept of parallax, then, seems to have provided the young Powers with a richly suggestive metaphor from which he extracted not only an aesthetic principle

¹¹ Powers, *Orfeo*, 63.

¹² Richard Powers, *Galatea 2.2* (New York: Farrar Straus & Giroux, 1995).

¹³ Nicholas C. Laudadio, 'Just Like So But Isn't: Musical Consciousness in Richard Powers's *Galatea 2.2*', *Extrapolation* 49, no. 3 (Winter 2008): 410–31, 412.

but a political principle as well.¹⁴ This analysis of the temporal structure of Powers's narratives bears similarity to Deleuze's perception of the crystallization of time in cinema and the concept that time perpetually splices the present in two: "Time... has to split the present in two heterogeneous directions, one of which is launched towards the future while the other falls into the past... it splits itself in two dissymmetrical jets, one of which makes all the present pass on, while the other preserves all the past."¹⁵ However, the lemniscate form differs from the typical perception of the parallax: an optical phenomenon where one object is perceived from two different viewpoints, instead acknowledging the multiple subject positions within the present from which the past and the future can be simultaneously viewed. Similarly to the displacement created by the parallax effect, the two DNA strands which form the double-helix shape move in opposite or anti-parallel directions. The double-helix shape lends itself to the analysis of Powers's implementation of multiple narrative perspectives: The process of transcription and replication which occurs when the double-helix winds and unwinds creates an alternative frame for viewing Powers's polyvocal texts. In contrast with this organic design, the lemniscate shape does not separate to provide an opportunity for a new strand to form within the structure. Instead the movements back and forth through time meet at a central node whilst allowing for innumerable, seemingly infinite, comparisons within an expanding figure-of-eight shaped curve.

The decision to view Powers's temporal framework as lemniscate stems from the author's representation of multiple timelines occurring simultaneously. Notably, the lemniscate shape appears as a typographical device in Powers's novel, *Generosity*.¹⁶ The text opens with an adjunct professor, Russell Stone, riding backwards in a Chicago subway car. The narrator then begins to expand upon the description of this man in relation to their distinct temporal and spatial perspectives: "I can't see him well, at first. But that's my fault, not his. I'm years away in another country."¹⁷ Powers articulates returns to familiar paths or places alongside revisionary repetitions – "This place is some other Second City... and these words

¹⁴ Charles B. Harris, "'The Stereo View': Politics and the Role of the Reader in *Gain*," *Review of Contemporary Fiction* 18, no. 3 (Fall 1998): 97–108, 98.

¹⁵ Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema II: The Time-Image* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013), 81.

¹⁶ Richard Powers, *Generosity* (Great Britain: Atlantic Books, 2010)

¹⁷ Powers, 3.

are not journalism. Only journey.”¹⁸ - creating a vivid image of infinite possibilities and a reusable past occurring simultaneously in the present and future. In Powers’s texts these figure-of-eight shaped timelines typically include the narrative of a family unit or multiple protagonists, allowing for a multilinear narrative structure that converges during moments of pivotal change and reflection.¹⁹ The lemniscate structure of Powers’s narratives undermines a conventional image of linearity, exposing repeating themes which continue to haunt the US imagination. Despite the reprises grounded in past events, the narratives conclude with speculations on an undecided future, mirroring the lemniscate narrative structure. When viewed as an ongoing design the loops back to familiar themes, which highlight repetitions within national identity narratives, enlarge the lemniscate structure of each text. Perpetual returns to the past and predicted futures collide within each protagonist’s present, exposing the multitude of narratives which individuals and wider society create in order bring a sense of structure to their sense of reality. Beyond the text-specific repeating yet evolving narratives, Powers engages with a wider tradition of utopian and speculative fiction: acknowledging and interacting with literary and aesthetic traditions whilst re-examining preconceived categories and seemingly fixed objective histories.

The paratextual and intertextual elements are most evident in the texts which update pre-existing literary works. Notably, the overt references to *Galatea* and the *Pygmalion* myth in *Galatea 2:2* and Orpheus in *Orfeo*, situate earlier fictions within emerging forms of narrative and neural networks. These intertextual references place Powers’s texts within a collaborative archive of literature whilst creating palimpsests within his own body of work. Alongside this overt transtextuality²⁰ emphasis is placed on the transmediality of the utopian tradition and the porous boundary between fiction and nonfiction, tracing movements back and forth through US history in a pattern of incremental repetition. Powers depicts this underlying impulse across multiple subject positions, relating hegemonic US narratives to pre-

¹⁸ Powers, 6.

¹⁹ Sometimes this isn’t the case - an obvious example would be *Orfeo*. Despite this text having one protagonist, the fate of Peter Els comes to a head when he is reunited with his daughter. This potential future collides with his memories and a tumultuous present. The ruptures within family groups or communities are often central to the lemniscate narrative structure.

²⁰ “Everything that brings it into relation (manifest or hidden) with other texts.” Gerard Genette, *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation: 20*, trans. Jane E. Lewin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 27.

existing forms of discourse. Although there is a focus on the unravelling of established US narratives, Powers continually highlights their existence beyond the history of the US via a range of references including Biblical passages, classical Greek myths, classical European music, European medieval history, and Buddhist teachings. The lemniscate model builds on the connections between the past, the present, and the future in relation to Powers's depictions of the utopian tradition and the role of the author. The paradox of progress in the latter half of the twentieth and early twenty-first century US is emphasised via the engagement with reverberating traditions and histories.

The pursuit of innovation in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries is linked to US national ideologies and the remnants of master narratives. The notion of American Exceptionalism and the vestiges of the European Enlightenment are embedded within contemporary quests for dominance. Rush Welter's summation of Arthur Ekrich's characterisation of progress in the US between 1815-1860 remains relevant to present day US ideologies. This "systematic and perpetual improvement of the human estate" continues to emerge in multifaceted forms in "the American people's characteristic ideology."²¹ The abstract concepts of a utopian society and the divisive application of neocolonial visions of progress engage with this perpetual model of development in tandem with an encroaching sense of dread and uncertainty. The movements back and forward through time from multiple perspectives re-examine the supposedly revolutionary past of the US and the "uniformity enforced by public opinion which... was the outgrowth not so much of social conditions themselves as of habits of thoughts to which social conditions taken as evidence of progress had given rise."²² The endless search for improvement occurs alongside scenes of conflict and devastation which undermine the notion of a united human estate and a revolutionary national identity. The promotion of an idyllic society is discredited by the ongoing retreat into social dreaming and utopian fictions alongside emerging technological and scientific discoveries.

Powers's engagements with fragmented patterns, depicting protagonists on their respective journeys through collective or individual histories whilst they re-narrate pre-existing narratives, explores the potential for a future beyond the pre-

²¹ Rush Welter, 'The Idea of Progress in America: An Essay in Ideas and Method', *Journal of the History of Ideas* 16, no. 3 (1955): 401–15, 401.

²² Welter, 413.

mapped shape. Ingold's description of the changing Western perception of linearity in the twenty-first century articulates the loss of the illusory sense of linearity and cohesion which the protagonists strive to recover or redesign:

Once the trace of a continuous gesture, the line has been fragmented – under the sway of modernity – into a succession of points and dots... To an ever-increasing extent, people in modern metropolitan societies find themselves in environments built as assemblies of connected elements. Yet in practice they continue to thread their own ways through these environments, tracing paths as they go.²³

Powers's narrative arcs follow individuals tracing their own paths through these prescribed linearities. These lemniscate speculative timelines emphasise the potential for restrictive narratives to be amended or expanded. Despite this, the success with which these protagonists subvert pre-existing systems of knowledge and hegemonic discourse varies in relation to their respective societal status and the socio-historical contexts of each text.

The proceeding analysis of six of Powers's texts in three comparative pairings focuses on the lemniscate temporal frame and multilineal narrative progression, paying close attention to the depiction of intermediality and counternarratives. The lemniscate structure of these texts is enhanced by repeating content that highlights the enduring narratives which can mask or potentially alter history. Powers's perception of the role of the artist will be considered in relation to speculative histories and the expanding utopian tradition. The potential for an alternative future is evinced through a range of compositions, collaborations, and creations. The lemniscate temporal form and the array of intermedial narratives expand and converge as Powers's fictional worlds increase. Powers's narrative patternmaking, the staggered repetitions which create echoes within and beyond each text, will be analysed through an interdisciplinary interrogative framework. Staggered starts and spliced narratives are combined within one text and overlay one design with multiple variations on a single theme without a finite conclusion. The three chapters compare the repeating themes and societal contexts of a text from early on in Powers's literary career, in the late 1980s and early 1990s, with another from the early 2000s onwards. This comparative approach engages with the repetitions inherent in each

²³ Tim Ingold, *Lines* (London; New York: Routledge, 2016), 77.

text whilst enlarging their scope, exploring speculative histories and futures from multiple perspectives.

In the first comparative pairing, forms of artistic composition are spliced with scientific innovations and the societal changes that stem from the atomic age. The pursuit of a new narrative, code, and forms of innovation are combined with destructive moments from history. Enduring hegemonic US identity narratives are traced to each narrative's present, undermining a sense of linear development. The escalating commodification of cultural production is related to late-stage capitalism and mass media whilst remaining anchored to the entwined legacy of art and endorsed national ideologies. The transmediality of both *The Gold Bug Variations* and *Orfeo*, and the ethico-political lens through which Powers unfolds these narratives, begins a pattern of accumulation and loss in parallel with innovation and destruction. In the second pairing, Powers depicts the potentially redemptive qualities of fictional narratives amidst scenes of ongoing conflict and inequality. In *Operation Wandering Soul* and *Plowing the Dark*, Powers considers the role of the author and artist within the latter half of the twentieth century in relation to the externalised digital imagination and the contemporary innovations which alter the forms of production and the dissemination of knowledge. A turbulent neocolonial global landscape acts as the catalyst for renewed engagements with utopian traditions and the imagination, revealing their active role in shaping this landscape: "We have a saying. Everything in life is imagination. But in fact it is reality. Whoever knows this will need nothing else."²⁴ In the last comparative pairing, the role the atomic bomb plays in speculative histories and US utopianism is considered in more detail. The depiction of music, science, and animation reflects upon the role of propaganda and authorial responsibility, expanding upon Powers's enduring thematic concerns. In *Prisoner's Dilemma* and *The Time of Our Singing*, the specific losses and traumas of the families and their creation of private languages and compositions are inextricably bound to larger moments of conflict and destruction. The nonlinear structure of the narratives enlarges the legacy of subversive creative acts beyond the protagonists' endeavours and the immediate narrative timeline.

²⁴ Powers, *Plowing the Dark*, 292.

Powers relates the networks of interlinked forms and immense coded systems to individual and collective unfolding human histories, and in recent scholarly articles the significant role of the collective story in Powers's texts has begun to be addressed. Contemporary articles, such as Rachel Adams's 'An Overstory for Our Time', re-examines *The Overstory*²⁵ (2018) in light of the COVID-19 pandemic: "the fact that viral networks operate on scales more microscopic and immense than the human does not make human activity, or the story of individual persons, irrelevant... care must take place at the scale of the human."²⁶ Although this focus on the human subject within the vast networks of seemingly overwhelming power has become more apparent since *The Echo Maker*²⁷ (2006), the attention paid to individuals navigating large scale systems within a planetary community is a thematic concern found throughout Powers's texts. The depiction in *Bewilderment*²⁸ (2021) of a bleak speculative future and a presently fragmented family dynamic, alongside the combination of seemingly incongruous styles, is a technique found throughout Powers's novels. Powers has repeatedly noted the blurring of disciplinary boundaries and genres within his texts and once again has melded different styles to comment on contemporary issues:

The book has its roots in two different worlds. It is, in part, a novel about the anxiety of family life on a damaged planet... But it is also a kind of 'planetary romance' that pays homage to both contemporary and classic speculative fiction writers... I took great pleasure in colliding what a lot of readers might think of as entirely incommensurable aesthetics.²⁹

The expansion and contraction of each narrative emphasises the individual's relationship to larger global concerns.

Scott Hermanson similarly contends that Powers's unconventional engagement with the natural world is evident in earlier works: "in contrast to his nature writing contemporaries, Powers refuses to discount the fictional aspects of his creations, and he links the narrative creations of worlds to the narrative processes in which we make sense of the reality beyond our minds."³⁰ The engagements with

²⁵ Richard Powers, *The Overstory* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2018).

²⁶ Rachel Adams, 'An Overstory for Our Time', *American Literature* 92, no. 4 (1 December 2020): 799–807, 804.

²⁷ Richard Powers, *The Echo Maker* (London: William Heinemann Ltd, 2007).

²⁸ Richard Powers, *Bewilderment* (London: William Heinemann, 2021).

²⁹ Richard Powers Q&A | 'The Booker Prizes', <https://thebookerprizes.com/richard-powers-qa>.

³⁰ Scott Hermanson, 'Just Behind the Billboard: The Instability of *Prisoner's Dilemma*' in Peter Dempsey and Stephen J. Burn, eds., *Intersections: Essays on Richard Powers* (Champaign: Dalkey Archive Press, 2008), 62.

enmeshed narrative forms and processes in some of Powers's earlier texts frames the depiction of the links between social relations, fiction, and national accounts of history with the ongoing nuclearisation of the planet. The influence of Emmanuel Levinas' work is arguably present throughout these texts. Levinas asserted that irruptions within history are exposed when the narrative perspectives through which we comprehend or navigate reality are addressed and a dialogue is created: "History is worked over by the ruptures of history in which a judgement is borne upon it. When man truly approaches the Other he is uprooted from history."³¹ The dismantling of knowledge based on seemingly neutral or objective understandings of human experience occurs throughout Powers's lemniscate texts. The depictions of a range of characters striving to reconcile with seemingly illogical or chaotic events are linked to wider histories and large-scale human and ecological devastation. Powers consistently engages with unburied pasts and complex evolving codes whilst remaining focused on the individual's role and response to the anxieties associated with an undetermined future, emphasising the significance of the individual and communication within vast seemingly repeating systems.

The depictions in these texts of families, individuals, and communities striving to create an alternative existence, narrative, or composition within a late-capitalist US society are related to an evolving utopian impulse. Lyman Sargent defines the phenomenon of utopianism as, "social dreaming – the dreams and nightmares that concern the ways in which groups of people arrange their lives and which usually envision a radically different society than the one in which dreamers live. But not all are radical, for some people at any time dream of something basically familiar."³² A wide-ranging history of utopian projects are explicitly or implicitly related to the protagonists' ambitions and desires, mapping the first instances of seventeenth-century US utopianism to the Civil Rights Era and beyond. John and Virginia Friesen's overview of the varied utopian movements throughout the history of North America notes the increase in utopian communities which emerged in the first half of the twentieth century "in response to the devastation of the two world wars" and the subsequent images of "harmonious families or serene individuals that dominated the

³¹ Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority* (Pittsburgh, Pa: Duquesne University Press, 1969), 52.

³² Lyman Tower Sargent, 'The Three Faces of Utopianism Revisited', *Utopian Studies* 5, no. 1 (1994): 1–37, 3.

film and television screen.”³³ The fragmented family groups, collectives, or duos in each text are central to this dual focus on US utopian traditions and current conflicts; the desire to become part of an ideal society necessarily stems from dissatisfaction with, and/or withdrawal from present reality in the wake of two large-scale conflicts. Powers does not promote a clear utopian vision in any of the six texts and instead charts a persisting urge to create a paradisaical society within an uncertain present. During a talk at the Royal College of Art, Luke Turner related current preoccupations with the realisation of a utopian society to a metamodernist perception of contemporary reality: “Metamodernism does not, then, propose any kind of utopian vision, although it does describe the climate in which a *yearning* for utopias, despite their futile nature, has come to the fore.”³⁴ Powers’s lemniscate depiction of utopian traditions, impacting upon the present and prospective shape of society, coheres with a metamodernist articulation of persisting desires and undecided futures³⁵. The dystopian and utopian potential of the US is bound to both the paradox of progress and the protagonists’ community building or self-invention endeavours.

A range of past utopian visions are related to the protagonists’ role within intentional communities or their retreats into mythic eutopias. In the afterword of *American Utopias*, Robert Fogarty states “no single type of commune dominates or has prevailed in our history, because utopian communities, like our country, have been varied and ‘in process’.”³⁶ The wide ranging depictions of communal societies and utopian collectives are not tied to one specific vision or fixed definition of ideal change. Despite this ambiguity, utopian traditions can be viewed as the cornerstone from which the protagonists’ respective creative impulses stem. Some scholars have begun to explore the hybridity of creative forms in Powers’s texts which expose the myth of US unity, considering the reality of the American Dream in relation to the

³³ John Friesen and Virginia Friesen, *The Palgrave Companion to North American Utopias* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 4.

³⁴ Luke Turner, ‘Metamodernism: A Brief Introduction | Notes on Metamodernism’, n.d., <https://www.metamodernism.com/2015/01/12/metamodernism-a-brief-introduction/>.

³⁵ This perspective on Metamodernism aligns with the Dutch school of Metamodernism as opposed to the Nordic School. It is important to note that this approach to defining Metamodernism can be viewed as lacking clearly defined parameters and/or maintaining a somewhat indecisive approach to the term. Alex Fergnani and Brent Cooper further contend: “This perspective of metamodernism can be criticized insofar as it provides a rich depiction of the structural feeling and cultural expressions of metamodernism but yet bypasses the urgent need and opportunity for a scholarly turn to be pro-actively normative.” Alex Fergnani and Brent Cooper, ‘Metamodern Futures: Prescriptions for metamodern foresight’, *Futures*, 149 (May 2023): 1-12, 3.

³⁶ Robert Fogarty in Charles Nordhoff, *American Utopias [1875]* (Stockbridge, MA: Berkshire House Publishers, 1993), 428.

characters' artistic commentary on US society. Heinz Ickstadt explores the role of variations and musical metaphors in *The Time of Our Singing*, noting the unbridgeable gap between an inescapable US past and the veneer promoted in the present: "against a coercive concept of cultural unity [which exposes the myth of an inclusive American utopia]... base unity is realized in the very plenitude of its possible variations but whose polyphonic harmonies neither deny nor hide the reality of the abyss."³⁷ However, Ickstadt does not consider the portrayal of communities and families beyond the musicality of this text, aligning the innovative performances of one family to a polyphonic societal composition with moments of dissonance and consonance. This analysis of Powers's texts will expand upon this, focusing on the variations on the reappearing utopian theme which is often overlooked in favour of an embedded subtheme. The protagonists in all six of the texts in this study create or participate in innovative discoveries that are entrenched in a US narrative of discovery and destruction. The lineage of utopian communities in the US is contextualised by a range of interlocking forms of repetition and change which are traced to each respective protagonist's experience of a trauma and a turbulent US history.

The interlinked repetitions associated with unresolved trauma, conflict, and the utopian tradition, create an immersive depiction of US history within a tumultuous present. The substantial changes to the characters' perceptions of reality are tied to events which persist in a spectral form within the present, framing the experiences of the individual within a wider history. The role of storytelling is linked to individual responses to collective trauma and the pursuit of a utopian society. The trajectory of the lives of many of the protagonists are shaped by the traumatic events they experience in their formative years. These pivotal incidents have a substantial impact on their world view and their reliance on creative forms as adults; therefore it is important to consider the definition of trauma in relation to identity and memory. Wulf Kansteiner defines trauma as an event which is distinct from identity and memory and "implies the occurrence of some serious real or imagined injury with long-term psychological, political and moral consequences."³⁸ However, this assertion ignores

³⁷ Heinz Ickstadt, 'Surviving in the Particular? Uni(Versali)Ty and Multiplicity in the Novels of Richard Powers', *European Journal of American Studies* 2, no. 1 (3 April 2007), 11.

³⁸ Wulf Kansteiner, 'Genealogy of a Category Mistake: A Critical Intellectual History of the Cultural Trauma Metaphor', *Rethinking History* 8, no. 2 (1 June 2004): 193–221, 214.

the component of trauma which alters memory and identity, leading to long-term consequences for the individuals affected by this change, which irrevocably links trauma, memory, and identity.

Michelle Balaev's definition of trauma extends beyond an act of violence, stating that trauma "refers to a person's emotional response to an overwhelming event that disrupts previous ideas of an individual's sense of self and the standard by which one evaluates society."³⁹ Balaev's characterisation of trauma coheres with the analysis of trauma, and its impact on the protagonists' concepts of development, change, and identity, in the following chapters. The bridge between the present, the unrepresentable past, and the unimaginable associated with trauma, are explored in Powers's depiction of the protagonists' identities and their perception of reality. The compulsive returns to pivotal moments in retrospective narrative moments create an omnipresent past within their present timeline. Trauma acts as one of the catalysts for the protagonists' preoccupations with notions of progress, eternity, and the quest to create a utopian society in all six texts. Pivotal historic moments are anchored to their memories of life-altering events, situating these individual narratives within a broader depiction of US history. However, Powers does not provide facile solutions to these larger issues: the utopian longings and traumas depicted in these texts remain respectively unrealised and unresolved.

The protagonists' personal interactions with US history begin in the twentieth century after WWI and escalate during the advent of the Atomic Age. The role that the creation of the atomic bomb plays in Powers's novels should not be underestimated - each protagonist's speculative visions are tied to the invention of the atomic bomb, the cold war, and the ensuing threat of a dystopian era. The hegemonic US ideologies which promoted the benefits of the atomic bomb were then followed by an extended era of panic. Gabriel Schwab contends that this period extended into the later decades of the twentieth century and was borne from "a collusive routinization of the fear and horror of nuclear war, a collusion that reinforces the repression of nuclear trauma."⁴⁰ Schwab goes on to trace the initial 'pervasive ecology of fear' which began with the initial colonisation of Native American lands, to the Manhattan Project in 1939, and the subsequent building of

³⁹ Michelle Balaev, 'Trends in Literary Trauma Theory', *Mosaic: An Interdisciplinary Critical Journal* 41, no. 2 (2008): 149–66, 150.

⁴⁰ Gabriele Schwab, *Radioactive Ghosts* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2020), 9.

the Los Alamos National Laboratory in 1943 in New Mexico, to emerging forms of radioactive colonisation and necropolitics: “As the corporate capture of uranium began on reservation lands, these communities were already living in a system of ecological dependency created by earlier encounters with American settler colonialism.”⁴¹ The links between the psychological, the neocolonial, and the political are similarly explored in Powers’s treatment of trauma, repetition, and hegemonic discourse.

In each text creative media is shown to have both dissociative and redemptive potential, with the power to comment upon or to disguise histories. In *Prisoner’s Dilemma*, the overwhelming spectre of Eddie Hobson Sr’s military past, and the salve offered by fantasy Arcadian realities, cause ruptures within the Cold War present for the Hobson family: “They had traveled the length of the decade dioramas... only to find themselves catapulted back into 1978. They stood paralyzed by the man’s abrupt return to the present... the year that 4 prominent Soviet human-rights activists were sent to the gulag.”⁴² Their father’s erratic returns to an unreconcilable past shapes the family’s experience of time. Eddie Sr has become captivated with the potency of speculative worlds following his involvement with the Trinity Test Site in New Mexico, frequently retreating into his imagination. Schwab traces the destructive notions of progress that pictured a utopian society arising from a moment of mass annihilation to comparable speculative works of fiction: “Wells’ idea of a ‘world set free’ in the aftermath of atomic destruction is symptomatic of a... moral inversion, that would come to mark the idea of the ‘war to end all wars’.”⁴³ Powers similarly charts the ripple effect of this inversion through his protagonists’ lives, threading their attempts at innovation or emancipation to earlier examples of utopian projects and speculative fictions which arose from conflict and loss. The adult characters in all six texts navigate their fragmented landscapes, accompanied by the ghosts of both an individual and national past. Powers depicts a range of characters responding to moments of crisis via the creation of alternative narratives, articulating their ideals whilst providing a retreat from reality.⁴⁴

⁴¹Schwab, 60.

⁴² Powers, *Prisoner’s Dilemma*, 233.

⁴³ Schwab, *Radioactive Ghosts*, 2.

⁴⁴ Not all these narratives are written – some are sung, drawn, imagined, or performed.

Although Powers combines a range of atrocities, inequalities, and conflicts within these narratives, the figure of the atomic bomb reappears in relation to emerging forms of destructive innovation. Active involvement in the development of the atomic bomb or innovations associated with modern warfare frame the texts. The speech given by J. Robert Oppenheimer following his resignation of the directorship of the Los Alamos test site on October 16th, 1945, echoes throughout these lemniscate histories:

The peoples of this world must unite or they will perish. This war, that has ravaged so much of the earth, has written these words. The atomic bomb has spelled them out for all men to understand. Other men have spoken them, in other times, of other wars, of other weapons. They have not prevailed. There are some, misled by a false sense of history, who hold that they will not prevail today. It is not for us to believe that. We are committed, committed to a world united, before this common peril, in law and in humanity.⁴⁵

Powers' depictions of creative works in the latter half of the twentieth century are haunted by this irrepressible event and the phantom figure of ongoing global nuclearisation. The significance of art to identity is interconnected with scientific and technological advancements in each text. The interweaving of these potentially incongruous forms of design has been assessed at length and related to a variety of scientific and musical works. In a study of the narrative structure of *The Time of Our Singing*, Aura Heydenreich considers the theory of relativity in relation to Bach's quodlibet compositions and the potential realisation of a 'hybrid community': "The seemingly incompatible fields of music and physics are condensed on a conceptual level by the realization of a fundamental similitude, which offers a key to the solution of the aporia of identity."⁴⁶ The oscillations between the positive and negative forms of development entrenched in the characters' internal contradictions are considered in relation to these juxtaposed forms of progression. The utopian desires of the protagonists are inextricably linked to both local and global events.

This enduring utopian impulse and the sociohistorical context of each narrative inform Powers's depiction of creative forms and the role of the artist and the author within the early twenty-first century. Neocolonialism and the creation of

⁴⁵ J. Robert Oppenheimer, quoted in, Kai Bird and Martin J. Sherwin, *American Prometheus: The Triumph and Tragedy of J. Robert Oppenheimer* (New York: Atlantic Books, 2009), 329.

⁴⁶ Aura Heydenreich, 'Closed Timelike Curves: Gödel's Solution for Einstein's Field Equations in the General Theory of Relativity and Bach's "The Musical Offering" as Configuration Models for Narrative Identity Constructions in Richard Powers's "The Time of Our Singing"' in, *Narrated Communities and Narrated Realities*, ed. Hermann Blume (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2015), 15.

the atomic bomb are accompanied by the narratives that help society to comprehend these events, often functioning as a form of control. Jean-Francois Lyotard persuasively argues that this act creates a persuasive account of events whilst reinforcing societal bonds: “a collectivity that takes narrative as its key form of competence has no need to remember its past. It finds its raw material for its social bond not only in the meaning of the narratives it recounts, but also in the act of reciting them.”⁴⁷ Powers’s focus on the role of the author and the potency of storytelling occurs alongside the repurposing of the narrative form in the early 1990s as the digital frontier expanded as well as increasing concerns regarding ‘narrative imperialism’. This anxiety surrounding narrative imperialism is explored in each of the six texts in this study, and in particular detail in *Operation Wandering Soul* and *Prisoner’s Dilemma*. The blurring of the boundaries between history, children’s stories, animation, and repressed memories highlights this deliberate confusion and poses the question of how successfully the author can undermine these strategies. The enduring intermedial narratives and the litany of failed utopian projects are frequently aligned with a veiled colonial and neocolonial US history.

The proceeding chapters consider Powers’s depiction of the anxieties surrounding this transformation of knowledge in relation to artistic works and forms of progress. The depiction of speculative histories and the quest for a utopian society incorporates the changing methods of cultural production and processes of producing and disseminating meaning. This web of intermedial narratives erodes divisions between creative forms whilst highlighting changes to the media industry and the advent of the digital media space. Christian Salmon examines the repurposing of the narrative form in the twenty-first century and traces this revival to the 1990s and the technologies which increase the speed of exchange: “The narrativist turn of the mid 1990s in the social sciences coincided with the Internet explosion and advances in the new information and communications technologies that created the preconditions for the ‘storytelling revival’ that allowed it to spread so rapidly.”⁴⁸ Technological and scientific advancements are depicted alongside creative forms and conflict, illustrating the matrix of influences which shape this lemniscate societal network. Despite the differences between linguistic, pictorial, and

⁴⁷ Jean-Francois Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984), 22.

⁴⁸ Christian Salmon, *Storytelling: Bewitching the Modern Mind* (London: Verso, 2010), 6-7.

musical systems, these signifiers remain intertwined and connected to concepts of scientific and technological progress.

Lyotard's study on knowledge in the postmodernist era is pertinent to this analysis of Powers's texts and the contemporary commodification of knowledge and the status of art. Knowledge, Lyotard suggests, has become an increasingly commodified product: "knowledge is and will be produced in order to be sold, it is and will be consumed in order to be valorized in a new production... knowledge ceases to be an end in itself."⁴⁹ In the six texts focused on in this study, the pursuits of the protagonists develop and interact with this changing perception of knowledge as well as enduring yet mutable narratives. These entangled narratives are situated within a landscape of emerging forms of communication and creation. The notion that "narration is the form of customary knowledge,"⁵⁰ is highlighted through the depictions of these entangled exchanges. The advent of digitalised archives, social media, animation, and virtual reality are just some of the examples of the commodified forms of knowledge tied to narration, ideology, and creative media within these texts.

The impact which technology has had on the forms and circulation of knowledge in the post-industrial age is undeniable. Contemporary platforms which enable rapid or immersive communication, ranging from Twitter in *Orfeo* to Virtual Reality in *Plowing the Dark*, reposition the role of the author and artist in relation to emerging technologies. The innovations associated with virtual reality in *Plowing the Dark* expands upon the multiple meanings attached to recognizable symbols and augments the possibility of multilinear temporalities: "Origins converge in the Jungle Room. Choose your myth of preference: the garden banishment, the wayward chromosome... here you can reassemble all lost growth, and even back it up onto magnetic tape."⁵¹ This highlights Powers's continued focus on intermediality and repetition, whilst the use of a virtual reality platform engenders a different form of recollection and participation in the construction of these evolving art traditions. The power of the performer and the crowd found in *The Time of Our Singing* moves from in-person interactions to an online or virtual space in *Plowing the Dark*. The potential for immersive audience participation and alternative realities changes the speed with

⁴⁹ Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, 4.

⁵⁰ Lyotard, 19.

⁵¹ Powers, *Plowing the Dark*, 188.

which hegemonic narratives and speculative futures can be addressed or undermined. The accelerated potential for revision or repetition allows the artist to update the oral tradition via electronic and digital media.

Powers's depiction of re-programmed musical ATMs, speculative histories uttered into a dictaphone, and social media embellishing the myth-making media narratives, modifies the role of the listener or audience. Powers himself has promoted forms of voice-dictation when writing, suggesting that these technological developments allow for an enhanced return to oral traditions: "Just a little closer to what... cadences might mean, when replayed in the subvocal voices of some other auditioner."⁵² Alongside this potential for the humanities to create and collaborate at an accelerated speed, Powers highlights the ability of political and military forces to similarly create widespread change via these forms of new media and technology. The depictions of digitised archives, social media, campaigns of psychological warfare, The Beirut Crisis, virtual reality, the Manhattan project, and the Civil Rights Era, align progress and innovation with neocolonial conflict and inequality. The interchange between enhancement and destruction, innovation and regression, creates a myriad of speculative narratives within one text. These varied outcomes will be explored in the proceeding chapters in relation to unresolved histories and the enduring US utopian tradition, replete with problematic universalising narratives. The layered narratives in these subsequent comparative sections disassemble and reassemble pre-established narratives. Each protagonist's motivation for change explores the potency of narratives and subsequently depicts the redemptive, collaborative, and destructive potential of narratives.

The multistrand narratives, juxtaposition of disciplines, and interwoven timelines all allow for expansive comparisons whilst highlighting interconnections. The encyclopaedic content of Powers's texts has been analysed at length, with critics arguing for and against the potential for closure or synthesis by the novel's conclusion. José Liste Noya argues that these techniques "bring into view a sort of transcendent third perspective that is associated with the reader's necessarily ethical intervention, manoeuvring between the two frames."⁵³ The representations of duality

⁵² Richard Powers, 'How to Speak a Book', *The New York Times*, 7 January 2007, sec. Books, <https://www.nytimes.com/2007/01/07/books/review/Powers2.t.html>.

⁵³ José Liste Noya, "'All Business as Usual': Richard Powers' Gain and the Complicities of (Re-)Incorporation', *Anglia* 139, no. 3 (1 September 2021): 536–63, 539.

and ambiguity undermine limited perspectives on US history and engender the conception of an alternative perspective on the unfolding future. Powers explores the potential for collaboration across disciplines to affect social change, re-framing the role of the artist and author as central nodes within this network. The author's contribution to *Intersections*, a series of essays on his own works, gives insight into the significance of the relationship between the form and content of the novels he strives to produce: "Refracting the private through the public, story through form, forcing the reading self into constant reciprocal renegotiations by always insisting that no level of human existence means anything without all the others."⁵⁴ The following analysis of the lemniscate narrative structure and simultaneity of narrative content, expands on the prior studies of intersections and situates these interwoven textual elements within a narrative-driven, increasingly inter-connected societal landscape.

Powers's depiction of the simultaneity of intermedial forms and modes of communication acknowledges the changing commodification of knowledge and artistic production. Wendy Steiner's argument for the capacity of art to create simultaneous moments from the successive is central to this analysis of these texts' expansive lemniscate narrative structure with a contemporary context: "The intricate structuring of art... is designed... to enlarge our ability to turn sequence into simultaneity, to allow us to form ever larger temporal flows into unified, atemporal structures."⁵⁵ When considering the depiction of the simultaneity of intermedial forms and the overt non-linearity of Powers's texts, the consistent references to varied forms of art is significant to the creation of a vast lemniscate world-view with multiple co-existing temporalities. Consequently, the pre-existing scholarship on Powers's use of classical music compositional techniques is relevant to this study of the purpose of the lemniscate form. The musicality of Powers's novels is undeniable: *The Gold Bug Variations*, *Orfeo*, and *The Time of Our Singing*, all contain a myriad of overt references to music and performance. The references and similarities to musical compositions have already been examined in close detail: the gradual accumulation of slowly repeating themes and interconnected forms has been related to a rondo movement, contrapuntal techniques, prolation canons, or a more general

⁵⁴ Richard Powers, 'Making the Rounds', in Dempsey and Burn, *Intersections: Essays on Richard Powers*. 308

⁵⁵ Hazel Smith, *The Contemporary Literature-Music Relationship: Intermedia, Voice, Technology, Cross-Cultural Exchange*, 1st edition (New York: Routledge, 2016), 10.

polyphonic feel.⁵⁶ Hazel Smith's assertion that "writers often strive to imitate the simultaneity of music, because simultaneity allows for the superimposition of multiple perspectives"⁵⁷ can arguably be applied to Powers's texts. The creation of these expansive temporal flows is embellished via the intermedial forms already studied at length.

The myriad nonlinear timelines and matrices of forms do not necessarily imply that a fragmented, disconnected system of communication or cultural production exists. Instead, Powers's depiction of interconnection creates a more inclusive, alternative large-scale narrative within the post-industrial era of mass media. The comparative pairings of six of Powers's novels explores the origins of hegemonic discourse and creative traditions across the latter half of the twentieth century. Powers highlights the role mythmaking and propaganda plays in hegemonic historical narratives through the depiction of the utopian tradition in relation to the Atomic Age. Laurence Coupe's definition of myth is pertinent to Powers's depiction of the utopian tradition, progress, and hegemonic US narratives. Powers's transmedial depiction of the utopian tradition adheres with Lawrence Coupe's understanding of myth:

It would be naïve to contrast modernist mythopoeia and postmodernist mythopoeia as simply synonymous with order and chaos, as if these were mutually exclusive principles. Myth, after all, is inseparable from the idea of totality... and yet by virtue of its organisation, it approximates a timeless paradigm which can never quite be realised.⁵⁸

This quasi-ahistorical narrative technique undermines the distinction between fact and fiction and blurs the delineations between historical eras. The notion of buried master narratives, which Fredric Jameson asserts persist in our political unconscious, is something which Powers engages with through the depiction of these enduring rhetorical devices.⁵⁹ The mythic quality imbued in this seemingly timeless hegemonic discourse is traced through varied eras to contemporary late capitalist culture as Powers explores the transformation of ideology in non-linear narrative frames. Although exclusionary transhistorical narratives are uncovered,

⁵⁶ For example, Yulia Kozyrakis, 'Sightless Sound: Music and Racial Self-Fashioning in Richard Powers' *The Time of Our Singing*', in Antje Kley and Jan D. Kucharzewski, eds., *Ideas of Order: Narrative Patterns in the Novels of Richard Powers* (Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag Winter, 2013).

⁵⁷ Smith, *The Contemporary Literature-Music Relationship*, 10.

⁵⁸ Laurence Coupe, *Myth* (London: Routledge, 2008), 79-80.

⁵⁹ Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious*, 2nd edition (London: Routledge, 2002).

Powers suggests that the potential to use the utopian impulse to create an innovative, heterogeneous master narrative exists. The oscillations between these established narratives and the possibility of change within these forms suggests that these texts exceed purely postmodernist or modernist readings.

The commentary which Powers provides on contemporary US society has been considered in previous scholarly studies. Heinz Ickstadt asserts that Powers highlights “the general state of social and ecological unawareness on which the global reign of corporate capitalism thrives – threatening, among other things, the status of the novel.”⁶⁰ This concern for the status of the novel, an awareness of global crises, and the text’s movement across varied forms, suggests that Powers’s novels can be broadly defined as transglossic or metamodernist works of fiction. The form and content of Powers’s novels mirrors the six trends and characteristics of the transglossic defined by Kristian Shaw and Sara Upstone. Shaw’s and Upstone’s definition of the transglossic focuses on cross-cultural dialogue and empathy, intersectionality, authorial responsibility, and productive authenticity. These characteristics provide an interrogative framework for the analysis of contemporary texts - and can similarly be applied to Powers’s texts. The transglossic “captures the productive simultaneity and intersectionality of contemporary literature since the millennium.”⁶¹ The examples of intersections, intermediality and simultaneity within Powers’s narratives align with this contemporary literary movement. Powers’ movement across forms corresponds with the proposed classification of contemporary texts as transglossic.

Although Powers’s texts typically emerge from an era of postmodernity,⁶² the protagonists acknowledge the fragility of an assumed historicity whilst retaining fragments of a modernist idealism and an enduring utopian impulse. This amalgamation of influences adheres with a developing metamodernist style. Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin van den Akker first suggested the use of the term metamodernism in a 2010 article, describing this as an oscillation between aspects

⁶⁰ Heinz Ickstadt, ‘ ‘Asynchronous Messaging’ The Multiple Functions of Richard Powers’ Fictions’ in Kley and Kucharzewski, *Ideas of Order*, 25.

⁶¹ Kristian Shaw and Sara Upstone, ‘The Transglossic: Contemporary Fiction and the Limitations of the Modern’, *English Studies* 102, no. 5 (4 July 2021): 573–600, 576.

⁶² “The case for its existence depends on the hypothesis of some radical break or coupure, generally traced back to the end of the 1950s or early 1960s.” Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism or the cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013), 53.

of modern and postmodern perspectives. Pavol Bargár expands upon the definition proposed by these co-authors and describes metamodernism as bringing together:

The key features of both modernism and postmodernism, such as earnestness and irony, commitment and detachment, optimism and reluctance, naivety and skepticism, and the yearning for utopia and the awareness there is none. Embracing paradox and juxtaposition, metamodernism takes the project of *construction* from modernism and that of *deconstruction* from postmodernism to come up with its own *reconstruction*.⁶³

Powers moves beyond modernist and postmodernist viewpoints whilst including traces of their characteristics in the depiction of an uncertain future. The shadow of progress, reason, and the Promethean man are not entirely discarded. Instead, the flawed confidence of modernist thought is accompanied by a postmodern cynicism and a multitude of previously suppressed voices. The paradox of progress, the juxtaposition of timelines, and the seemingly futile quest for a utopia occur within a lemniscate temporal frame, emphasising the movements 'with, between, and beyond'. These qualities situate Powers's fiction within contemporary transglossic and metamodernist categories, as opposed to the postmodern novel.

Although the significance of postmodernist and modernist influences are not reduced through this analysis of Powers's texts, it is important to note that an engagement with history and expansive networks does not confine Powers to the depiction of pre-existing perceptions of society or vast interconnected systems. The comparative pairings that follow allow for a consideration of the form and content of these narratives which encompass globalization, intermediality, simultaneity, and contemporary debates surrounding authorial responsibility. While these concerns are present in texts which pre-date current fiction, the depiction of emerging technology, speculative histories, and an eco-consciousness positions these narratives within a specific contemporary context. As Shaw and Upstone conclude: "It is distinctly literary... a defined interweaving of content and form, and by a nuanced and identifiable attitude towards multiple perspectives and their relationship to cultural imaginaries of both the present and the future."⁶⁴ The interlocking themes of the genetic code and musical composition in *The Gold Bug Variations*, which are spun outwards as new narrative threads are introduced, are emblematic of Powers's

⁶³ Pavol Bargár, 'The Modern, the Postmodern, and... the Metamodern? Reflections on a Transforming Sensibility from the Perspective of Theological Anthropology', *Transformation* 38, no. 1 (2021): 3–15, 4.

⁶⁴ Shaw and Upstone, 'The Transglossic: Contemporary Fiction and the Limitations of the Modern', 596.

merging of content and form and the potentially redemptive quality of art. Powers traces the threat of an emerging dystopia to innovative creations via Franklin Todd's preoccupation with the Herri de Bles's atmospheric landscape paintings: "the only thing to do when the world begins to end is to stand aside and paint it. Name it. Your belief in the ability of words to intervene."⁶⁵ The roles of the scientist, composer, researcher, and artist, are entwined, enlarging the inconclusive perspective on the redemptive or passive qualities of the artist as activist or bystander.

An ongoing ethico-political approach to speculative histories and engagements with the utopian literary tradition, alongside a transglossic approach to the written narrative, situates Powers's texts within a growing body of early twenty-first century contemporary fiction. The similarities between Powers and other twentieth-century US writers, such as Don DeLillo and Thomas Pynchon, have been acknowledged in previous studies. Heinz Ickstadt in particular charts Powers's development in-line with US fiction's growth beyond the postmodern novel. Ickstadt argues that the renewed engagement with realism, the advent of hyper-reality, and the role of the family associated with this period are similarly encountered in Don DeLillo's *White Noise*⁶⁶. However, the obvious similarities--expansive interdisciplinary content, complex narrative systems, and layered family histories— are tempered with clear differences.

Powers's later novels return to themes first touched-upon in *The Gold Bug Variations* and *Operation Wandering Soul*. The protagonists navigate urban centres and natural landscapes, confronting the fragile ecosystems threatened by pollution and conflict. Scott Hermanson similarly asserts that *Prisoner's Dilemma* "subtly but very definitely links modernism's pursuit of complete understanding to the ecological upheaval left in its wake."⁶⁷ The seeds of a focus on ecocriticism, and natural superstructures in conflict with an increasingly commodified and technologically advanced world, suggests that there are comparisons to be made beyond these postmodernist US authors. Garrett Stewart contends that the familiar expansive and overwhelming systems are approached in a different manner by Powers: "The

⁶⁵ Powers, *The Gold Bug Variations*, 341.

⁶⁶ Heinz Ickstadt, 'Surviving in the Particular? Uni(Versali)Ty and Multiplicity in the Novels of Richard Powers', *European Journal of American Studies* 2, no. 1 (3 April 2007), 119.

⁶⁷ Scott Hermanson, 'Just Behind The Billboard: The Instability of *Prisoner's Dilemma*' in, Dempsey and Burn, *Intersections: Essays on Richard Powers*, 60.

unmastered mysteries of a System in which human energies have found themselves embedded – that anxious horizon frame that constitutes the stock-in-trade of the paranoia novel... is a trope turned inside out by Powers”⁶⁸. The pursuit of dominance within the planetary system has led to wide-scale devastation and the construction of claustrophobic legacies. These texts highlight the need for a wider planetary consciousness and emphasise the author’s role as a commentator who addresses global concerns.

The revisited theme of an enduring utopian impulse addresses the societal concerns within each text’s specific context whilst highlighting the links between notions of advancement and repetition. Although the narrative arcs of Powers’s texts follow a conventional pattern of tension and climax, the ambiguity of each text’s ending thwarts an emotional catharsis, resulting in an incomplete pattern of tension and release which frustrates the unilinear process of time. Powers references a range of art and literature within his narratives to articulate this enduring drive for a sense of cohesion and completion. The references to ‘The Tower of Babel’, ‘Jacob’s Ladder’, and ‘Sailing to Byzantium’ are just three instances of art which evince a sense of enlightenment and improvement alongside an implied utopian longing. In a study of ‘The concept of Time Implied by the Theme-and-Variations Form’, Emily Peterman notes that “each variation, after all, builds not on the previous variation, but on the theme itself, so that the development of the thematic material is one of accretion rather than progress.”⁶⁹The continuing revision of pre-existing material enlarges the enduring thematic concerns of his texts and the lemniscate speculative histories and projected futures to which Powers returns: “I think the pleasure I take in revision stems from this desire to try and do something to rearrange my stylistics each time out... the archive of literature as the race’s high-level genome.”⁷⁰ The thematic concerns gather a layered significance as the narratives of Powers’s successive texts unfold like “the slow accretion of a haunting chord.”⁷¹ The enduring traditions with which Powers engages thwart a teleological release and situate these persisting patterns within an unfolding contemporary context and a repeating past.

⁶⁸ Garrett Stewart, ‘Organic Reformations in Richard Powers’s *The Overstory*’, *Daedalus* 150, no. 1 (1 January 2021): 160–77, 165.

⁶⁹ Emily Petermann, *The Musical Novel: Imitation of Musical Structure, Performance, and Reception in Contemporary Fiction* (Rochester, New York: Camden House, 2018), 173.

⁷⁰ Jim Neilson, ‘A Conversation with Richard Powers’ | Dalkey Archive Press.

⁷¹ Richard Powers, *The Gold Bug Variations* (Harper Perennial, 1991), 31.

Chapter One: The Gold Bug Variations and Orfeo

Introduction

From scientist to music aficionado, and musician to biohacker, the transformative roles of the protagonists in *The Gold Bug Variations*⁷² and *Orfeo*⁷³ are framed by turbulent twentieth and twenty-first century US landscapes. The fluid portrayals of the protagonists' chosen roles are placed within specific cultural contexts. The narratives enmesh personal and collective US histories whilst relating these to the protagonists' unfulfilled utopian desires and chosen vocations. The narratives arc back and forward through time, revisiting places and people and reworking past events in the narratives' present cultural context of the latter half of the twentieth and early twenty-first century. The protagonists' identities are shaped by both the changing socio-political landscape of the US and their fragmented inter-personal relationships. Powers highlights the porous reciprocal borders placed between personal and collective identities through this tandem development and critically re-examines the concepts of progress and enduring US master narratives.⁷⁴ These traces are projected forward into the future and backwards into unresolved pasts, producing a lemniscate narrative form.

In *The Gold Bug Variations*, Powers replicates the double-helix DNA structure in his depiction of two linked love stories. The failed relationship between Stuart Ressler and his married colleague, Jeanette Koss, is related to the discovery of the double helix structure of DNA in 1953, and the subsequent deciphering of the genetic code in 1961. The spectre of Cold War fears, the influence of Bach's composition, and Jeanette's anxieties surrounding infertility, complicates their shared ambitions and the depiction of codes, inheritance, and evolution. The relationship between Jan O'Deigh and Franklin Todd in 1980s New York develops alongside the recollection of this earlier relationship. This relationship is framed by a pervasive consumer culture and the increasing commodification of knowledge. The

⁷² Richard Powers, *The Gold Bug Variations*. Subsequent references in the text.

⁷³ Richard Powers, *Orfeo*. Subsequent references in the text.

⁷⁴ American Exceptionalism and the American Dream are two examples of enduring master, or dominant, societal narratives that have shaped the perception of the US. These national narratives are embedded in the artworks produced by varied creative traditions, supporting the ongoing belief in a mythologised US landscape.

juxtaposition of print and televised advertising, print archives and digital data stores, exemplifies this state of change. These repeating personal histories and connected forms of scientific and technological advances create a non-linear history interlaced with moments of personal loss, precarious progress, and alternative designs. In *Orfeo*, the aftermath of 9/11 and the implementation of the Patriot Act help to shape the public's perception of Peter Els: the Biohacker Bach. Peter Els's misjudged attempt to place his own musical masterpiece within *Serratia*⁷⁵ leads to his public downfall. The authorities chase Els across the US whilst he recounts his memories of failed relationships and flawed compositions. Powers depicts classical, modernist, and avant-garde compositions whilst engaging with repeating Orphic mythology. The significant role music has played in Els's life, and the changes that US society underwent in the latter half of the twentieth century, are depicted alongside a silent soundtrack. Powers explores the potential for innovation alongside destructive forms of progress in this depiction of an elderly man running from the rapidly multiplying public perception of his endeavours.

The structures of *Orfeo* and *The Gold Bug Variations* chart a looping course through time; varied intersecting accounts collide within the respective narrative's contemporary era. Powers's narrative structures employ dual narrative strands, emphasising the significant legacy of the problematic ideologies imbued in US national identity narratives. The return to similar historical landscapes within the spliced narrative structures of each text allows Powers to build a multi-layered nonlinear account of personal and societal histories. The interwoven narratives, and the combination of two or more disciplines in comparison, allows for a sense of registral expansion whilst addressing the repeating themes of time, memory, and identity narratives. The thematic concerns in these narratives, despite engaging with a broad range of topics, depict "a set of variations whose differences declare their variegated similarity" (GBV 40). The comparison of these two texts allows for a consideration of the similarities and variations found within US fictional and historical

⁷⁵ *Serratia* is a genus of bacteria which causes infections in humans, animals, and insects. There are 14 species of *Serratia*. Once thought to be non-pathogenic, *Serratia* was used in experiments by the US military in the 1960s. This resulted in members of the public being exposed to *S. marcescens* and led to US congressional hearing in the 1970s. Powers engages with this legacy and highlights the ancient narratives and contemporary experiments on *Serratia*. Although Els is condemned for his actions, the US government have previously authorised forms of destructive experimentation. Steven Mahlen, 'Serratia Infections: From Military Experiments to Current Practice', *American Society for Microbiology, Clinical Microbiology Reviews*, 24, no. 4 (2011): 755–91.

narratives in relation to an expansive global history. The cycles within history and memory are often related to supra-historic narratives and neo-spiritual desires. Mathematically logical thought and rationalism are fused with a retained pre-Enlightenment mysticism. These fictional narratives are illustrative of the mythic foundations upon which some US societal ideologies are shown to be based. The litany of failed utopian communities and the legacy of the American Sublime art form haunt the US landscape, sketching an unfulfilled image of society onto an unstable present.

Powers explores the influence of creative media alongside the performative nature of US national identity narratives in both *The Gold Bug Variations* and *Orfeo*. In *Orfeo*, Powers makes repeated references to Walt Whitman's 'Song of Myself'⁷⁶, and in *The Gold Bug Variations* 'Jacobs Ladder'⁷⁷ and Pieter Bruegel the Elder's 'Tower of Babel'⁷⁸ are referred to alongside contemporary visions of growth and enlightenment. The use of these references, within texts which are concerned with change and non-linear histories, emphasises the individualised yet interrelated narratives created by the protagonists and wider society. Powers's implementation of an overt transmediality creates multi-layered, dense narrative structures which eschew a simple code in favour of a complex net of entangled mythologies and timelines. The ongoing relevance of creative media to the unwavering pursuit of progress is entrenched within Powers's depiction of time and society in these texts. The commodification of cultural forms and the role of the artist are central to Powers's engagements with a range of intermedial fictions. Whilst accumulating a web of interconnected personal and collective histories amidst a technologically enhanced landscape, Powers considers the wider position of the arts and humanities within this era.

Powers's references to classical mythology and biblical art alongside the history of Western music, emphasises that a range of societies have used musical or polyphonic forms to engage with desire and have incorporated similarly subjective approaches to time. Despite many scholars considering the overt references, and

⁷⁶ Walt Whitman, *Song of Myself*, Reprint edition (London: Vintage Classics, [1892] 2015).

⁷⁷ "And he dreamed, and behold a ladder set upon the earth, and the top of it reached to heaven." Genesis 28:12-17 in, Robert Carroll and Stephen Prickett, eds., *The Bible: Authorized King James Version [1611]*, Illustrated edition (Oxford ; New York: OUP Oxford, 2008).

⁷⁸ Pieter Bruegel The Elder, *The (Great) Tower of Babel*, c 1563, Oil on Wood Panel, 114 x 155 (cm), c 1563, Kunsthistorisches Museum.

structural similarities, to classical music compositions in their analyses of *The Gold Bug Variations* and *Orfeo*, the layered and protracted time frames of these narratives also evoke the compositional techniques associated with American minimal music. Due to Powers's explicit engagement with classical music, there has been a lack of scholarly focus on twentieth-century compositional forms in the analysis of Powers's texts. In previous interviews, Powers has expressed his concerns with critics focusing on one form, or specific technique in their analyses of multiple texts: "I think that the way my books deploy multiple narrative frames has been so different... that such a stripped-down description threatens to become a little misleading... thereby missing as much of those books' structure as they succeeded in capturing, using the simple generalization."⁷⁹

The focus on classical compositions overlooks the importance of the reworking of form and the elongated time frames of minimal music that eschew traditional Western forms of anticipation, climax, and release. In his study of American minimal music, Fink contends that "Western music has been uniquely concerned with constructing desire and subjectivity through its control of temporality and expectation", and that "insight into how previous cultures construed desire and subjectivity can be induced analytically from the way their music moves through time."⁸⁰ Minimal music sought to craft a different approach to climax and expectation, seeking to imitate non-Western music's articulation of anticipation and desire. The depictions of transhistorical and transmedial persisting themes throughout human history is a comparable approach to the articulation of these emotions, transcending comparisons with a purely classical approach to composition. The memories of personal and collective histories and the repetitive ahistorical narratives engage with modulating yet repeating temporalities, reflecting on the past and speculating on the undetermined future without a finite conclusion.

⁷⁹ Allan Varda, *A Fugitive Language: An interview with Richard Powers*, 4.

⁸⁰ Robert Fink, *Repeating Ourselves: American Minimal Music as Cultural Practice* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 76.

The Gold Bug Variations

The content and form of Richard Powers's third novel, *The Gold Bug Variations*, is founded on both the musical arrangements and scientific discoveries which helped to shape the cultural landscape of the twentieth-century US. Johann Sebastian Bach's 'Goldberg Variations' provides the inspiration for the title and structure of the text, which Powers recalls through his use of canons, a quodlibet, and corresponding thirty chapters.⁸¹ This textual variation on a pre-existing musical arrangement is related to the discovery of the base structure of DNA and an increasingly computerised model of memory, archives, and data storage. Previous studies of Powers's works have noted the tradition of melding science and art in US fiction with which he engages: "Positioning himself at the crossroads of literature and the sciences has put him in an ancestral line with authors like Thomas Pynchon, William Gaddis, Joseph McElroy, or Don DeLillo (an ancestry he gladly acknowledges)."⁸² In this instance, two distinct designs inform Powers's narrative structure and content: Bach's 'Goldberg Variations' provides the basis for the form, whilst the twisted ladder created by the two love stories in the narrative resembles the double-helix structure of DNA.

The diminishing role of music and the increasing significance placed on scientific and technological innovation is undermined by the influence of Bach. Although this analysis of Powers's narrative will not focus on the structural similarities between the text and Bach's 'Goldberg Variations', it is worth noting the inspiration of the mathematical and the divine within Bach's music. Gottfried Lebiniz asserts that Bach's composition fuses seemingly rational order and code with the quasi spiritual inarticulable response to music: "As rational Enlightenment encroached, Bach ballasted his faith with hermetic truths that could be demonstrated, in terms of music, with an exactitude that leaves verbal language helpless; what results from Bach's demonstration of the transcendental unity of number is liberation and joy."⁸³ The interdisciplinary nature of Bach's own

⁸¹ Johann Sebastian Bach, *The Goldberg Variations*, 1741.

⁸² Heinz Ickstadt, 'Asynchronous Messaging' *The Multiple Functions of Richard Powers' Fictions* in Kley and Kucharzewski, *Ideas of Order*, 23.

⁸³ Gottfried Wilfred Lebiniz quoted in Wilfrid Mellers, *Bach and the Dance of God* (1981) in Jamie James, *The Music Of The Spheres: Music, Science and the Natural Order of the Universe*, New Ed (London: Abacus, 1995), 181.

compositions is significant to the use of varied forms within a single creation which Powers replicates in this literary form. The structure and the content of the text provide comparative forms within one narrative whole, creating a dizzying image of growth.

The content of the novel focuses primarily on three protagonists: Stuart Ressler, Jan O'Deigh, and Franklin Todd. Ressler's abandoned attempts to decipher the genetic code, and the accompanying tale of his tragic love story and haunted memories of 'The Goldberg Variations', are revisited in Jan's and Todd's combined account of his life alongside their own unfolding love story. The image of linear development is undermined by Powers's lemniscate narrative which examines twentieth-century US societal change from two seemingly distinct yet repeating perspectives. These echoing love stories and re-examined histories emphasise Powers's motif of variations on a pre-established narrative. The variations on a theme which are scattered throughout the narrative examine manmade, natural, and hybrid forms of synthesis and explore evolving sublime or utopian traditions within a late-twentieth century context. The concluding words, "once more with feeling," (639) end this text on the note of change and regeneration. Powers's use of language in *The Gold Bug Variations* overtly addresses the illusory sense of unshakable progress present within the US in these texts. This "study of imitative forward motion, the staggered duplicate pair of voices," (61) engenders a cycling timeline without a closing perfect cadence. The sense of an upward trajectory is undermined by Powers's interlocking narrative form and content, examining repeating collective and personal histories from enmeshed lemniscate viewpoints.

The accumulation of personal and societal histories provides the reader with unstable binary forms of knowledge and additional indivisible forms. The definition of pre-established fixed categories and dualistic constructs are undermined in *The Gold Bug Variations*. The synchronistic depiction of science and art within two interwoven love stories allows for a fluidity of form and fluctuating pre-existing categories. The staggered, looping timeline explores evolving yet variable forms of knowledge whilst relating these perceptions of knowledge to creative media. Stuart Ressler's criticism, "the humanities have clearly slid into the terminally curatorial, forsaking claim to knowledge." (47), is an accusation which Powers confronts through this interdisciplinary narrative. *The Gold Bug Variations* contains varied examples of fictive socio-historical narratives and provides different perspectives on knowledge.

Powers's explanation of the potential real-world application of literature, "fiction can be a mirror in which we come to know our fictions about the world... Our reading of these things ought to be at least equal to their reading of us"⁸⁴, emphasises that these acts of self-narration can generate a revelatory form of knowledge. Widening the scope of this world-building narrative illuminates the hidden traces that span across knowledge bases, societies, and timelines: "The trick to listening... is to hear the pieces speaking to one another... carrying the traces of everything that ever worked." (377). Powers uses the motif of music as an analogy for the complex interlocking, developing identity compositions which are often overlooked within US society.

Born in 1937, Stuart Ressler lives through periods associated with modernism and postmodernism. The entangled movements back and forth through Ressler's life during these eras creates a temporal imminence despite the elongated timeframe. In 1957, the threat of nuclear war and the national imperative to preserve a sense of US supremacy makes Ressler's research into DNA and the genetic code an unintended cooperative endeavour. This contest for dominance imbues Ressler's research with the added weight of national improvement whilst reducing his autonomy as a scientist. The changes taking place in the post-war Atomic Age US frames Ressler's role working within this new frontier: "research – America in '57- is no country for old men." (44) The changing perception of progress merges with new forms of destruction. The expansion Westward complete, a new contestable ground has been formed. The collaborative generating forms associated with Bach's composition and the genetic code are contrasted with Cold War-era US ideologies and a post-Enlightenment rhetoric which promoted human-made designs: "Life is passing the second threshold, emending the contract... the same destructive desire to grow, be more... the grotesque trade-off" (593). Emerging forms of innovation are aligned with a problematic form of anticipation.

The 1980s, where society seems "five minutes to meltdown," (62) is juxtaposed with the Cold War anxieties of the late 1950s where the threat of nuclear war overshadows Ressler's life as a researcher. The narrative's fluctuations between the era in which Ressler carried out his scientific research, to the 1980s when Ressler worked for a data company creates an entangled timeline of events.

⁸⁴ Neilson, 'A Conversation with Richard Powers' | Dalkey Archive Press.

Powers's depiction of these two timelines explores the generating national narratives which engage with potentially destructive forms of development. The research associated with the space-race, in contrast with Ressler's own research, allows differing images of growth to coemerge. The melding of science, technology, and a diminished mysticism is expanded upon within the narrative timeline based in 1980s New York. National expansion has now moved beyond the confines of earth: "a new celestial body circles the sky. Everything at launch level is changed utterly.... Fear is electric; we've escaped the pull of the world." (202) Powers emphasises that this expansion beyond a global space undermines notions of spiritual transcendence and combines the pursuit of innovation with a pervading sense of trepidation.

The shift in focus from the open expanse of the frontier to the innovations associated with late-capitalist society are foregrounded through Powers's descriptions of Ressler's, Jan's, and Todd's lives in New York City. In contrast with these emerging artificial designs, Powers aligns the depiction of the transportative nature of sound - "beyond the point where experience commonly defers: beyond cleverness to joy... rubbing shoulders against wonder" - with organic compositions and "necessary and breath-taking generating form." (209) Unlike the research carried out as part of a national defence strategy, and the instances of technological advancement in a sterile city space, these moments of transcendence are aligned with organic forms. The changing image of progress masks the significance of underlying natural codes, whereas creative combined arrangements can recreate the sense of awe associated with pre-existing developing patterns. The innovations and discovery which began in the first timeline re-emerge within this postmodern city space, emphasising the similarities between these two distinct eras through this condensed timeframe.

Powers depicts the commodification of both scientific and technological innovations within "the pallid postindustrial shimmer" (108) of New York alongside the depiction of a reclusive, jaded Ressler. The illusory and polluting New York cityscape, a "technological Oz of local urgencies... miles of fossil fuel blazing," (99) is the narrative space where Powers stages Ressler's decline and Jan's pursuit of a superficial relationship with Keith. The loss of status Ressler experiences is linked to diminished inter-personal relationships and a lack of agency within this postmodern city. Despite this sense of an overbearing postmodern condition, Ressler's final pursuit of cooperative innovation undermines this restrictive city space. Ressler

modifies pre-existing code and attempts to amend the commodification of social life, restoring his status as a creator through an unanticipated fusion of forms. Chapter 30, 'Today in History', emphasises the ephemeral nature of the present and the ability of music to conjure up the past. The use of musical code to alter the functionality of an ATM places Ressler in the role of a deus-ex-machina whilst rendering technological accomplishments secondary to human connections. This virus requires Todd's input of a code and Jan's PIN at an ATM, recovering Ressler's concealed sound and restoring the collaborative trio once more. The take-over of this machine subverts the status quo: "occasional fallibility permits life to crack open the sterile stable of inorganics and scream out." (196). Powers's protagonist maintains a code which focuses on innovation and human-centric experience of the world in relation to pre-existing organic forms.⁸⁵ Ressler exposes the flaws in machine-driven processes and reveals the unexpected combinations which can arise from subversive improvisations.

The repetitions found within the code lying dormant within the ATM challenge the gathered crowd and Jan. Ressler reawakens their curiosity by generating an unexpected sonority. The increasing commodification of art is highlighted via the repeated instances of creative forms spliced into machines or systems associated with a late capitalist consumer-culture US. Ressler's last labour is situated as a subversive intangible act which reclaims a space for the artist within a materialistic society. In contrast with the lack of agency found in a seemingly rational age, Powers depicts the potential for the artist to challenge an increasingly materialistic worldview which has engendered the rise of commodity culture and labour automation. Rob Wilson asserts that sublime art is a creative form which can "reverse this social subjugation to the administered world with its totalizing commodity reign".⁸⁶ The challenge to the status quo, achieved through Ressler's use of Bach's composition within a pre-existing pattern, produces a narrative which undermines the authority of a capital-driven code and engenders a small-scale social change. Ressler's last act re-establishes an interdisciplinary approach to code and restores this dual commitment to science and art within a materialistic society: "The

⁸⁵ For further consideration of the role of generating codes, as opposed to codes which function as substitutions without adding any additional meaning once deciphered, see Jay Labinger, 'Encoding an Infinite Message: Richard Powers's *Gold Bug Variations*', *Configurations* 3, no. 1 (Winter 1995): 79-93

⁸⁶ Rob Wilson, 'Techno-Euphoria and the Discourse of the American Sublime', *Boundary 2* 19, no. 1 (1992): 205-29, 210.

purpose of science was to revive and cultivate a perpetual state of wonder. For nothing deserved wonder so much as our capacity to feel it. "(611) Ressler combines scientific advancement with prior sublime experiences, cultivating a renewed sense of wonder for these increasingly disconnected onlookers.

The change in Ressler's role from a scientist deciphering naturally occurring codes to a corporate worker involved in computer coding, emphasises the changes to the promoted image of progress. However, by implanting his own code within a symbol of convenience, automated action, and capital, Ressler temporarily alters the purpose of the machine. This innovative use of an ATM to generate music, beyond the sounds associated with its intended purpose, resurrects a past. This acts as the catalyst which brings about Jan and Todd's reunion and joins the entire spliced narrative together. This music, "which had never stopped. Something of divinity in it, beyond the ear... reaching a pitch of synthesis I will never recover," (631) brings a sense of the unexpected and the otherworldly to a mundane daily routine. This language juxtaposes the spiritual, the ephemeral, and the musical to expand upon pre-defined variations of enduring artistic traditions. Powers's fusion of omnipresent societal icons into unexpected forms, highlights the porous nature of boundaries and the mutability of underlying definitions. Ressler's unexpected combination of two codes successfully disrupts Jan's jaded perception of reality. Conversely, Todd and Ressler's attempt to undermine basic automation processes and manipulate the vast frontier of data to raise the wages of their co-worker, Jimmy, fails. Unlike Ressler's replication of a fragment of 'The Goldberg Variations', which alters the function of the ATM and reunites Jan and Todd, this change to a computerised system results in Jimmy gaining a raise whilst disastrously losing his health insurance. Their joint endeavour is impacted by a facet of capitalism; this subversive act unwittingly interacts with an unexpected force.

The romanticised face of machine-driven change is challenged by Powers's counterpoint collaborative forms that develop alongside the changing format of archival stores. Ressler's opinion on the curatorial nature of the humanities is initially strengthened by Jan's failed attempts to re-construct the narrative of Ressler's life from data and archival sources alone. This archival process and approach to narrative-building supports Ressler's perception of fiction as a product which does not provide any new knowledge. However, by combining Jan's journals and research with Todd's romantic sensibilities, two complementary narratives emerge. Powers

fuses characters and seemingly discordant approaches to knowledge to expand restrictive perceptions of art forms. Jan and Todd join the biographies they have written on different eras in Ressler's life and become composers of the spliced form of the structure, as well as part of the story themselves. The ability for variations on one narrative to create something new provides another instance of cooperation. Barry Lewis's wide-ranging overview of *The Goldbug Variations* considers the influence of science and music on Powers's treatment of repetition and variation. Lewis contends that "literature reproduces itself in a fashion which might almost be called genetic."⁸⁷ The account of Ressler's life which emerges through this unanticipated combination occurs alongside the descriptions of natural code and the arguments for and against the curatorial nature of literature. The universality of the genetic code, and the varied forms of life which share this code, makes this repeating structure with varied forms an ideal model for Powers's narratives. Despite the unambiguous structure of the code itself, the repetitions of the same code in evolving and mutating organisms and micro-organisms leads to an imperfect cadence, thwarting a pre-determined map of growth. The emphasis on collaboration and propagation illuminates not only the inter-disciplinary structure and content of the text, but also the inter-personal relationships within the narrative.

Jan's reliance on seemingly objective records to provide structure within an at times chaotic world, is challenged by the changing perspectives on history which she gains an awareness of via the media and wider US society. The 'Question Board' Jan organises in the library encourages a different form of creativity and collaboration which eschews the forms of innovation and development promoted in the post-industrial US. Jan's inability to answer some of these questions undercuts her belief in a rational, fileable past. This board, "both living fossil and meta-mammal" (35), challenges Jan to search for new facts whilst undermining her desire to secure a finite answer for all questions. Powers succinctly describes the living curatorial past and the hybrid forms present within the interpretation of history. Jacques Derrida asserted that the archive was, "the experience of *memory* and the return to the *origin*, but also the *archaic* and *archaeological*, the memory or the dig...

⁸⁷ Barry Lewis, 'Thirty Two Short Paragraphs about *The Gold Bug Variations*' in Dempsey and Burn, *Intersections: Essays on Richard Powers*, 84.

the search for lost time.”⁸⁸ Cathy Caruth references Derrida in order to form the argument that archives engage with both subjective memory and historicity. Notably, historical events and societal narratives of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries often involve the destruction or creation of sites of remembrance. This is the result of a desire “that attempts to return to the past but to some extent always repeats and passes on, in its very act of interpretation, the ways in which the past has been erased.”⁸⁹ This notion of the archive as a site to recapture erased narratives is something which engages with regression and repetition whilst rewriting the present. Powers’s depiction of the protagonists’ pasts within this reflective narrative emphasises that history is not a static fixed form. History and the analysis of archival sources is constantly changing through its interpretation in a fleeting present context.

Powers’s depiction of varied archival, memory, and data stores considers how an object, sound, or event can lose its original meaning through replication within a different cultural context. Jan’s former partner, Keith Tuckwell, works within advertising and uses the repetitions within history which Jan posts on the ‘Today in History’ board for his advertising strategies: “Keith was building a truly bizarre strategy for selling microwave gourmet meals, using an ad I had discovered in the September 18, 1939, issue of *Time*: ‘Hitler Threatens Europe – but Betty Haven’s Husband’s Boss is Coming to Dinner and *That’s What Really Counts*.” (149). Keith’s advertising strategies repurpose archival sources, creating an alternative form of repetition to evince a sense of fear and nostalgia. Another campaign, featuring the U-2 shot of Cuba, takes on another narrative form once the overlay, “DO YOU KNOW WHAT THE OTHER GUY IS UP TO?” (313), is spread over the image. Keith asserts that “paranoia – our supreme erotic desire” is the motivation which compels consumers to purchase the product – “everyone secretly adores having his worst nightmares orchestrated.” (313). The use of the Cuban missile crisis to induce a trance-like state in the consumer and promote e-mail suggests the use of technology to create a surveillance state engages with pre-existing ideologies, fear, and historical narratives. The cut-up newspapers which Keith spreads out on the floor, whilst Jan tries to provide logical answers to impossible questions surrounding large-scale acts of devastation, depicts the intersecting yet markedly different approaches

⁸⁸ Jacques Derrida, *Mal d’ Archive: Une impression freudienne*, “Prière d’insérer” quoted in Cathy Caruth, *Literature in the Ashes of History* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014), 77.

⁸⁹ Caruth, 78.

to historical events taken by the two characters. These differing approaches to history, as a tool to manipulate a consumer or to provide reassurance in an unstable present, both interact with archival information and influence present societal behaviour. The entwined states of fear and desire associated with the controlled consumer and the streams of data which Ressler, Todd, Jan, and Keith all access within their professional roles, function as examples of the interwoven artificial patterns found within the post-industrial US that can induce a sense of stasis and a loss of agency. This sense of inertia is countered with forms of unexpected growth and persistent change, avoiding a fatalistic portrayal of contemporary US society .

Powers's inclusion of "the perpetual calendar" (7) suggests an infinitely recycling image of time and history within a "compressible eternity" (265). This choice of language creates a playful sense of ambiguity and re-assembles definite terms, describing infinity within a fixed form and condensing an inarticulable timeframe. Powers's use of language and Jan's library boards consistently undermines pre-conceived notions of time and form. The library is shown as a site of collaboration and change which contains more than static archives of knowledge. The increasing reliance on digital formats to store knowledge, and the seemingly obsolete nature of pre-existing data-stores, is challenged by Powers's depiction of the library as a place which surpasses a reliance on process-driven knowledge stores, fostering human ingenuity and collective engagements with the past. The condensed yet elongated depiction of a still-animated history thwarts an image of a post-Enlightenment-era US with an upward trajectory of development, divorced from antiquity.

The paintings and musical compositions which Powers references are fluctuating, ambiguous cultural symbols that undermine the near sighted promotion of human-made innovations and contemporary industry. These enduring symbols contrast the depiction of present national ideologies that promote technological advances and the accumulation of capital, enlarging the narrative's timeline and encompassing ancient portrayals of flawed progress. The image of the spiral-shaped, crumbling Tower of Babel represents the interlinked yet divided identity narratives and disintegrating forms of development present throughout human history. This depiction of a polyvocal society isolated within different windows, yet part of the same structure, reinforces the interconnected forms which exist in a precarious global society. The advent of the Promethean man, ascending closer to a

self-defined Heaven within crumbling tower, aligns destruction with invention. The twin influences hanging on the office wall of Toveh Botkin, Ressler's colleague at the University of Illinois, overtly link the motivations of two innovators whose designs are related to the proximity of creation to erasure. The photographic prints hanging on Botkin's wall of the musician Mahler and the chemist Kekulé, provide two examples of visionaries who engaged with similar life and death cycles whilst composing within different fields: "The latter dreamt one night of a snake rolling its tail in its mouth and woke with the structure of the benzene ring. The former composed... a staggeringly beautiful song cycle on the death of a child from scarlet fever." (115-6) The repeating images found within these references enlarge the depictions of progress, history, and eternity threaded throughout the text.

The varied portrayals of the proximity between enlightenment and annihilation provides an ahistorical commentary on the pursuit of knowledge and power in contemporary US society. The title of Chapter III, 'We are climbing Jacobs Ladder' (43) references the staircase to heaven which Jacob witnesses in a dream, and is also the title of a slave spiritual which first appeared between 1750 and 1825 before later being adopted by White Christians. This reference to emancipation, transcendence, and US history, highlights the suppression of multi-faceted histories in relation to intermedial reinterpretations of Biblical narratives. Conversely, a young Ressler views his secular goal of cracking the genetic code as the ultimate form of enlightenment and the height of human discovery: "he will give her the most beautiful bouquet imaginable... the top rung of Jacob's Ladder." (258) The original goal of acquiring this hidden knowledge is now tied to his dreams of attaining Jeanette's affection. This interwoven love-story creates an entangled image of desire and creates a looping timeline, subverting notions of a linear human history. Powers entwines varied aspirations and innovations and embeds subtle references to US master narratives into these depictions, highlighting the subjective and fallible motivations behind advancement. The notion of American Exceptionalism and the realisation of the US as an Edenic land is still pertinent to this twentieth-century image of an enlightened nation. Chris Jennings's assessment of the beliefs of nineteenth century secular Europeans who travelled to the US emphasises the ongoing relevance of this view: "They claimed that the final chapter of history, the top rung on the ladder of progress, would play out in the New World... North America

was not just an expanse of plains and mountains; it was a messiah made of land.”⁹⁰ The fusion of Enlightenment beliefs and enduring Biblical narratives haunt Ressler’s endeavours.

The significance of the ‘Goldberg Variations’ to Ressler is not only the similarity in the patterns which underlie varied permutating codes, but also the memories of his failed romance with Dr Jeanette Koss. The damaged vinyl ‘Goldberg’ disc holds physical traces of a previous listening experience and provides a tangible link between the elderly Ressler’s twin foci, music and memory: “the music radiates again, with only a few-additional scratch-induced mutations.” (257) Powers’s iconographic and sonic landscapes enable specific objects and compositions to function as temporal anchors, creating reflective moments in the protagonists’ lemniscate narrative. The final version of ‘Goldberg Variations’ heard by Ressler, recalls his past whilst remaining “a radical rethinking from beginning to end... the last notes of one spilling into the first notes of the next.” (636). Powers suggests that emerging re-interpretations of a pre-existing design can revive memories whilst also creating new layers, extending one creation indefinitely. The multiple timelines that emerge as a result of the varied recordings of one composition, in contrast with the specific historical context of Ressler’s time as a scientific researcher, highlight differing forms of growth. These interrelated developments reinforce the entangled webs between distinct eras and simultaneity, individuals and society, which Powers examines through the lens of the Cold War era US.

As the Cold War reaches its apex, the division between innovation and destruction has been increasingly blurred and a dystopian conclusion is anticipated during an escalation of mutually assured destruction: “pitched in a final footrace, not between Manichean political ideologies but between inventiveness and built-in insanity” (78). The narratives of innovation and the scenes of devastation which accompany the use of nuclear and chemical weapons during the Cold War era, create a spectral conflict and a sense of imminent disaster within the neocolonial US.⁹¹ The Apollo-Soyuz joint orbit on July 15th, 1975, is an event which Jan posts on

⁹⁰ Chris Jennings, *Paradise Now: The Story of American Utopianism*, Illustrated edition (New York: Random House, 2016), 6.

⁹¹ The use of Agent Orange during the Vietnam War and the Three Mile Island incident are just two examples of the impact of chemical warfare and nuclear meltdowns during this era. Whilst the threat of annihilation remained imminent, warfare occurred beyond US borders.

library board, hoping that this collaborative moment “had not come too late to save us from the rest of history.” (78) The forecasted conclusion to this conflict-ridden history stems from the mutual exploration of this new frontier following the end of the Vietnam War on April 30th, 1975, highlighting the Atomic Age acts of destruction bound to the ongoing pursuit of power and knowledge. In contrast with Powers’s depiction of translucent historical frames, Frank Ankersmit asserts that the moments in history which are promoted as sublime events involve an erasure or distancing from previous identities: “the intense historicization and narrativization taking place at the occasion of a sublime historical event may completely dissolve the historical identity of a previous period and replace it with a new one.”⁹² The airbrushed narratives of a luminous new dawn are undermined by Powers’s depiction of the interlinked designs and ideologies, from before and after the invention of the atomic bomb, echoing throughout the 1970s and 1980s. This sense of growth and decay, alongside an unbridgeable gap in time between the present and an often romanticised past, leads to the compulsion to repeat in conjunction with the urge to create change and re-define progress.

Todd’s fascination with the landscape artist Herri de Bles is given a contemporary context through Powers’s depictions of a present-day Armageddon. Herri de Bles, the subject of Todd’s original dissertation, painted scenes that involve apocalyptic sublime imagery. These landscapes depict an “immense, jagged, Manichean battleground between the real and the imagined” (341) with disaster on the periphery of the scene depicting the process of loss. These imagined moments of loss turn tragedy into a spectacle whilst blurring the boundaries between history and allegory. The interrelated depictions of art, individual memory, and US history, engage with varying forms of creation and suppression whilst creating an expansive odyssey through Ressler’s secretive past. The entwined roles of the artist and scientist are enhanced via the significance of the elusive de Bles to the narrative’s present context and the mysterious figure of Ressler. Todd’s desire to preserve the past of an enigmatic figure in the future is thwarted by the unbridgeable gap between representation and lived reality. Similarly, Ressler’s past cannot be identically recalled or reclaimed, despite repeatedly replaying ‘Goldberg Variations’: “Perhaps neither beauty... nor meaning, but something will not go over the bridge intact.” (352)

⁹² F. R. Ankersmit, *Sublime Historical Experience* (Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press, 2005), 365.

These attempts to recapture a lost moment in time align data, archival sources, seemingly objective code, and composition with an ineffable emotive response to persisting iterations of sublime experiences.

The desire to modify, and thereby dominate nature is examined by the entangled notions of development with which Powers engages: “The world is too well mapped; quadrants capture it all. Alchemy’s four elements, psychology’s four humours. What can a body do in its quartet of seasons but set fire to the familiar.” (264-5) The urge to finalise the unending narrative - to master an event or a history by destruction or conquest - is charted through this lemniscate image of history. Wulf Kansteiner states that “through the stages of animalism, magic, myth and enlightenment human beings developed more and more successful tools of representation and manipulation which allowed them to control their fear of nature.”⁹³ The diverse references included in *The Gold Bug Variations* encompass these forms of representation in relation to the promoted models of innovation in the late twentieth-century US.

The seemingly infinite quest for the ultimate form of mastery over life and death, in combination with the histories and compositions which haunt the present, augment the structure of Powers’s regenerative and interminable narrative. Despite the focus on an underlying coded structure in an increasingly automated and digitised age, it is the human responses to these accumulating codes which add a pivotal layer of unforeseen collaboration. These perpetually emerging and fading enmeshed narratives intersect with wider societal narratives, creating interlocking progressions: “that string of four base-pairs coding for all inheritance, desire, ambition, the naming-need itself – first love, forgiveness, frailty.” (127) Powers connects the cornerstones of the text to established and emerging human innovations and tragedies, explicitly linking this formative code to the protagonist’s twinned desires of knowledge and human connection. Despite chapters and canons creating controlled textual transitions and imitations, the role of the final aria and the seemingly immeasurable forms which emerge from four nucleotides emphasise that this is a history in process - an unpredictable ongoing event with moments of individual and group transformation. The variations on the theme of four develops without reaching a final resolution, challenging conventional images of progress.

⁹³ Kansteiner, ‘Genealogy of a Category Mistake’, 196.

Comparison

In *The Gold Bug Variations* and *Orfeo*, Powers creates a compelling image of the interlinked roles that art, science, and technology play in the promotion or subversion of hegemonic societal narratives. The protagonists in each text meld disciplines and create disruptive masterpieces. After Stuart Ressler abandons his work as a scientist, a man now haunted by a Bach composition and an unrealised future, he retreats from the world of scientific discovery. Ultimately, an elderly Ressler returns to coded compositions and inserts a melody into an ATM, recoding technology and creating an unanticipated collaboration after his death. Similarly, Peter Els, following a life punctuated by an unsatisfactory career as a musician and a flawed marriage, attempts to create an eternal masterpiece, melding organic and man-made forms. The twitter-based persona Els creates in response to his biohacking composition lives on beyond his failed creation, becoming part of an eternal digital space with seemingly endless variations. These overlapping innovations and occupations create interdisciplinary designs in each narrative. Powers blurs the divides between forms, portraying two protagonists who engage with varied creative media, science, and technology in their attempts to create or combine disparate codes, highlighting varying instances of repetition and innovation in US society. Although both texts encompass multiple forms of repetition and variation, the focus on the ambiguous ideal of progress anchors this proliferation of forms to one enduring theme.

The protagonist's memories of early childhood experiences and failed relationships are replayed alongside the traces of enduring US master narratives. Both individual and societal narratives are bound to the conflicted images of growth and decay, regression and repetition. In each narrative, Powers depicts pivotal events from the protagonists' formative years which helped to shape their individual perspective on time, knowledge, and design. In *The Gold Bug Variations* and *Orfeo*, both protagonists face loss at an early age. Ressler and Els experience the death of their fathers at the age of 12; this trauma subsequently manifests as part of their pursuit of success and perfected compositions. The profound loss which informs Ressler's and Els's desire for transcendence, leads to the construction of identity narratives that can never be satisfied. Both protagonists pursue careers which are

associated with their trauma and attempt to master or hack codes which form the base of multiplying, evolving forms of life.

On the same day that Ressler receives a set of encyclopaedias his father suffers a fatal myocardial infarction, linking the quest for knowledge to a traumatic event. Ressler's research remains bound to his father's expectations: "what the man killed himself trying unsuccessfully to get out: How wonderful, to have a child who might add to the endeavour." (GBV 135-6). The work of previous generations adds the burden of duty and familial guilt to Ressler's endeavours. These inherited expectations and traumas enhance the backdrop which shapes Ressler's pursuit of discovery, innovation, and progress. Powers engages with trauma theory and acknowledges its role in the depiction of Ressler's development: "Ressler had never harboured closet Lamarckism; social traumas experienced by the forefathers are not visited upon their son... his grandfather's life underground left its imprint." (GBV 121) Ressler remains conflicted about the extent to which his development is bound to his ancestors' hardships, devoting his life to the pursuit of changeable codes and resisting an inherited US labour narrative.

Similarly, following the unexpected death of his father, Els retreats into music and is transported via this medium into times beyond his immediate existence. The musical compositions in both narratives evince both a state of disassociation and transcendence. The significance of Mozart's 'Jupiter Symphony' to a recently bereaved Els provides some of the initial inspiration for his musical career.⁹⁴ Els traces the transcendent experiences associated with musical compositions to the first time he listened to the 'Jupiter Symphony', linking aesthetic experiences to his pursuit of eternity and the loss of his father. The unrevivable and unresolved past creates an "abyss in time," (O 115) which shadows the elderly Els's quest to realise a small victory over mortality. Robert Fink suggests that "musicking... is about relationships, not so much about those which actually exist in our lives as about those we desire to exist and long to experience."⁹⁵ However, Els's continual attempts to create a transcendent, perfected composition leads to strained interpersonal relationships and a disassociation from reality. The attempts to amend these relationships and shape unfolding future histories concludes as Els reunites with his

⁹⁴ Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, *Symphony No. 41*, 1788.

⁹⁵ Fink, *Repeating Ourselves*, 21.

daughter. The early instances of personal loss in both texts lead to an isolating pursuit of knowledge and creativity which eschews human networks. The protagonists work in near isolation before ultimately embracing the significance of shared experiences.

The protagonists' personal losses are situated within scenes of a global significance, creating an ebb and flow between individual and collective histories with overlapping accounts of pivotal events. The individual experiences of the protagonists are compounded by the effects of the Atomic Age, the Cold War, and present-day conflict. The memories of the death of Ressler's mother resurface amidst scenes of national and global significance: "only the nightmare of not being able to name what was happening remained lost until... the evening the U.S. fires its first rocket-powered atomic warhead." (GBV 121) However, the specific traumatic experiences that punctuate Ressler's and Els's childhoods differ from the cultural trauma associated with Cold War anxieties and the threat of annihilation. Similarly, the death of Els' father is not the equivalent to the cultural trauma experienced by the US citizens who were not directly impacted by the loss and devastation which occurred during the September 11th attacks. Alongside this focus on instances of early childhood trauma, it is important to avoid reducing the distinction between the individual and collective recollections of events within these specific eras. Wulf Kansteiner asserts that the overuse of the term cultural trauma has led to universalising and reductive views on trauma and that "through misappropriation, especially in the humanities, trauma has become a moral untruth."⁹⁶ Kansteiner's view of the over-prescription of trauma terminology engages with these depictions of cultural trauma and the anxiety inducing legacy of the Cold War and the implementation of the Patriot Act.

Ressler's and Els's traumatic experiences - which encourage their desire to master and engage with the search for eternity through self-created codes, align the search for perfected designs with trauma. These movements between rational empiricism and unquantifiable events further undermine the boundary between science and the humanities. The protagonists' compulsions to create something empowering, intangible, and permanent occur alongside references to varied articulations of national identity narratives in persuasive artwork. Rob Wilson's

⁹⁶ Kansteiner, 'Genealogy of a Category Mistake', 214.

definition of the American Sublime articulates why both individuals and a US hegemony would engage with this sublime tradition: “the sublime, by converting powerlessness and a lurking sense of self-diminishment – or historical guilt- into a conviction of dematerialised power awaiting national use, eventuated in a figure of ‘self-reliance.’”⁹⁷ The attempts to create a transcendent, potent experience stem from the suppression of diminishing events and/or traumatic histories.

Despite the similarities between these articulations of overwhelming sublime and traumatic experiences, it is important to note their differences. Kansteiner’s article, which examines the problematic work within the field of cultural trauma - and the resulting generalisation of trauma- emphasises the problems arising from expressions of the ineffable which rely upon parallels with trauma to articulate the emotions evinced through art and sublime experiences. Kansteiner states that “it is neither necessary nor advisable to express this essential dilemma of representation through the metaphor of trauma.... We have to acknowledge that the dilemma of representation and the distress of trauma never carry the same effects.”⁹⁸ The unrepresentable associated with the sublime, and the compulsion to repeat associated with the uncrossable divide between the past and present, are not equal to experiences of trauma. The argument that the overuse of cultural trauma has erased victims - whilst including the experiences of bystanders and perpetrators - is pertinent to the enduring US master narratives that mask oppositional voices. F. R. Ankersmit suggests that “trauma challenges our identity... whereas the sublime requires us to abandon a previous identity... trauma serves the cause of memory, and the sublime that of forgetting.”⁹⁹ Powers’s engagement with US history in tandem with intermediality, highlights instances of hegemonic narratives which mask traumas experienced by oppressed groups whilst promoting the notion of an American Utopia or American Exceptionalism.

The desire for a sense of mastery over natural codes and time, align Ressler’s and Els’s endeavours with creative traditions which depict problematic scenes of unparalleled innovation and awe. When Els refers to himself as “the Prophet of Beautiful Terror,” (O 206) the duality of the sublime is revealed. The beauty and

⁹⁷ Rob Wilson, *American Sublime: The Genealogy of a Poetic Genre* (Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1991), 5.

⁹⁸ Kansteiner, ‘Genealogy of a Category Mistake’, 205.

⁹⁹ Ankersmit, *Sublime Historical Experience*, 318.

vastness found in genetic code and the destructive ramifications of biohacking are the double-bind of this contemporary sublime experience. This representation of the legacy of the American Sublime emphasises that the desire to master a seemingly vast expanse, and the race to produce the ultimate human invention, can lead to scenes of annihilation. Ultimately, the inarticulate responses to art are not expressed through an association with trauma. The problem of representation is not solved through the metaphor of trauma, instead Powers encompasses two varied forms of repetition and ephemerality without minimising the distinction between these two responses to wholly different events. Powers contrasts the use of art to mask or endorse problematic narratives with polyvocal, multifaceted creative designs.

Orfeo

In *Orfeo*, Richard Powers entwines two seemingly opposed codes and creates a narrative which traces the interconnections between different eras, disciplines, and group identities. Through the recollections of the protagonist Peter Els, Powers depicts interrelated aesthetic forms, innovations, and societal change in the US following the end of World War Two until the early twenty-first century. Faced with fading hearing and the process of aging Els strives to create an immortal masterpiece which will lessen his inability to stop or control the flow of time. Whilst sequestered in his garage laboratory, Els, “the biohacker Bach,” (356) endeavours to place “*music files into living cells*” (344) and subsequently faces unanticipated public outrage upon the discovery of these potentially destructive experimentations. This alienated protagonist provides the subversive register against which the events in the latter half of the twentieth-century US resound. The interrelated histories imbued in both the individual and national unconscious are recalled throughout the text in response to external stimuli and music. Els’s personal history is accompanied by a soundtrack which illustrates his changing musical tastes alongside those popularised in the mainstream and counter-culture US during the late-twentieth and early-twenty first centuries. These references to musical compositions enhance the narrative image of the US during Els’s lifetime, charting a musical legacy which originates beyond US borders.

Els’s evocations of place are tied to his experiences of counter-cultural movements, Transcendentalism, and his ‘Whitmanian’ sense of self. The romanticised task of creating a song of himself is eventually overwhelmed by the state of fear and surveillance within this modern-day US society. This multiplying force overshadows Els’s misguided attempt to achieve an atemporal existence by perfecting a self-generating composition which joins together natural and man-made designs. The propagation of code and musical forms are related to bioterrorism and potentially harmful forms of progress: “Life fills the world with copies of itself. Music and viruses both trick the hosts into copying them.” (265) Powers suggests that the differences between imitative and original forms are almost indiscernible within the narrative’s anxiety-ridden present. Powers recreates mythic tales whilst engaging with a specific historical context, participating in the articulation of an abyss in time in relation to trauma and connecting this distance to unanticipated collaborations.

Dominick LaCapra's writing on historical trauma references fictional narratives which avoid a sense of closure or uplift and "enacts an unfinished, unfinalizable interplay of forces involving a series of substitutions without origin or ultimate referent."¹⁰⁰

Powers's use of transmedial references and interlocking codes opposes the compulsion to trace a narrative to a singular point; the abyss between origin and referent is expanded and its significance minimised. The varied narrative forms and persistent propagating codes expand on the desire of Els to recreate a form within a host which will be innovative and eternal.

The examination of the transcendent and imminent properties of music, tied to the Orphic myths and contemporary or classical compositional techniques, interweaves differing notions of time and experiences of spirituality. Powers engages with pre-existing compositions, imbuing *Orfeo* with the form and content of classical myth and Opera, whilst considering a reality beyond the narrative's contemporary era. The similarities to tragédie en musique, typically based on tales from classical mythology and usually consisting of five acts and an opening prologue, are apparent from the opening lines to the ambiguous ending of the text. This conclusion arguably follows the traditional format of this genre of French Opera where the concluding fifth act did not show a tragic death onstage. Roger Savage's assertion - "the distance separating modern and postmodern representations of the 'end of time' from the ritual repetition of cosmogenic acts sets music's mimetic responses to time's inscrutable character against the mythico-religious experience of transcendence" - is undermined by Powers's fusion of distinct genres and beliefs.¹⁰¹

In contrast with Savage's assessment of modern and postmodern music's imitation of the opaque nature of time, Ernst Bloch argues that the suprasensory within opera allows another image of reality and time to emerge: "That mythical music-space of the highest reality, which transcendent opera shares with the drama of grace... depletes the spiritual ontologies beyond any possible world-destiny."¹⁰² Powers's expansive image of myth and music genres connects varied notions of time and finality, binding these notions of transcendent experiences. Brendan Dempsey's assessment of the metamodernist approach to the empirical and meta-

¹⁰⁰ Dominick LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014), 55.

¹⁰¹ Roger W.H. Savage, *Music, Time, and Its Other* (New York: Routledge, 2019), 163.

¹⁰² Ernst Bloch, *The Spirit of Utopia*, trans. Anthony A. Nassar (Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press, [1923] 2000), 103-4.

physical worlds - "An informed 'naivete' a sense of transcendence arising out of and ultimately held in check by the acknowledged immanent frame" - is articulated in this portrayal of a constraining sense of immanence conflicting with a romanticised notion of transcendence.¹⁰³ Despite the potential to function as a transportative experience, the operatic quality of Els's tragedy remains bound to ongoing events, mirroring the reception of Els's and Richard Bonner's opera which was overshadowed by the Waco Siege. The desire "to break free of time and hear the future" (2) is unrealisable. Els articulates his yearning for eternity, as the creation of a "downbeat of a little infinity" (369). This ambiguous choice of language reveals the duality in his chosen role; Els becomes a composer who attempts to conduct the creation of a small instance of immortality and instead creates his ultimate decline. The public are not moved by Els's haphazard attempts to gain a place in eternity.

The references to the Orphic Myth, and the break in Els's memories to include the tale of the four prisoner-of-war musicians, alters these pre-existing narratives in reference to the contemporary biohacking narrative. The 'Red Scare' beginnings of narrative in the post-World War Two US are traced to modern day anxieties. The enactment of the Patriot Act in 2001, following the September 11th and Anthrax attacks, alongside the rise of social media are pivotal to the reception Els's endeavour receives. Changing modes of cultural production are explored alongside scientific innovation, linking the events and processes which shaped Western history in the latter half of the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. The malevolent scientist reappears in a modern form, combining music and biohacking composition techniques to create a soundtrack for the contemporary era. Els's final attempt at creating an eternal masterpiece suggestively combines two forms of discovery together; science, "music's mirror fork," (330) is infused with a soundless composition, creating a potentially destructive combination. The importance of cultural 'soft-powers' in the Cold War years, led to the increased use of music as an ideological weapon alongside the ongoing accrual of atomic weapons. Els's decision to modify the design of bacteria and implant his own creation within a naturally occurring code overtly weaponizes music, emphasising that art - much like scientific or technological innovations - can be an agent for destructive or liberatory societal

¹⁰³ Brendan Dempsey, '[Re]construction: Metamodern transcendence and the return of myth', quoted in, Bargár, 'The Modern, the Postmodern, and... the Metamodern?', 5.

change. This narrative strategy highlights the differing forms of innovation and tradition harnessed by hegemonic state ideologies whilst interlinking incongruent designs.

The process which Terry Riley referred to as the time-lag accumulator, where tape technology is utilised to explore the repeating yet changing nature of sound, is similarly explored by Powers via this textual medium.¹⁰⁴ Powers's lemniscate narrative depicts repeating histories, and associated identity narratives, across a range of media in relation to emerging spliced compositions. The silent tones Els produces by playing the cloud chamber bowls - "in some America deep in his neocortex, he can hear every rising pitch the mute bowls make" (135) - are aligned with the silent histories which inform the quasi-choral US narratives that accompany Els's descent. Cloud chamber bowls are a musical instrument first built in 1950 by Harry Partch. Partch sourced the pyrex bowls used to make the instrument from the Berkley Radiation Laboratory. The indirect reference to the Manhattan project and the workplace of J. Robert Oppenheimer, highlights the expansive legacy of the 'destroyer of worlds' which is explored throughout Powers's texts. The interlinked depictions of scientific and musical innovations occur within histories scattered with instances of conflict and catastrophic change. This melding of legacies and forms once again creates a polyvocal narrative, fusing interdisciplinary and transmedial creations with flawed visions of progress.

Despite being unable to witness the composition, and without the knowledge that Els never achieved his goal, the ongoing performance is viewed by the public as both a threat and an innovative creation. The final line, "and at last you will hear how this piece goes," (369) emphasises the opacity of Els's closing act by leaving anticipation in this finale. The ambiguity in the perceived form of the "bud vial," (369) represents the danger in attempting to create something, "like a rose that nobody knows" (207). The use of a familiar symbol to represent Els's motivation to create a familiar yet innovative form is representative of Powers's narrative choices throughout the text. The references to well-established literary and musical genres are tailored to *Orfeo's* specific context. Powers engages with the legacy of Orpheus, a man who appears in varied mythologies whose musical skills allowed him to charm

¹⁰⁴ "The first machine plays something pre-recorded and the second records what has just been played. Then the first plays back what is newly recorded and the second records again. At each step in the process, the textures grow progressively denser." *Minimalism*, 36.

humans, Gods, and nature, and creates another version of this fictional figure.¹⁰⁵ Varied myths include depictions of Orpheus as a gifted musician able to descend to the underworld, a man ripped apart during Bacchic rites by the Thracian women, and a decapitated man still singing at the mouth of the river Meles. Ultimately Orpheus' soul continued to sing at the Elysian fields and became linked with the founding of the Eleusinian mysteries. In *Orpheus: The Song of Life*, Ann Wroe explores the enduring legacy of Orpheus and the unclear roots of this mythology. Wroe argues that Orpheus "has never left men's consciousness... but it is a strange sort of haunting... he has no certain roots, but keeps returning."¹⁰⁶ The ambiguity in Orpheus's role and his fluctuating form is something with which Powers engages in his depiction of Els, permutating mythology, and the spectral figure of music. The Orphic myths which partly inform the depiction of Els, engage with the timeless nature of mythic narratives in relation to the paradox of progress in a post 9/11 setting. The journey into the underworld of Els's psyche and the past of a nation at the beginning of a new century, explores themes of change and regeneration without a definitive end. The transmedial narratives embedded into the collective and individual unconscious are constrained by the social climate following the September 11th attacks.

Powers creates an initially detached view of Peter Els's downfall as a tragic performance occurring within early twenty-first century US suburbia through a series of stage directions - "an overture" (1) in the third person. Els's assertion that "the times would never be normal again," (175) stresses the importance of time to an elderly alienated protagonist whilst drawing the reader's attention to the era of change in which the narrative is set. The threat of further acts of terrorism and the Patriot Act informs the state and public response to Els's misguided experiments: "A *bipartisan Washington commission on WMDs and terrorism predicts a major bioterror attack.*" (266) The resulting changes to public privacy are accompanied by re-engagements with a mythic national identity, exposing the repetition of familiar narratives and nostalgia which can occur following a cultural trauma. Els's desire to revisit the past and alter the projected future creates a lemniscate image of history which corresponds with the matrix of interwoven responses to this cultural trauma.

¹⁰⁵ The earliest certain date for a depiction of Orpheus comes from the image of a man and a lyre with the lettering 'hail Orpheus' found on a Greek vase which has been dated to the 6th century BCE.

¹⁰⁶ Ann Wroe, *Orpheus: The Song of Life* (Pimlico, 2012), 7.

Powers emphasises the insidious ideologies which shape the climate of fear via the depiction of a pervasive yet soundless composition: “Music to panic a whole country. A thing of silence and nothingness. Required listening.” (345) The limits placed on the freedom of expression in the US after the events of September 11th, alongside the culture of fear which has permeated the country, are explored through the responses to Els’s creation. This claustrophobic surveillance state and instances of individualistic designs are woven together, producing two ways of viewing one man and one country undergoing irreversible change. Powers has stated that his focus is on “neither factual associations about the world nor mere stories about self-contained individuals. What I want to do is show the way in which setting and narrative invention are reciprocal processes constantly reinforcing each other.”¹⁰⁷ The context in which Els’s story unfolds affects the way the audience views Els’s compositions and his chosen creative medium. Els acknowledges this by creating TerrorChord, an online persona that provides commentary on the presumed anxieties of his audience. The role of mythmaking in the twenty-first century is explored through Els’s performance as his alter-ego, TerrorChord.

Els’ quest for eternity via a perfected musical masterpiece, participates in the return to a mythic past and unfulfilled narratives which are traced throughout the text. The reliance on enduring utopian narratives to shape and order a US history are revealed through the myth-making tendencies of society in the narrative’s present. Savage elaborates on the enduring societal need for myth and highlights the role which music plays in reviving this ahistorical experience: “barred from the return to the time of myth by the world’s demystification, explorations into the difference between time and its other take the form of fictive variations of eternity ‘experiences.’”¹⁰⁸. The significance of music, in this sense, lies in its ability to engender a sense of eternity in a demystified Western world. However, the intrusive commentary of TerrorChord emphasises that the seemingly rational post-enlightenment US still participates in the creation of mythic figures beyond musical compositions. The collective narratives associated with US identity engage with a myth-making impulse which Els channels, creating a legacy based on an illusion.

¹⁰⁷ Jian Sun, ‘Fictional Collisions: Richard Powers on Hybrid Narrative and the Art of Stereoscopic Storytelling’, *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* 54, no. 4 (2 October 2013): 335–45, 336.

¹⁰⁸ Savage, *Music, Time, and Its Other*, 166.

Els' personal history is partially erased and re-formulated by TerrorChord's Twitter posts. This testimony is included in bounded text and forms an alternate version of events, compounding this nonlinear recollective narrative further. This alternative version of events highlights the fallacy of pure information in the digital age. The potential for a perfected immortality to arise from technological improvements is paired with emerging forms of artistic production, questioning these supposedly objective innovations. TerrorChord's narration during this unfolding drama emphasises that social media, and the easily accessible images of an unfolding history, distance the viewer from the reality behind the spectacle. The reception his efforts receive helps to shape his identity, feeding into the public sense of panic as they watch "the cycling images in narcotic dread" (317). The anticipated "coming reconstruction from pure information, of everyone who ever lived" (216) is undermined by Els's online persona. Although the facts and fictions of Els's two identity narratives are not clearly defined, the two unfurling stories of one man's descent necessarily impact upon the form each other takes.

Powers depicts the socio-political contexts for mythmaking in the narrative's present as Els engages in the process of creating a mythic account of his actions as part of a spiralling media frenzy. The opening staging of the unfolding scenes, "in the tenth year of an altered world," (1) contains the only reference to the narrative's immediate historical context; the spectre of the events of September 11th and what has preceded this time remains. Frank Ankersmit considers myths to be a narrative form which creates a divide between "a pre-historical world of a perennial and quasi-natural stability from the world of change... myths are liminal phenomena, they most typically focus on the boundary of separating time from what preceded time."¹⁰⁹ In contrast, the need to regain a sense of potency and security in this post September 11th society, leads to the revival of pre-existing US myths and exposes the porous boundary between the quasi-mythical US narratives and an unstable, changed reality. The focus on a protagonist who is seeking to defy mortality during a time of transition, exposes two forms of myth making still pertinent to twenty-first century society. Els will live on as a mythologised individual, an on-line urban legend telling of an alienated man who sought to cast society into the underworld through his dangerous experimentations with sound and science.

¹⁰⁹ Ankersmit, *Sublime Historical Experience*, 364.

The desire to reach a state of immortality and this rapid rise of a mythic persona is facilitated via the presence of the digital space and influence of social media. The discovery of his DIY lab thrusts Els into the public eye, providing him with a space where he can interact with a mass audience; these social media interactions as TerrorChord occur within “the world’s largest auditorium” (354). This attempt to create an unprecedented art form induces a negative reaction from the majority. This hyper-visibility within contemporary US society provides a form of digital eternity, as opposed to the organic self-generating code which Els sought to imitate. The inorganic reproducing performance of a virtuoso biohacker identity, “the message sets out into the biosphere, where it will live and copy itself for a while” (359), is more fully realised than the manipulated code of Serratia that Els never managed to produce. The image of the internet as a web of objective information and connectivity is undermined by Els’s artificial performance.

The fusion of the Patriot Act and the rise of social media creates a veil behind which Els performs. Powers emphasises the unreality of social media whilst allowing Els to partly narrate and predict his own tragic demise. Kathryn Hume argues that the violent ending to Orpheus’s life in some Greek mythologies adds value to his tale. Hume contends that Els’s final composition gains potency through this intertextual reference and the similar narrative conclusion functions as “a protest against the government’s misuse of power, a protest, however that necessitates Els’s own death.”¹¹⁰ The Bacchanalian demise Els faces at the hands of the frenzied media and law enforcement leads to the rending of his identity. However, it remains unclear if Els’s final act results in his death, or even if this act is intended as a form of protest. The ambiguity of the final scenes could suggest that the extreme ordering of our lives - an Apollonian drive taken to the extreme - has resulted in a form of chaos, a Dionysian Bacchic ritual permutated within this contemporary setting. Eventually the memories of Peter Els as a father and composer will fade, but the reconstruction of Els through his last staged reality will grant him a place in a digital eternity.

Ultimately, the response to Els’s flawed creation overwhelms his intended performance and the spectre of a looming contemporary threat transforms his endeavours into a self-conscious performance on a magnified digital stage. Although

¹¹⁰ Kathryn Hume, ‘Novelty, Pattern, and Force in Richard Powers’s *Orfeo*’, *Orbit: A Journal of American Literature* 5, no. 1 (2017): 1–19, 9.

Powers is not explicit in his examination of the ramifications of cultural trauma, the role of electronic media in Els's unofficial trial engages with the aftereffects of an extensively televised event of terrorism. Wulf Kansteiner investigates the concept of cultural trauma and the idea of mass trauma and suggests that cultural trauma can be a useful model if, "we can show theoretically and/or empirically how the interplay between everyday life and electronic media produces something akin to trauma on a collective scale."¹¹¹ The images of the September 11th attacks circulated rapidly via mass media and suffused the national imagination with unresolved anxiety over the possibility of future terrorist attacks. The identity of Els is similarly mediated via a digital mass media space, becoming a cautionary tale for the large-scale hegemonic narratives which have the ability to stabilise or splinter a ruptured society.

Judie Newman's study on utopias in contemporary US fiction explores the differing reactions in the aftermath of September 11th and the role the media and the US government played in shaping these views. One commentator, Rebecca Solnit, reported that after the initial days of group cohesion, people were "overwhelmed by the Bush administration's encouragement to people to stay home... spy on their neighbours, live in fear of further attacks."¹¹² Conversely, Naomi Klein argued that after 9/11 local communities were not working together but instead experienced, "profound disorientation... and collective regression."¹¹³ The potential for reform and change, in Klein's opinion, began following this initial shock, whilst Solnit suggests that hegemonic powers soon regain control and reliance on familiar patterns of pacification and consumption resumes. The patterns of repetition present in the text frame collective and personal traumas as events which act as the catalyst for moments of compulsive regression and repetition whilst also facilitating moments to consider reform. A reaction to a realization of '2 Sounds' in April 1960 by La Monte Young and Terry Riley similarly emphasises the response of an audience to an unexpected experience: "Young dragged a gong across the floor, while Riley rammed a garbage-can against a wall. This time the audience began to curse loudly; some listeners, in an oddly misdirected act of self-defence, began to sing Star-Spangled Banner."¹¹⁴ The potency of cultural symbols is highlighted through the

¹¹¹ Kansteiner, 'Genealogy of a Category Mistake', 208.

¹¹² Judie Newman, *Utopia and Terror in Contemporary American Fiction: 21* (New York: Routledge, 2013), 131.

¹¹³ Newman, 131.

¹¹⁴ K. Robert Schwarz, *Minimalism* (London: Phaidon Press, 2008), 30.

audience's reaction to an unexpected sensory experience, the potential for danger to result in a reliance on pre-established comforting forms is something which multiple art forms have explored. Powers's balances these two approaches to large scale disaster in the text, without promoting one form of response over another: once Els has completed his personal pilgrimage during this time of upheaval, he moves beyond an initial state of regression to the desire to facilitate change and collaboration alongside his daughter.

Following a large-scale, televised act of terrorism the nostalgia for the mythologised past provides a comforting sense of coherence and an image of a familiar US. Chris Jennings's study of utopian movements in the US from the nineteenth century onwards explores the return to the enduring myths of the past in the twenty-first century: "Today, rather than considering idealized futures we are more likely to look longingly (and selectively) over our shoulder. Americans in particular have made our brief past the repository of all value and virtue – a Kodachrome fantasy of thrift, fresh air, honest labor, and various great generations."¹¹⁵ Els articulates this misplaced yearning for an unattainable past during his personal odyssey through the US landscape: "the key to re-enchantment still lay in walking backward into the future." (97) This individual pilgrimage through a personal history is relayed against a wider US socio-historical backdrop, highlighting a wider societal reliance on nostalgia when facing a crisis of disempowerment within the present. The romanticised Arcadian US reappears within these contemporary desires for a stable, utopian future. Wilson's definition of the American Sublime is pertinent to the depictions of regressive societal narratives which rely on enduring mythic pasts. Wilson argues that "this idea of the North American landscape... as a place of self-enlargement if not self-abolishment, has haunted the bliss-laden imagination of American poets like an anonymous refrain."¹¹⁶ Although the image of the US promoted by the American Sublime does not correspond with Els's pilgrimage through his memories of his life in the US, he initially relies upon a similar revisional history and romanticised past to gain a renewed sense of potency in the present. The comparable compulsion to reprise pre-existing narratives, reshape an account of history, and influence future change, aligns fragmented individual and

¹¹⁵ Jennings, *Paradise Now*, 382.

¹¹⁶ Rob Wilson, *American Sublime: The Genealogy of a Poetic Genre* (Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1991), 20.

collective identities. However, the tendency to retreat during times of uncertainty into familiar images differs for long-established mythologised US histories which often reinforce problematic legacies at the expense of collective change and a recognition of the past. The potential for disaster to result in social reform, or regression into familiar ideals, is portrayed through Powers's engagement with a range of artistic media and creative legacies.

The journey through Els's reconstructed past and his eventual reunion with his daughter are central to the narrative's figure-of-eight temporal frame - revising memories whilst imagining a future legacy. This narrative structure is enhanced by the Els's musically-infused vocabulary which articulates a similar lemniscate perception of time, conjuring an image of multilinear movements of sound through infinite time. The desire to halt the passage of sequential time and gain a sense of immortality through the creation of a lemniscate musical form, leads to the pursuit of a spliced composition that would restructure an organic form: "Music forecasts the past, recalls the Future. Now and then difference falls away... One abiding rhythm, present and always, and you're free." (28) Els's desire to fuse organic and man-made designs and produce a voiceless and all-pervasive act of self-composition undermines a Western notion of linear time. Tim Ingold traces the perception of the line through differing eras and explains that, "although the idea of a straight line as a connection between two points goes back more than two millennia... it was not until the Renaissance that it began to assume the dominance in our thinking about causes, effects and their relations that it does today."¹¹⁷ This perception of the temporal frame surrounding histories as linear is challenged through the structure and content of the narrative. Roger Savage argues that "music's evocation of a super-temporal reality that exceeds or transcends our ordinary experiences of time refigures time's ultimate unrepresentability in answer to our fundamental inability to constitute or master time."¹¹⁸ Powers's references to melody and compositional techniques alongside historical narratives, explores the unrepresentability of time and enhances the text's evocation of a seemingly infinite non-linear temporality.

Powers creates rematerializing textual layers which illuminate repeating histories and oppressive national identities. The accumulation of these layers

¹¹⁷ Tim Ingold, *Lines* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2016), 5.

¹¹⁸ Savage, *Music, Time, and Its Other*, 162.

enhances the lemniscate structure of *Orfeo* and incorporates a wider model of the social landscape of the early-twentieth-century US into the text. The insertion of these narratives creates multiple interconnected timelines within the trajectory of Els's life. This enlarged timeline surpasses Els's memories and engages with multiple layers of history. World War Two is portrayed as a pivotal performance, a re-birth through destruction and chaos which leads to "the next worlds debut," (113) signalling the latter half of the twentieth century, and Els's birth. Similarly, the fall of the Berlin Wall (1989) is described as one of the "driving harmonies" (272) of the early nineties and is linked to ongoing arrangements of societal and individual narratives. The role art plays within these histories is emphasised by the overt musicality of the text and Powers's intermedial references. These performances within performances reveal the amalgamation of wider-anxieties and notions of progress that shape a permutating US national identity.

The places, times, and histories which Powers explores in his narrative create both discord and harmony as they overlap each other. As these entwined histories unfold, the narrative revisits physical places from Els's past in the US and Europe to create accumulating place and identity narratives: "Each measure he wrote changed the ones he'd already written, and he felt them all, already being altered by the uniformed noises of the years to come." (62) The image of repeating variable creations is accentuated by Els's personal history. This odyssey is accompanied by the compositions which Powers enmeshes into this journey. Music that "blurred the line between prophecy and recall" (38) is central to the depiction of time in *Orfeo*, creating lemniscate moments in history which temporarily transcend the present whilst tracing moments of unity and conflict throughout history. Powers's seemingly incongruous juxtapositions of historical events creates narrative moments which lead to unexpected comparisons within an expansive image of history. These coexisting yet fused histories create a multi-layered narrative which refutes a linear notion of time. The lemniscate temporal structure which illuminates the discord in Els's present similarly reveals moments of cohesion within a turbulent past: "The two lines clasp and clutch, throwing off sparks of consonance and dissonance." (246) The past and potential futures interact with each other, depicting varied compositions in relation to this unstable present. Most notably, the break in Els's narrative to focus on the lives of musicians in a German prisoner of war camp during World War Two explores an alternative use of recognisable forms. In this instance, Powers depicts

the suspension of an oppressive role within a nightmarish present through the reclamation of a familiar identity: “Messiaen reworks from memory two pieces that he wrote in another life... to these he adds sounds from a remembered future.” (111) Despite the potential for innovation to cause unrest and alienation, the use of music to temporarily liberate an individual is implanted into the narrative, creating a counterpoint to Els’s Bioterrorist identity.

Olivier Messiaen and his fellow musicians are able to find a momentary respite from their status as prisoners through their role as a quartet playing chamber music. Their performance of the ‘Quartet for The End of Time’ on the 15th of January 1941, suspends the present, reengages with an ahistorical Biblical past, and gives voice to a hopeful transcendent future.¹¹⁹ The chamber music played by this quartet suspends linear time for both the audience and performers, simultaneously recalling a Biblical prophecy within a classical music tradition, whilst foreshadowing the coming future.¹²⁰ The possibility for music to act as a cultural panacea emphasises that beyond repetitive refrains, there are voices within recurring histories of conflict who yearn for an atemporal release from their present oppressive trajectory. However, we are ultimately reminded that the musicians, whose “jagged lines struggle to defeat the present and put an end to time,” (112) remain bound to the linear present and their own mortality. Art, as either an avant-garde arrangement or a return to simpler ‘purer’ forms, cannot overpower the conflicts which shape the day-to-day reality for the prisoners of war or for Els.

Despite the inability of art to fundamentally change the immediate present, Powers consistently highlights the role of the artist as a commentator on present events with the potential power to influence the future. A range of innovative composers are linked to Els’s character, providing contemporary and historic instances of performers who have impacted upon the shape of the cultural landscape. Despite their different approaches to composition, Powers has stated that John Cage, Phillip Glass, Steve Reich, and Harry Partch were all used to shape the character of Els. Powers elaborated on this choice, contending that these musicians

¹¹⁹ Olivier Messiaen, *Quatuor Pour La Fin Du Temps*, 1941.

¹²⁰ “At the end of the finished score, he wrote an inscription alluding to the book of Revelation. “In homage to the Angel of the Apocalypse, who lifts his hand toward heaven, saying, ‘There shall be time no longer.’ ... Like Britten in *The Holy Sonnets of John Donne*, Messiaen responded to the mechanized insanity of the Second World War by offering up the purest, simplest sounds he could find.” Alex Ross, *The Rest Is Noise: Listening to the Twentieth Century* (London: Harper Perennial, 2009), 390-391.

all share in “their insistence that the language of music can be extended into whole new places... all four of them asked people to listen again... and to hear it as beautiful and new.”¹²¹ Significantly, Philip Glass is seen as self-consciously employing nineteenth century forms, as McClary discusses: “Before us glimmers once again the Romantic Soul.... Alienation, memories of lost arcadia, and longing for utopia.”¹²² McClary goes on to assess how Glass dismantles these traditions: “For no sooner does a sentimental gesture tug our sleeve than it becomes somehow decentered. Most often this decentering results from the constant, mechanical repetitions that govern the unfolding composition.”¹²³ The decentering of traditions and narratives is facilitated via Powers’s variations on pre-existing forms, revealing their metamorphosis within this twenty-first century setting. Powers similarly evokes traditions associated with Romanticism and an idealised national identity, purposefully revealing the construction of the entangled form of *Orfeo* and the extensive influence of American master narratives. The retreat into the familiar is juxtaposed with images of avant-garde arrangements and Els’s flawed attempt at biohacking. These instances of seemingly new creations engender a panicked response from the public, highlighting an ongoing reliance on familiar fantasies.

The use of a range of natural codes and man-made compositions to engender new approaches to sonority engages with both classical and experimental music traditions whilst exploring the reception of these emerging compositions within wider society. Els rallies against history from “Plato to Pyongyang, the endless need to legislate sounds,” (282) and rejects the recognizable in favour of unconventional and avant-garde art forms. The decision to align himself with persecuted figures from history leads to the short-sighted dismissal of his potentially dangerous attempt at biohacking as harmless innovation, rejected purely due to oppressive legislation. Richard Bonner, Els’s long-time collaborator and friend, similarly embraces unexpected or disruptive art forms. Bonner’s motto, “zig when they expect you to zag”, articulates his fidelity to the avant-garde, the influence of experimental music, and his ongoing refusal to engage with traditional forms of anticipation and recall.

¹²¹ Allan Varda, ‘A Fugitive Language: An Interview with Richard Powers | Rain Taxi’, <https://www.raintaxi.com/a-fugitive-language-an-interview-with-richard-powers/>, 7-8.

¹²² Susan McClary, *Conventional Wisdom: The Content of Musical Form*, New Ed (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 2001), 143.

¹²³ McClary, 143.

The focus on the avant-garde counter-cultural movement Els engages with, and which his co-creator, Bonner, continues to pursue in old age, signals the changing approaches to Western notions of time and tonality. This movement away from a Euro-centric Enlightenment and Modernism to Postmodernism and beyond, occurs whilst persisting traces of usable past traditions appear throughout the text.

However, this desire to create art beyond pre-established traditions and external reality is undermined by the collision of Els and Bonner's Opera based on the Siege of Münster with the shooting at the Waco compound on the evening before their debut. The similarities in the fate of these purportedly utopian religious communities intersect with Els and Bonner's own idealistic pursuits. Neither Els's retreat into a distant history nor Bonner's attempts to create something outrageous, detached from present reality and recall, are portrayed as achievable strategies for society or musical arrangements. McClary's assessment of the impossibility of removing traces of an interrelated form from contemporary movements is pertinent to Els' and Bonner's shortcomings: "despite these Modernist attempts at weeding out all traces of its Other, the paradox remains that atonal projects themselves derive meaning from tonality."¹²⁴ Despite an engagement with the avant-garde movements which influenced Els's musical style, the narrative avoids being restricted to purely generating action or a directional progression.¹²⁵ Instead, this lemniscate view of history subverts a linear image of development and complicates compositional techniques that engender a sense of recall and anticipation, without creating a narrative of pure process.

The events which shape US society in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries provide the backdrop to Els's compositions, whilst enduring pre- and post-Enlightenment traditions frame these developments. The references to the Münster Rebellion, World War Two, and Walt Whitman's 'Song of Myself' provide examples of the historical events and creative forms which continue to impact upon identity narratives in Els's present day. These returns, re-examining former phases to engender a new becoming, emphasise the changing direction national identity narratives can take. The impression that development occurs in a unilinear direction

¹²⁴ McClary, 141.

¹²⁵ Fink provides Michael Nyman and Stephen Meyer as examples of two critics who believed in, "The absolute division between an experimental avant-garde and... 'modernist' compositional ideology... experimental music replaces the teleology the 'time-object' with the anti-teleology of process." Fink, *Repeating Ourselves*, 33.

is undermined through Powers's engagements with pre-existing cultural forms which highlight the enduring legacy of cultural symbols within the US socio-political landscape. Wilson asserts that, "icons of national sublimity are still being summoned to recycle cultural capital and to renew international profits... reconnecting the political to the symbolic."¹²⁶ Wilson's view of the continued relevance of the American Sublime to late-capitalist US society is pertinent to the depiction of re-assembled histories and arrangements in *Orfeo*.

The "sampled, chopped up, looped, and reassembled song quilts that are again all the rage" (265) in Els's present are an example of the interwoven relationship between the restyled compositions and histories which can undermine or promote contemporary hegemonic US identity narratives. These reproductions or reworked designs create innovative perspectives on pre-existing material in the present, exemplifying the possibility for future change based on enduring narratives. Els's ex-wife, Maddy, creates intricate quilts - a tangible example of a regenerative design and another model for creating something new based on pre-established meaning. In contrast with Els's attempts to recapture the past and create an infinite 'now' through an ever-expanding biohacking masterpiece, quilting, sampled songs, and retrospective or speculative histories reassemble and alter pre-existing materials without purely catastrophic results. Els's isolating, obsessive pursuit of a perfected masterpiece leads to the end of his marriage and Maddy's quilting is ultimately re-used to cover Els's dead dog. This symbolic burial is the catalyst for Els's exilic flight through this spectral US landscape, aligning discarded collaborations and patchwork creations with multiple forms of loss.

Alongside the influence of individuals and cultural ideologies on the shape of Els's ideal compositions and collaborations, Powers explores the ramifications of aging on the perception of sound and time. This recollective narrative of an elderly fugitive allows for repetitions in material with an increasing sense of urgency and temporal flux. As Els's hearing declines, his desire to create a lasting yet silent masterpiece highlights his changing relationship with sound and mortality. The use of cloud chamber bowls, Serratia, and the changing experiences of the sounds around him, explore Innovation, change, and decay in tandem. These artificial and organic soundscapes engage with numerous forms of repetition and development. The

¹²⁶ Wilson, 'Techno-Euphoria and the Discourse of the American Sublime', 216-8.

potential outcomes of collaboration across natural and man-made boundaries is threaded throughout these ongoing innovations. Els's desire for a "ring of thanksgiving with no beginning or end... music for forever and for no one," (333) finds form in his attempted fusion of organic and inorganic code which would remain silently imbued in an undetermined future. This reference to a non-denominational national space, the Thanks-Giving Shrine and the Court of All Nations in Dallas Texas, alongside the US Thanksgiving tradition, emphasises the range of inclusive or restrictive spaces which emerged in US society in response to a founding history that involved genocide and colonialism. The desire to create an inclusive atemporal composition is repeatedly shown to be an impossible pursuit through the references to history embedded in these idealised configurations. These subjective histories multiply, and the modes of recall which spark Els's memories of events alter, as technological innovations lead to the advent of a digital space with a globally connected community. Although Els's memories and fading vitality provide his personal motivation for an all-encompassing yet transcendent performance, the technological advancements and popular ideologies of each era depicted in the narrative necessarily impact upon Els's musical arrangements and notions of time.

The technology employed in the creation of music in the late-twentieth century allows databases to be accessed remotely and songs to be instantly replayed. Memory is changing in form, massive databases of information can be stored and easily accessed, and the recollection of songs and past events becomes secondary to the pure data associated with the internet age. The young students Els meets are surrounded by the sonic ghosts of their predecessors in a more apparent and instantaneous fashion. In a similar style to Powers's own narrative content, these students place samples within their compositions and merge old and new sounds. The past is revived within "technology that turns an average tunesmith into Orpheus." (319) The perception that this technology allows the revival of forms from the musical underworld with an unparalleled finesse is refuted via the references to a range of musicians who predate these innovations. Els's reaction to these new forms of composition, "you children are like Gods," (319) emphasises the mythological and quasi-spiritual undertones to these advancements; the spectre of the Promethean man emerges in this digital age. The potency granted to the students within this era, who can recall the past, and generate spliced compositions with ease, is indicative of the changing, promoted forms of recall in an increasingly digitised era.

Despite the perception that individual autonomy has risen in this digital age, the response to TerrorChord and the presence of state sanctioned forces within this space undermines the parallels made with deities. Lizzie O'Shea warns against the notion of a digital revolution where the flaws of the past have ceased to influence the shape of this emerging frontier. O'Shea explores the collaborative and restrictive qualities of the digital space and emphasises the ongoing influence of socio-economic factors: "Technology is revolutionizing how we organize production, reproduction and consumption. These changes also contain revolutionary potential... or struggle to find a form under capitalism."¹²⁷ The increasingly rapid commodification and circulation of artistic works within virtual spaces leads to artists losing further control of their designs. Powers's earlier short story, 'Modulation', expands upon this theme, depicting a bug spread via an MP3 file which leads to devices playing a piece of music in an innovative, overwhelming style.¹²⁸ Powers portrays the ramifications of compressed data on the processes of consumption and creation in a style which Michael Hedges refers to as "calling attention to the utopian potential of the MP3 format to democratise music for listeners [whilst also presenting file sharing as] the absence of recorded sound, silence as a consequence of its own devalued propagation."¹²⁹ The ability to freely resurrect the past is tempered by the loss of control experienced due to unregulated forms of reproduction and consumption.

The repeating and permutating past becomes more visible within this era, whilst appearing in a more uniform source form as a reliance upon digital databases, rather than individual memory, grows. John Cage's predictions for the future of music and the changing arrangements which will emerge, emphasises that recognisable pasts are necessary to create a future sound: "The principle of form will be our only constant connection with the past. Although the great form of the future will not be as it was in the past, at one time the fugue and at another the sonata, it will be related to these as they are to each other."¹³⁰ Unlike Cage's assertion that the form will be

¹²⁷ Lizzie O'Shea, *Future Histories: What Ada Lovelace, Tom Paine, and the Paris Commune Can Teach Us About Digital Technology* (London; New York: Verso Books, 2019), 9.

¹²⁸ Richard Powers, 'Modulations', *Conjunctions* 50 (Spring 2008): 87–103.

¹²⁹ Michael Hedges, "'Modulation' by Richard Powers: Digital Sound, Compression and the Short Story", *Short Fiction in Theory & Practice* 11, no. 1–2 (1 June 2021): 161–76, 164.

¹³⁰ John Cage, 'The Future of Music: Credo', in Christoph Cox and Daniel Warner, ed., *Audio Culture, Revised Edition*, Revised Edition (New York, NY: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017), 29.

the only constant connection with the past, Powers depicts both fluctuating codes and the content created by these codes as the bridge between the past, present and future. Bonner's idea for a grand performance which Els identifies as minimalist in design - "cycles within cycles," and "parts fading and surging, splitting off, then swelling again into a churning whole" (198) - resembles the depictions of reoccurring forms and themes within Powers's own lemniscate texts.

The repetitions found within *Orfeo* provide an alternative form of anticipation and a nonlinear mapping of history. Els's recall of a spectral past shapes this account of self-regenerating national identities and nightmarish innovations: "let your progressions predict time's end and recollect the dead as if they're all still here." (322) However, these repetitions lack a finale, thwarting a sense of anticipation and release. The immediate context of a post-September 11th surveillance society becomes part of an ongoing expansive transmedial narrative, minimising the sense of finality achieved through Els' assumed demise. Powers's description of a piece of music which "consists of regions of mutating rhythmic fragments... constantly cycled and transposed... between the grip of the past and the cult of progress," (187) underlines the fluctuating movements between recall and change, and the omnipresent nostalgia for an idealised past and a perfected future. Throughout this multilinear narrative, Els uses the same phrase – "a rose nobody knows" (368) - in relation to the legacy created by historic events, highlighting the similarities and differences over time. Cycles of time and the endless pursuit of increasingly precarious forms of progress leads to rewriting spaces already imbued with meaning: "this innovative phasing piece, collapsing back into art antiqua. Organum again: the sound of possibility, after the map of the possible is all filled in." (248) Although this vast network of endless returns and projections creates a claustrophobic vision of an apocalyptic future, the potential to rewrite tomorrow by re-examining the past promotes the possibility of collaborative communities creating a peaceful outcome. Powers relates facets of utopianism to a range of compositional practices and literary genres, engaging with non-Western traditions whilst focusing on the national identity narratives which were reinforced following September 11th. Powers's depiction of compelling national identity narratives during times of crisis explores the role transmedial traditions play in erasing or rewriting history. The compulsive pursuit of endless innovation alongside these retreats into nostalgia create regressive movements through advancing time without a finite end.

Conclusion

Dustin Iler's article on the evolution of Cold War fear in novels that were written during the last years of the Cold War examines the timeline of *The Gold Bug Variations* in relation to the changing role of the US and the emergence of liberal capitalism. Iler states that the narrative's depiction of scientific theory and technological innovations illustrates "the nation's internal division and fragmentation...– in light of the role of the United States as a global superpower."¹³¹ The changing role of the US on a global stage and the increasingly divided national identity in a digital age are explored in *The Gold Bug Variations* and developed further in *Orfeo*. The "aberrations caused by moving too quickly into the Data Age," (GBV 241) that concern Ressler are realised more fully by Peter Els. This thematic concern with the danger posed by technological advancement is enlarged on in *Orfeo*, where the implementation of the Patriot Act enables the US government to further encroach upon the privacy of its citizens. The media witch hunt which follows the discovery of Els's makeshift lab, accompanied by the court of public opinion which reinforces these promoted societal anxieties, is a familiar narrative in a post-Cold War-era US. This feedback loop perpetuates the dismembering of the reputation of individuals who align themselves with unauthorised forms of collaboration. Both texts engage with this increasing legacy whilst encompassing references beyond the immediate changes within the twentieth and twenty-first century US. Powers's engagements with sources written BCE explores collaborative identity narratives beyond the timescale to which Iler refers, mapping the repeating impulse to attain an ultimate form of progress beyond a national contemporary border and situating the protagonists' subversive acts within wider repeating histories.

The expanding technological world, encompassing ostensibly objectively catalogued vast stores of personal data, creates new forms of mythmaking whilst engaging with the legacy of US expansionism within this new frontier. The information age in *The Gold Bug Variations*, and the surveillance state in *Orfeo*, link the two texts through Powers's examination of the fallibility of data and the

¹³¹ Dustin R. Iler, 'From Split Atoms to Spliced Genes: The Evolution of Cold War Fear in Michael Crichton's *Jurassic Park* and Richard Powers's *The Gold Bug Variations*', *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* 57, no. 2 (14 March 2016): 137–50, 138.

increasingly commodified processes of cultural production. Jean-François Lyotard suggests that “Data banks are the encyclopaedia of tomorrow. They transcend the capacity of each of their users. They are ‘nature’ for postmodern man.”¹³² The encyclopaedias which Ressler’s father purchases shortly before his death are replaced by the masses of data with which Ressler works at the Manhattan company. The accessibility of song catalogues, the archival data which Jan can access, and the staff records which Ressler and Todd hack into, all examine the changing nature of data in the late-twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. The Ed Sullivan Show referenced in *The Gold Bug Variations* and the use of Twitter in *Orfeo* are examples of televised or online stages which help to disseminate national narratives whilst engaging with public feedback, providing data which is far from objective. The audience’s response to Ingrid Bergman on the Ed Sullivan show, is mediated by the opinions presented by large-scale media outlets. Jan’s and Todd’s biography of Ressler’s life and the TerrorChord persona invented by Els provide the reader with edited versions of the lives of Powers’s protagonists, highlighting the revisionary nature of histories and the subjective point of view with which archival data is reviewed.

When considered as another spliced narrative, the potential futures suggested by the Aria in *The Gold Bug Variations* are realised in *Orfeo*. The ongoing desire to master death and return from an odyssey through the underworld of the US in *Orfeo* engages with the content of *The Gold Bug Variations* whilst retaining an ambiguous resolution. Els and Ressler create codes which recall their personal past and alter the future. Both protagonists’ identities are revived, reworking their respective past histories and becoming part of this nation’s future through their spiritual or genetic ancestors. Jan and Todd continue Ressler’s narrative and romantic legacy whilst Els is reunited with his daughter in his final moments, reliving their past musical creations as he pursues his final performance. Despite the non-linear temporal frame and repeated returns to history and cultural traditions, Powers avoids engendering a sense of stasis. Restrictive national narratives are amended by the individual compositions which Ressler and Els seek to create. These counter-narratives and the fictions within Powers’s fictions comment on the role of art and the artist within

¹³² Jean-François Lyotard, trans. by Geoff Bennington, ‘The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge’ 51 in Rob Wilson, *American Sublime: The Genealogy of a Poetic Genre* (Madison, Wis: University of Wisconsin Press, 1991), 201.

society whilst exploring the potential for innovation to lead to destruction. The focus on cooperative endeavours in both texts explores the enduring desires of the protagonists alongside the significance of permutating forms of creativity and exchange in relation to contested societal narratives and unresolved histories.

Powers' sustained interactions with musical performances which take place during times of conflict and disruption emphasise the contrast between the romanticised notions of music and the reality of the discordant US landscape. The inserted narrative of Olivier Messiaen's performance whilst a prisoner of war illustrates the difference between art and an abhorrent reality, despite these forms interacting with each other. The depiction of non-linear cultural landscapes with repeated instances of destruction concealed within images of harmonious progress emphasises the hidden melodies within elongated compositions: "The notes too occupy, a horizon of tones stretching in all direction... sustained loss unfolding in the background of a peaceful scene." (GBV 378) The rhetoric of the American Sublime engages with the unrepresentable feelings evoked by the changing landscape and creative performances whilst repressing histories and concealing narratives. Colonialism, neocolonialism, and the creation of the atomic bomb are destructive creations and forms of control camouflaged by romanticised accounts of history and the creative traditions that supported these ideologies.

Powers depicts the different narratives present in society and illuminates the consonance and dissonance created by human-made and the natural world's differing designs. The spectre of master narratives remains visible within the twentieth century's innovations. Power's depiction of these enduring traditions challenges Rob Wilson's assertion that the influence of the American Sublime would become increasingly diminished within a transnational world following the end of the Cold War and the threat of mutually assured destruction:

This nationalist ideology of the American Sublime will die hard... the ongoing abolishment of the United States as an economic superpower, once contingent upon rivalry with the U.S.S.R. for global hegemony and upon proliferating nuclear weapons for the maintenance of sublime terror may already be a *fait accompli* within a world unlocked from its Cold War polarization. ¹³³

¹³³ Rob Wilson, 'Techno-Euphoria and the Discourse of the American Sublime', *Boundary 2*, V 19, No 1 (Spring: 1992), 205-229, 210.

Instead, Powers depicts the sublime as an ever-visible spectre within US ideology in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, cross-cutting man-made and natural codes, “the script of life’s particulars... too often become too much... too awful to bear, too unendurable, transiently beautiful.” (GBV 583) The traces of this tradition are depicted within the rhetoric surrounding the atomic bomb, the technological sublime, and the sublime of terror. Powers’s depiction of humanity’s hubris and landscapes of ecological devastation, emphasises the diminished role of underlying organic codes as the role of man-made innovation increased; these two forms of design are juxtaposed through opaque language which undermines this promoted hierarchy whilst highlighting connections.

Instead of the technological innovations linked to Capitalist ideologies in each protagonist’s respective age, Ressler and Els seek to imitate or decipher the sublime associated with an awe-inspiring natural world. Both protagonists insert their own compositions into pre-existing creations, striving to alter codes associated with cyclical, permutating forms of life and attempting to conjure the past and amend the future. Powers highlights the enduring significance of organic designs in relation to the creative impulses of Ressler and Els. The self-generating codes in *The Gold Bug Variations* and *Orfeo* begin with foundational organic patterns before incorporating the variations of these forms within man-made codes and history. Organic and inorganic structures are aligned through Powers’s references to, and use of musical arrangements for, the organisation and content of these narratives - “even folk songs propagate like viruses.” (GBV 339) The unpredictable forms these patterns can take challenges the image of restrictive unilinear timescales and predictable codes.

The upward trajectory of artificial advancements in the Western world is something which Ressler distances himself from by pursuing an alternative code. Similarly, Els interacts with the genetic code of *Serratia* and attempts to add to this seemingly eternal composition as a musician and amateur scientist. The confrontation with old-age and declining health for both protagonists leads to a renewed interest in the fusion of coding and composition. Ressler retains the hopes that a reconnection with organic life will result in a harmonious future: “learning to hear the underwritten tune might at last affirm our own derivation from the theme... rejoin us to the superorganism at the source” (GBV 326). This implies that his attempt to master code - and reach the top rung of Jacob’s Ladder - is not to gain a feeling of omnipotence but another form of enlightenment. The use of a possessive

pronoun followed by an objective plural pronoun emphasises that this is a collaborative effort, imploring the narratee to live in harmony with the natural world. Powers considers the displacement of the natural world in this post-industrial landscape and returns to organic forms as the tragic source of inspiration for destructive innovations. The protagonists advocate for the possibility of change with varying degrees of success within their own narratives. However, this desire for eternity and change is situated within a lemniscate temporality. The depiction of varied intermedial forms that have generated new designs through unanticipated collaborations, situates Ressler's and Els's innovations within an expanding unpredictable timeline. By echoing this linearity in both the form and structure of these narratives, Powers emphasises that a finite resolution will not be reached. The plea to revive humanity's connection with organic forms of life in the digital era is not resolved through these vast twined narrative forms. Both texts engage with problematic histories and mythic eutopian pasts whilst highlighting the urgent need for change in the present.

Chapter Two: Operation Wandering Soul and Plowing the Dark

Introduction

In *Operation Wandering Soul*¹³⁴ and *Plowing the Dark*¹³⁵, Powers considers the changing function of creative forms alongside technological and scientific innovations and emerging modes of communication in the late-twentieth-century US. In *Operation Wandering Soul*, Powers depicts a disillusioned doctor, Richard Kraft, searching for an alternative narrative in an increasingly claustrophobic postmodern LA cityscape. Kraft's unresolved childhood history in Thailand returns in the present following an encounter with a child patient, Joy Stepaneevong. Kraft reframes childhood stories, musical instruments, and memories in relation to the narratives of his child patients. The larger neocolonial narratives and role of an interventionist US are juxtaposed with potentially redemptive or utopian fables and depictions of failed utopian communities. Powers situates the legacy of divisive ideologies within this overtly crafted narrative to consider the role that fictions play within the recollection of historical events. In *Plowing the Dark*, the narrative oscillates between Adie Klarpol's and Taimur Martin's realities. The experiences of Adie, an artist recreating popular art works within a virtual reality project based in Seattle, are paired with Taimur's, a US teacher taken hostage during the Lebanon crisis. The US military's involvement and funding of virtual reality projects, and their spectral presence within Beirut, Lebanon frames both protagonists' narratives. Both protagonists seek refuge in art and revisit their memories of failed relationships, whilst contemporary media channels and computer technology mediate the production of a range of narratives, shaping the perception of unfolding history. Powers traces lines between disassociation and trauma, and conflict and innovation, without untangling these intricate knots.

The protagonists of both texts navigate turbulent landscapes and confront their restricted agency within these spaces. Powers's depictions of interwoven timelines in both texts are related to US-centric experiences of desire, loss, and the search for transcendence in the late-twentieth century. The search for a finite form of

¹³⁴ Richard Powers, *Operation Wandering Soul*. Subsequent references in the text.

¹³⁵ Powers, *Plowing the Dark*. Subsequent references in the text.

progress and an ultimate moment of transcendence is a reoccurring theme throughout Powers's texts. This theme is examined in these two texts in relation to the redemptive qualities of art and fiction within turbulent postmodernist settings. Whilst the protagonists strive to create utopian worlds, Powers depicts forms of dissociation achieved via immersion in potent fictional worlds. These novels interact with fluctuating collective and individual histories whilst remaining tied to an eschatological concept of time which seemingly has no end. Powers explores multiple iterations of regressive yet progressive identity narratives and histories without creating a sense of stasis. The ongoing engagements with art forms that are often viewed as archaic or static artefacts, emphasises the active positions they continue to occupy within the US zeitgeist.

In *Storytelling: Bewitching the Modern Mind*, Christian Salmon explores the changing significance of hegemonic narratives and counter-narratives in both the public and political sectors in 1990s US society, tracing these changes to Ronald Reagan's persuasive speeches which embedded recognisable quotes from classic Westerns into speeches on contemporary conflict, blurring the lines between fantasy images of the frontier and neocolonialism. Salmon argues that the public and political sectors now utilise emerging narrative techniques to further "immerse us in multisensory and tightly scripted virtual worlds."¹³⁶ Powers explicitly explores these innovative forms of technology and the creation of virtual worlds in *Plowing the Dark*. Pre-existing creative media is re-framed within a virtual reality construct in juxtaposition with the imaginary worlds Taimur Martin creates whilst held hostage. The links between distanced forms of warfare, virtual reality, and established fictions are explored via these conjoined narratives. Similarly, in *Operation Wandering Soul* Powers considers the enduring significance of fictional worlds to the protagonist's past and present landscape. The depiction of a postmodern Los Angeles overtly blurs the boundaries between reality and illusion and exposes the hegemonic narratives which underpin the promoted pursuit of human mastery over life and death. These artificial counter-memories overlap with the state sanctioned accounts of history which shape reports of conflict, silencing victims. The central characters in both texts rely on a range of alternative fictions to solidify their fragmented world, countering the increasingly visible scenes of inequality and conflict.

¹³⁶ Salmon, *Storytelling*, 3.

The patterns which underpin Powers's novels create a complex image of interrelated individual and collective histories. In both texts the US is depicted as a central presence that dictates the context of the protagonists' memories or self-created worlds. The interwoven narrative strands form an improbable merging of worlds, connecting Powers's unconventional linearity with a US perspective on history. The accounts of manifest destiny, US expansionism, and utopian communities are related to the respective protagonists' perception of reality. Alongside this focus on the enduring legacy of US exceptionalism, Powers questions the ideal of globalism. The continuing cycle of conflict and regeneration spans boundaries and countries whilst persistently reaffirming divides. The suggestion that revolution resembles a harmonious composition - "music here heads through the occasional passing dissonance. But always by closing cadence, it finds its way back to Do" (145 PTD) - does not extend to Powers's narrative conclusions. The ramifications of a disruptive present remained unsettled at each narrative's end, forming a developing image of patterns, temporalities, and boundaries in a state of flux.

Operation Wandering Soul

Powers's fourth novel *Operation Wandering Soul* enlarges on the portrayal of enduring fictional legacies found within the late-twentieth-century US within a wider patchwork mythopoeic history. The fables and histories interspersed throughout the text are connected to the present-day setting. The depiction of the postmodern sensibilities of early-1990s LA are juxtaposed with these fictions and wider histories, highlighting enduring foundational myths, cycles of conflict, and regeneration. Unlike many of Powers's other texts, *Operation Wandering Soul* does not have a dual narrative structure created by two or more protagonists and instead uses the doubling of spaces to examine underlying connections between identity constructions. Despite focusing on the adult Richard Kraft, a US doctor now working at Angel Hill hospital in Los Angeles, the narrative returns to his childhood in Bangkok, Thailand and Angel City. Despite the temporal imminence Powers creates by rapidly moving between these two distinct yet parallel places, the similarities between the two Angel Cities does not result in an equal exchange. The privileged position that wealth and national identity afford the Kraft family, in contrast with the experience of the Stepaneevong family in the US, emphasises the divide between these immigrant experiences and their differing journeys to and from the US.

Powers's narrative content and use of language expose various ambiguities and fictions within Western-centric histories and undermines rigid societal perspectives. The spectral doubles for places, characters, and intertextual references, reveal the haunted psyche of Richard Kraft and the US landscape. This approach to time and US society combines repeating layering timelines and manifestations of suppressed personal and national pasts, creating an entangled image of nonlinear time which resists a finite definition. Richard Hardack's study of *Operation Wandering Soul* considers the text's similarities to techniques found within postmodern literature. Hardack argues that "under such postmodern treatments of history, repetition becomes culmination... Such fusion of times makes *Operation* an unusually postmodern novel for Powers, whose humanist tendencies sometimes downplay narrative techniques and theoretical assumptions associated with

postmodernism.”¹³⁷ Although Hardack asserts that the fusion of timelines in *Operation Wandering Soul* is an unusual technique for Powers, this regressive yet cumulative depiction of history can be found throughout Powers’s novels. The extended accumulating blueprint of US history, and the resurfacing identity narratives in this text, opposes categorisation within one specific theory, and once again highlights shared commonalities across borders. Powers’s article for *Emergence* magazine highlights the significance of this theme to the realisation of a planetary conscious: “Blood ties give way to proxy relations and fictive kinship—kinship grounded in shared place, shared practices, and shared narratives, both measurable and imaginary.”¹³⁸ These interconnected narratives and non-linear global histories underpin Powers’s depiction of interlinked trauma, compositions, and societal narratives. These movements back and forth through time contain personal and collective memories of the past with moments of collision and collaboration.

The emphasis placed on both personal and collective trauma alongside migration and spirituality entwines differing notions of repeating histories, complicating Powers’s depictions of time and treatment of postmodernity. The imagined futures and the returns to the past are situated within the characters’ fragmenting present. This looping yet permutating depiction of human history reveals a continuing pattern of loss alongside the desire to attain a state of atemporality and transcendence. The layering of repeating accounts of vanished children, conflict, and pilgrimage resembles postmodern trauma narratives contemporary to *Operation Wandering Soul*. These texts similarly compound the impact of one traumatic event on a protagonist via fragmented and non-linear depictions of time and history. Alan Gibbs considers these postmodernist works as traumatic metafiction where “the representation of trauma is dramatized alongside the traumatic incidents and their aftermath.”¹³⁹ Echoing histories, symbolism, and transmedial narratives accumulate as Kraft’s memories unfold, exploring aftermaths of traumatic events and their links to a wider history. As Kraft becomes overwhelmed by the relentless stream of

¹³⁷ Richard Hardack, “‘Militant Expectations’: Childhood’s End and Millenarianism in Richard Powers’ *Operation Wandering Soul*”, *Studies in American Fiction* 36, no. 2 (2008): 221–38, 230.

¹³⁸ Richard Powers, ‘A Little More Than Kin’, *Emergence Magazine*, 14 October 2021, <https://emergencemagazine.org/essay/a-little-more-than-kin/>.

¹³⁹ Alan Gibbs, *Contemporary American Trauma Narratives* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014), 89.

memories and contemporary social inequalities, the unspoken connections formed between characters are gradually revealed.

Powers creates tangible links between past and present US history through Kraft's interactions with one of the child patients at Angel Hill hospital, Joy Stepaneevong. Despite the expansive temporal frame, the context of Operation Wandering Soul anchors Powers's treatment of history to a specific conflict. Operation Wandering Soul, carried out by the 6th Psychological Operations Battalion of the US army, broadcast 'ghost tape number 10' into Viet Cong occupied areas of the jungle. These tapes included cries for help from supposedly deceased soldiers and capitalised on the Vietnamese soldiers' Buddhist beliefs that spirits remain bound to the earth if their bodies are not found and buried. The re-emergence of Kraft's childhood traumas are related to a suppressed US history and the repurposing of Othered voices. Joy's and Kraft's identities are influenced by these past events, highlighting the ripples created throughout time and over generations. However, this inherited trauma is associated with the facets of US history and neocolonialism which do not equally acknowledge all ethnicities, languages, or spiritual beliefs. Kraft and Joy are affected by this legacy in markedly different ways.

Kraft is an established white male US citizen and Joy is a recently arrived Asian immigrant child. The lack of visibility afforded to Joy's father, Wisat Stepaneevong, and the failures of the education and healthcare systems, victimise and marginalise the Stepaneevong family. Institutions repeatedly deny their agency and voice, continuing to control their identity within this space. Powers highlights the different status Joy and Kraft are afforded as immigrants and their journeys to and from the US as children reveal the privileged position Kraft occupies. However, Kraft fails to recognise or acknowledge the difference in their status, concentrating on his own fallibility, memories, and inability to craft a better world. The lucky charm which holds meaning for both Kraft and Joy emphasises the enduring links between the US and Othered groups as well as Kraft's individual history. This trinket has improbably passed from Kraft Sr to Joy. During Foreign Services activities connected to Operation Wandering Soul, the charm slips from Kraft's father's neck and, "traverses the sealed border... awaiting the next child." (316) The entangled timelines and the unlikely reunification of Kraft with his father's trinket via Joy destabilises the notion of the centred self, emphasising the nonlinear links within time. Jameson's perception of this phenomena in literature aligns Powers's narrative technique with other

postmodernist works of fiction: “Each character is a bundle of destinies... A view consistent with the kind of contemporary thought that evokes ‘multiple subject-position’ and repudiates notions of the centred self... this is not the old ‘organic totality’ but something closer to Lacan’s *pas tout* (‘not-all’).”¹⁴⁰ However, this multiple subject-position extends beyond a postmodernist reading of the text and relates to Powers’s ongoing depictions of an interconnected society, distanced from each other and a wider eco system: “In my fiction, kinship forms through conflict. Through the play of dramatic tension between seemingly inimical values, my characters come to recognize the keys to themselves that others hold.”¹⁴¹ Despite their differences, the varied relationships of these characters to pre-existing conflict, medicine, and fables, exposes their similarities.

Gene Ray describes a totemic object as, “a relic of extreme violence. Its very existence is physical evidence of the destructive event; its presence and condition... testify negatively to the excessive use of power.”¹⁴² This symbol of conflict and permeable borders is imbued with a loss of innocence that both Kraft and Joy inherit. The memories of Kraft’s past accumulate as his narrative develops, gradually revealing the significance of Joy to Kraft alongside these emblematic heirlooms. When Kraft encounters sensory reminders of his childhood, past trauma resurfaces in the present; splintered memories intrude and disrupt the narrative’s linear progression. The girl who stepped on the landmine in front of a teenage Kraft during a charitable mission to build a school, returns in the present as a reminder of Kraft’s and the US’s buried pasts: “she was a shape changer, a demon from the *Ramakien*, come to teach them what the tales really meant.” (357) This reference to Thailand’s national epic embeds another fabular journey into the text, enlarging the image of unfulfilled pilgrimages and incorporating the significance of Joy into a wider depiction of a global mythopoeic history.

Interspersed with Kraft’s recollection of a childhood trauma are a myriad of epics, mythologised figures from history, and childhood fables. These multilinear narrative strands chart an alternative history via interconnected creative forms and personal histories. Powers entangles purportedly distinct epochs and produces both

¹⁴⁰ Fredric Jameson, *The Ancients and the Postmoderns: On the Historicity of Forms* (London: Verso, 2017), 209.

¹⁴¹ Powers, ‘A Little More Than Kin’.

¹⁴² Gene Ray, ‘HITS: From Trauma and the Sublime to Radical Critique’, *Third Text* 23, no. 2 (1 March 2009): 135–49, 142.

an imminent and distanced account of historical and contemporary unrest and trauma. The text moves back and forth through time, revisiting Kraft's childhood whilst mimicking Kraft's process of recall from a detached point of view in the third person. David Cowart views the third-person narrating voice as something which "accommodates the author's penchant for literary allusion, reference to the literary *disjecta membra* of a civilisation on the point of collapse."¹⁴³ The fragments of pre-existing fictions and events present a disjointed and distanced overview of contemporary society. In one pivotal instance, Powers interrelates childhood fictions and staged pantomimes to the horrors of war: "Ricky, ever the boy who shouts, 'Look out behind you!' as the Punch and Judy ran toward her." (357) Powers emphasises Kraft's distanced perspective on this event and filters these memories through a lens which splices violence with nang yai and nang talung shadow theatre: "he had to witness, reflected like a shadow puppet epic against the scrim of indifferent air, the vision the girl was after." (358) Kraft's failure to save this girl creates a rupture within his psyche which is indelibly tied to diverse creative traditions, pre-established narratives, and a turbulent late-twentieth century society.

Powers undermines the image of development and juxtaposes the overtly fabular with historical events: "sinkholes in the mythology of progress gape open... the steepest reliefs of belief are shocked into submission when laid against these wilder contours." (8) The mental cartography of Kraft is revealed alongside an expansive physical terrain, persuasively juxtaposing these imagined and actual spaces to expose the oppressive nature of Empire of Liberty ideologies. The destruction of Kraft's childhood idealism, the erasure of the girl who stepped on the mine, and the interventionist actions of the United States are linked together to portray a multifaceted personal account of a wider history. The theatre of war and this moment of impact, undermines Kraft's belief in a paradisaical Angel City. Engaging with the legacy of colonialism, Angel City is promoted as the land of the free, "in the one country that had never been anyone's colonial possession." (353) Despite this, Thailand's position 'just across the river' from Vietnam has led to a US presence within this area. The impact of colonialism is traced to the current conflict and Kraft's idealistic childhood Angel City is, "smeared by the nightmare adjacent to

¹⁴³ David Cowart, 'Passionate Pathography: Narrative as Pharmakon in *Operation Wandering Soul*', in Dempsey and Burn, *Intersections: Essays on Richard Powers*, 121.

it.” (355) The notion of a country unaffected by this legacy of colonial conquest is shattered by the US neocolonial interventions in the latter half of the twentieth century.

The gradual accumulation of collective histories, individual memories, and scenes of loss accompany Kraft's disassociation from his immediate reality. However, Kraft's preoccupation with his role within the hospital and his increasingly intrusive memories, impedes the development of a reciprocal connection with Linda Espera - a therapist at the hospital and Kraft's occasional partner- and Joy. These female characters' histories remain secondary to Kraft's. Towards the conclusion of text, the significance of Linda's relationship with Kraft is framed as an unintentional re-enactment of her own childhood trauma, “the abuser's name... paying its nightly visits, refusing to kill and deliver her.” (399) The discovery of Joy's love note for Kraft resonates with Linda's own memories of childhood abuse, revealing her previously concealed trauma. These confrontations with an accumulation of unacknowledged memories emphasises the myriad ways that buried pasts overlap and collide. Although Powers has emphasised that one of the purposes of these expansive narratives is to expose similarities via interconnected differences, the depictions of marginalised or suppressed voices within these lemniscate narratives avoid diminishing the differences between lived experiences. Homi Bhabha's assertion that recognising cultural difference disrupts authoritative accounts of history is relevant to the lack of autonomy granted to Linda and Joy. In *The Location of Culture*, Bhabha writes: “cultural difference problematizes the binary division of past and present, tradition and modernity, at the level of cultural representation and its authoritative address.”¹⁴⁴ The diminished status granted to Linda and Joy reduces their characters to secondary symbols who lack agency within their own repeating pasts. Kraft does not view Joy or Linda as independent agents: their histories and character development remain tied to his perception of reality. Kraft's trauma shapes the perception of the characters who are secondary to his crumbling psyche, illustrating the varied ways dominant narratives can interact with and shape seemingly subordinate histories.

The manipulation of pre-existing identities and the co-option of othered voices is central to the relentless accounts of erased children: the silenced victims of conflict

¹⁴⁴ Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 51.

and crusades. This entangled image of the text's namesake, Operation Wandering Soul, highlights the influence that the fusion of spirituality and technology have within and beyond the late-twentieth-century interventionist US. The technology used to recreate the voices of lost ancestors or troops modifies cultural or faith-based beliefs whilst appropriating an othered voice. Powers highlights the omnipotent position the US sought to achieve via these tactics: "from haunted heaven into an animist jungle... A monsoon of invisible, amplified voices from out of an unreal parallel." (315) This spectral imagery moves the focus from pasts that haunt Kraft's US present to the phantom figure of US neocolonial forces. The use of these innovations during conflict is juxtaposed with the distancing effect achieved through fiction and childhood songs, exposing the varied forms of creative media employed to support an often-destructive pursuit of control and discovery. The reappearing and disappearing voices of ancestors as a form of warfare, created by US troops, emphasises that sound, symbols, and spirituality can be manipulated by the external forces who control the promoted face of positive change and history. Richard Hardack explores the depiction of a US perception of history in the text and concludes that "Powers suggests it is peculiarly American failing to see the world in terms of narrow beginnings and ends, through only those origins and extinctions that relate to the perceiver."¹⁴⁵ The resurfacing voices and lemniscate textual frame undermines a narrow US lens, interrupting Kraft's unilinear reality and generating inconclusive endings. Despite focusing on Kraft's hallucinatory experience of time Powers's references to a wider European past extends beyond a US specific frame, encompassing a broader post-Enlightenment image of history with a similarly limited perception of beginnings and anticipated endings.

Although Powers does not foreground musical compositions within the text, differences in speech and sound emphasise the focus placed on Western centric perceptions of colonial and neocolonial history, tonality, and time. In the essay 'Music and New Music', Theodor Adorno assesses the changing focus on tonality in 'new music'. Adorno states that, "tonality was only vegetating, leading a sort of shadow existence... looking for something to hold on to, an order inaccessible to

¹⁴⁵ Hardack, "Militant Expectations": Childhood's End and Millenarianism in Richard Powers' Operation Wandering Soul', 225.

itself.”¹⁴⁶ Although music does not play a central role within *Operation Wandering Soul*, a tonal allegory enhances the depiction of Kraft’s unstable perception of self and society. The emergence of avant-garde compositions created a new perspective on tonality and pre-existing traditions, similarly the French horn is recontextualised and provides a commentary on Western notions of tonality as well as Kraft’s fragmented identity: “He is trying to bend tones through the tube that are too inflected to fit down a Western bore... pitches that have long been expelled from the orchestral overtone series. Another scale, a further sound.” (331) Powers places an Orientalised tonal system within Kraft’s disjointed narrative and destabilises the status ascribed to Western classical music. Kraft’s inability to recreate a sound in the present, the tune distorted by his childhood instrument, symbolises this loss and the inability to recapture a specific time. The suggestion that Kraft’s memories form part of a “tonal teleology” (258) that cannot be replicated on this French horn, undermines a singular Western explanation of history and of an object’s purpose.

Language and music are imbued with collective and personal histories and are central to the incomplete, disjointed recall of the past. Kraft’s gradual recovery of the suppressed memories, languages, and historical events associated with his childhood are connected to sensory prompts. However, the inability to fully recover these lost languages and childhood memories creates an intangible shadow-self in the present. Powers relates the ghostly language which Kraft cannot recover to musical arrangements, layering differing forms of communication to enhance the image of Kraft’s split identity: “fragments of the alphabet chant reassemble themselves... many letters are now beyond recovery with no words to slip into the blank melody slots.” (112) The use of silence, sounds, and instruments in the text embellishes the depiction of repeating cycles of trauma and conflict. The trauma of witnessing a land mine explosion silently haunts Kraft’s adult life: “even years later, there was never any sound.” (358) In contrast, Linda’s own resurfacing trauma unearths concealed forms of speech and identity: “saturated in death, she lapses into her real language.” (399) The ghosts from their childhoods, and these silenced sounds, exemplify the varied responses to trauma whilst engaging with the status of marginalised immigrants within the United States. This depiction of submerged

¹⁴⁶ Theodor Adorno, *Quasi Una Fantasia: Essays on Modern Music*, Reprint edition (London New York: Verso, 2012), 253.

sounds and omnipresent silences emphasise the disruption of representation associated with trauma: “sound seeps into the eardrum, too curdling to face, too remote to locate or answer.” (140) The implausibility of a finite cathartic release from pre-existing accounts of conflict and division is magnified via these sonic allegories.

Varied narratives associated with conflict, pilgrimage, and conquest intersperse Kraft’s narrative, focusing on the diminished status of children within histories that have been designed, and recounted, by adults. In addition to the personal significance of the French horn to Kraft, the depictions of child evacuees during World War Two align music with vanishing innocence and the desire to transcend a turbulent reality. “The last sung service of innocence,” (53) heard by children and a schoolmaster during the Blitz evacuations, once again links transhistorical compositions with an intangible sense of loss and the end of childhood. The analysis of *Orfeo* in Chapter One explored the similar insertion of a World War Two narrative and the significance of this diversion to adult composers with pre-existing societal roles. However, this account of evacuees foregrounds child victims who lack a pre-established identity in the adult world, expanding the image of a creative medium facilitating transcendence from the horrors of war whilst similarly linking a US account of history to European experiences during World War Two. The desire to disassociate from the immediate temporal plane is linked to the repeating sites of erasure and willed absences - “the children had shaken loose of the real” (53) - which shadow the depiction of the arts and curated pasts within *Operation Wondering Soul*. The varied responses of the ghosts of abandoned children to Kraft’s suppressed childhood memories explores not only the litany of child victims throughout history but also the creative medium through which their experiences are filtered or reclaimed.

Although this maximalist fiction includes varied histories from a range of perspectives, Powers’s patchworked stories of child victims risk normalizing the course of these events as seemingly inescapable cycles of corruption, destruction, and erasure. Dominik LaCapra suggests that, “a post-traumatic response of unsettlement becomes questionable when it is routinized in a methodology or style that enacts the compulsively repetitive turn to the aporia, paradox or impasse.”¹⁴⁷ The absence of closure and the repetitions of a collective past highlight the enduring

¹⁴⁷ LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma*, 47.

histories, interconnections, and the paradox of progress: “forever caught in mid passage.” (256) However, the interview which Kraft gives as a teenager during his charitable endeavours provides an overview of the legacy of colonialism and establishes a specific historical timeline: “A Caribbean Island that sowed its fields with its own carcasses rather than share the land. He described half a billion subcontinentals massing in sacrificial waves over the shape of God’s head.” (351) Powers positions Kraft as a spokesman to create links between the trans-Atlantic slave trade, Foreign Service activity occurring during Operation Wandering Soul, and immigrants arriving to the US in the late-twentieth century. Kraft’s accounts of the trail of conflict and US involvement across the globe continues, encompassing a wider history: “he had read how there had been two wars a year, each costing an average quarter-million lives since the start of history.” (351) This testimony emphasises the legacy of the unrelenting accumulation of wealth, colonialism, and the enduring hegemonic political narratives that venerate the pursuit of progress.

The alternative education Kraft receives as a teenager at a Buddhist monastery highlights the different concepts of time promoted by varied spiritualities alongside the monomaniacal nature of the quest to uncover and master the meaning of life: “beating through his pallid skin was the sick bias of his home island: we must be *headed* somewhere.” (307) The compulsion to discover and maintain upward progression is aligned with neocolonialism. This impulse is undermined by these interconnected events which engender a sense of temporal stasis and expose this normalised cycle of violence and oppression. Despite the repetitions across borders and eras which emphasise that the US is part of a wider complex history, narrated from a Western perspective, Powers avoids a fatalistic chronicle of unsettlement in the twentieth-century US by suggesting that it is possible to alter an entrenched national identity. The depiction of these metanarratives encompasses both interconnections and the possibility of restorative collaboration.

The creative reinterpretations of established histories and fictions are enmeshed in the characters’ efforts to establish an alternative society or group identity. This potential for a community or collective to build a paradisaical future is repeatedly returned to in Powers’s texts. In this instance, children are depicted forming groups that subvert the status quo. The child patients in the Angel Hill hospital forge their own community and establish their own marketplace and currency within their ward microcosm. This children’s collective echoes Kraft’s own

experiences as a teenager. The children on the ward strive to regain agency and create change whilst reconciling with their own ill health and loss of innocence, triggering Kraft's memories of his failed charitable Operation Claus. Kraft's experiences as a young boy, helping to build a school for children in a village outside Angel City, closer to the river border with Vietnam, exposes Kraft to the violent spectacle of war and leads to his loss of idealism. The children's mission collides with official US activity: "this Operation Claus... acting on its own initiative was not in the best of coalition interests," (347) and is discarded amidst the frenzy to create an official narrative. The children's strategies to alleviate suffering vanish during the chaos created by the adults' neocolonial operations. The media interest in the charitable endeavour enables these interventionist forces to control the images of Othered communities and the archives of history, "this new continuous primer in illiteracy and evasion, the world's last will and testament." (351) Powers aligns legally binding documents and factual texts with these distortions of reality, uncovering the myths behind the purportedly objective accounts of conflict. The carefully curated scene exposes the fictionalised version of events and dehumanisation of children and non-Western societies: "he wanted allegory... in the manner this rightless class has always been painted: perversely small, alien creatures." (350) Powers repeatedly aligns staged performances, the pantomimes of children, and shadow-theatre with the absurd horrors of reality. The multiple forms of creative media which are depicted in tandem with contemporary forms of reportage, illustrate the enduring narratives that can be repurposed to reinforce or undermine hegemonic ideologies or process inarticulable loss.

The unresolved events embedded in a collective memory and mythic origin stories, are linked via the dissociative potential of creative forms. Powers's detailed descriptions of image versus reality - "give nothing else, but give good video" (324) - foregrounds the desensitisation of spectators who view the horrors of conflict and the reality of the hospital ward through the lens of journalism and scripted dramas. The use of cameras and technological warfare distance the individual from a tumultuous reality. In a pivotal scene, Kraft recalls fragments of his memories of Operation Wandering Soul, and his personal history in Thailand, whilst watching a documentary. Televised images of the arrivals of refugees and immigrants in Western countries are seamlessly connected to this documentary, emphasising the ongoing narration of an authorised account of history from a US perspective. The

contemporary immigrant and refugee arrivals are delivered to Kraft via “doses of nonfiction TV... awash in open boats... Mass mockeries of the last ordeal.” (313) These media generated accounts of reality, reminiscent of medieval trial by ordeal, are preceded by the racially divisive childhood rhymes which resound through the hospital wards. This childish mockery forms part of the vast web of divisive narratives compacted into these two pages of the text to expose the persisting “anxiety ridden in this verse enchantment.” (313) These varied forms of communication are used to reinforce hegemonic narratives, masking the ongoing confinement, forced exodus, and destruction of othered groups.

The creative forms used to narrate a revised event create echoes of a phantom history within the present, distorted projections that repeat and refract through nonlinear time. The technological advancements, which shape the platforms societies use to construct a story and dictate a perception of reality, magnify these phantom histories: “the screen is there and the camera is there... every picture tells a story. And every story lives at right angles to itself.” (187) The adjacent chapters which move back and forth through time, engaging with fabular worlds before returning to present events, emphasise these differing projections created throughout history, undermining the one-sided accounts of refugees, migrants, and conflict. The depiction of the diverse function of fictions, as form of self-expression, a means of disassociation, or to legitimise divisive destructive enterprises, highlights the dichotomies inherent in modes of creativity and relates these divisions to a polyvocal US society with a fragmented national identity. The foundational and purportedly liberating myths found within a national US imaginary have been embedded into seemingly factual histories, merging these narratives into one. Powers’s depiction of hegemonic narratives as overlapping or obscuring repressed or unreconcilable events is exemplified by references to a problematic nationalism. Kraft’s desire to, “run close lidded in the other direction singing, ‘the star spangled banner’ while cupping your hands over your ears,” (149) provides a dissociative soundtrack that protects his sense of self and US society.

The new forms of mass-media used to promote ideologies or re-frame events are related to the legacy of fictional accounts which reinforced state-sanctioned histories, “myth shades off into reportage, fact into invention.” (405) Powers situates the depiction of victimised adults and children within a mosaic of contemporary media productions and works of fiction, revealing the erasure of marginalised or

subversive histories via homogenising narratives. Kraft is haunted by these irrepressible figures from memory, fiction, and histories, “trauma racing through every country on unlimited tourist visas.” (352) The global ramifications of ongoing destructive patterns of behaviour creates an array of rapidly expanding images, intensifying Kraft’s psychic irruptions. In *Writing History, Writing Trauma*, LaCapra explores the ramifications of repeating traumas. LaCapra asserts that this trauma “arises or is assisted in a continent or particular historical setting, but... not confined to a given period of time but reappears in different forms over time and whose recurrent inflections may even be defining characteristics of the culture.”¹⁴⁸ The descriptions of interlinked forces in *Operation Wandering Soul* expands the image of colonialism and neocolonialism and encompasses medieval battles, highlighting the repeating interconnected traumas which shape national identities.

Kraft Sr’s work with the US Foreign Service is described as contributing towards a pseudo force with a benevolent façade, linking ongoing conflict and US interventions to medieval religious wars and post Enlightenment discoveries: “they followed Foreign Service Coriolis, their country’s crusaderism with a human face.” (295) Powers condenses the depiction of the paradox of progress into one succinct sentence. The traces of ancient events within ongoing conflicts engenders a lemniscate image of time suffused with quasi-fictional, transcultural, and transhistorical accounts of loss. In the chapter, ‘A Sapling Learner’s Classic’ (134) Powers relays a rapid stream of stitched-together events and fictions, half-completed encyclopaedia entries are listed alongside partial chapters from J. M Barrie’s *Peter Pan*.¹⁴⁹ An entry on Peter the Hermit: a French preacher during the First Crusade, is followed by a passage from *Peter Pan*, and continues to Peter the Wild Boy: a German child found in the woods and taken to England. These interwoven fragments resist a linear image of time and loss, melding together fictions, conquest, and factual examples of lost children. These interspersed entries occur whilst the re-appearing vanished children and televised atrocities intermingle contemporary events with the fabular, weakening Kraft’s tenuous grip on his role within a contemporary Los Angeles reality.

¹⁴⁸ LaCapra, 48.

¹⁴⁹ J. M. Barrie, *Peter Pan [1904]* (Wordsworth Editions, 2018).

Despite creating a wider image of US history beyond national borders, Powers keeps a focus on the state of US society in this era. Los Angeles, the focal setting within Kraft's present, is described as an "Emerald City blazing away all nonrenewable futures." (286) Powers's references to Frank Baum's *The Wizard of Oz* moves beyond typical postmodern representations of urban spaces to consider the legacy of children's fictions within the adult imaginary and national hegemonic discourse.¹⁵⁰ This intertextual reference forms part of a network of enduring yet varying fictions which transcend the constraints of a postmodernist reading. These references reinforce Powers's depiction of the links between the ideal of progress, utopianism, and the compulsion to create speculative histories and futures. Powers associates Los Angeles with illusion, fictional utopias, and destructive consumption, emphasising the damaging legacies engrained in the US social and economic infrastructures: "the wail taunts under cover of darkness: Come try your inalienable rights, your annual increments to the GNP against *me*." (141) The invisibility and powerlessness of victims within this false paradise are immune to the myths of inclusivity and are irrelevant factors within the State's focus on US citizens globally and nationally as facilitators of economic growth. Joy's experience of powerlessness within this city differs from Kraft's; an immigrant child's status further reduces their worth to a society's materialistic pursuit of gain. The visibility of US citizens and immigrants necessarily differs, but both interact with a legacy of conquistadors and colonisers within this shared city space.

From the first page of the text, Los Angeles is established as a city with persisting historical traces and vast man-made spaces that have supplanted nature, "freeways, like rivers, age and meander... the tourist scratches on the pavement marking the sites of annihilated Spanish missions." (1) The early expeditions led by Hernán Cortés around the Baja California Peninsula are related to the unrealistic expectations which persist in the present-day; the streets of the US are not paved with gold and silver. The man-made landmarks which replace the natural, and the contemporary tourist sites which add a veneer to the history of colonialism, are foregrounded in this scene. The interstate which Kraft now travels along to work was once part of the historic Golden State Highway, a significant route for Dust Bowl immigrant workers travelling across the State of California. The varied journeys and

¹⁵⁰ L. Frank Baum, *The Wizard of Oz*, Unabridged edition (Luton, UK: Puffin Classics, 2008).

amended spaces conjured within this brief paragraph, prefigures the accounts of pilgrimages and migration throughout the text. These interlinked events foreshadow Powers's expansive depiction of the destructive blend of fantasy and reality within hegemonic US national narratives.

Joy's history book, *The World Awakens, Part III*, describes the period in Western Europe between 1527 and 1535 when the Tarascan State and Inca Empire were brought under colonial Spanish rule and an influx of goods bolstered Western Europe's economy. This repeating cycle of death and rebirth, a reawakening through conquest and colonialism, is annotated by Joy who transposes this history within her present: "a passage here obscured by vigorous Crayola spirals." (161) Joy's defaced history book parallels the childlike obliteration of passages from history, emphasising the destructive elements of mythic origin stories which erase conflicting narratives. These oscillating movements back and forth through time are similarly noted by David Cowart: "*Operation Wandering Soul* looks back to the Watts riots of 1965 and anticipates the rioting of 1992."¹⁵¹ However, the focus on natural devastation alongside societal unrest suggests that this speculative vision of a disjointed future moves beyond a focus on the citizens of this city and encompasses the wider ecosystem. Kraft's deterioration occurs against this larger backdrop, succumbing to the overwhelming images of anticipation and recall created by a terminal history in a state of flux.

The opening pages of text continue to provide an overview of Kraft's city as he travels further along traffic-clogged Interstate 5. The significance of image over reality accumulates additional layers in this twentieth century metropolitan city space where "billboards are scriptural." (6) The ideologies promoted via large scale advertising strategies dominate the landscape, supplant religious beliefs, and accompany Kraft's increasing disassociation from his immediate reality. The image of an oppressive state engaging with forms of stage craft to exert control over marginalised members of society expands as the narrative progresses, incorporating references to the Münster rebellion and overlaying the Los Angeles landscape with images of a flawed, purportedly utopian, community. The Anabaptist's forceful ejection of Catholics is disguised by the allure of becoming one of the very few elect

¹⁵¹ David Cowart, 'Passionate Pathography: Narrative As Pharmakon in *Operation Wandering Soul*' in Dempsey and Burn, *Intersections: Essays on Richard Powers*, 102.

and the appeal of the equal distribution of wealth, creating a “fantastic feat of stagecraft... designed for the starving populace.” (166) Facets of the Münster rebellion are related to the illusion of an utopic US. The billboards, TV screens, and hospital soap operas mask the reality of illness, violence, and poverty.

The polyphony of sound and the “grotesque patchwork” (188) of fictions and history in *Operation Wandering Soul* creates a relentless repletion of carnivalesque events. This depiction of consumer culture mirrors its excess as a form of critique. A significant depiction of Kraft’s mental decline occurs against the backdrop of an overwhelming replication of images and sound in a home entertainment store: “several hundred of them super impose their simultaneous soundtracks into a cacophony.” (187) This consumer culture overload frames Kraft’s deterioration, his latent memories become a more active force within the present and competing forces superimpose themselves upon his perception of reality. Following an interview with Powers, Jim Neilson concludes that the text’s style is, “often completely over the top, a verbal mania that is supposed to reflect Richard Kraft’s increasingly apocalyptic read on inner-city Los Angeles in late-capitalist America.”¹⁵² Although these moments within the text provide commentary on Kraft’s view of Los Angeles, this perception remains intrinsically tied to his childhood experience. The gradual accumulation of layers of cycling sounds, histories, and fictions within Powers’s novels, critiques late-capitalist, consumer US culture whilst depicting a wider image of escalating patterns of conflict, illusion, and decay.

Powers considers the legacy of empires and fictive utopian communities through a transmedial lens before returning to the spectre of Millennialism: “could it be that the seed of the Thousand Year Kingdom, that troubled dream toward which the world still falters, was sown in a place possessed long ago and lost, except to fable?” (215) The enduring influence of prophecies from ‘The Book of Revelation’ alongside Enlightenment era notions that Eden can be recreated on earth via scientific advancements, enmeshes aspects of spiritual and secular beliefs into flawed ideologies.¹⁵³ These speculative impulses are woven into a twentieth century pursuit of progress, and the final realisation of a utopian society, alongside the encroaching threat of an apocalyptic future. Kraft’s childhood memories of

¹⁵²Jim Neilson, ‘An Interview with Richard Powers’, *Review of Contemporary Fiction* 13, no. 23 (1998): 106–38.

¹⁵³ ‘Revelation’ in Carroll and Prickett Eds., *The Bible*.

Tranquillity base, the site of the first successful moon landing, links the advent of space exploration to the emergence of new claimable frontiers; the evolving search for transcendent, geographical, and now selenographic utopias continues. Whilst Kraft combats the sense of rootlessness that ensues from his family's movements to varied sites of conflict, the enduring desire for exploration and conquest unfolds on the television screen. The arcadian dreams of pioneers are transformed into the search for "imaginary constructs, pointers to a lost colony off to airless nowhere," (125) updating the expansionist US rhetoric which continues to haunt a shared imagination. The memories of Kraft's dislocated childhood are juxtaposed with Joy's, emphasising the similarities and differences between a US citizen's and first-generation immigrant's childhood experiences and their accompanying fantasies of an ultimate homecoming.

The enduring mythologised origin, departure, and homecoming stories feature as a common thread throughout US history and beyond. The search for a deliverance from reality is related to a repeating nomadic impulse: "home too is a way of leaving. It is about leaving, a departure as certain as any urge, longer even than the sense of having come from there." (406) Problematic adult visions of utopias, as well as those associated with childhood fantasies of escape and adventure, are related to the foundational myths of the United States and their continuing involvement in overseas conflict and 'crusaderism'. Operation Mayflower, the virtual partition of Cyprus in 1974 which involved assistance from British and US forces, is depicted as the coalition of forces which will "assist history, by any protection racket necessary, to its unbridled outcome." (316) The evocative name of this operation and interventionist actions of these two external powers emphasises the wider history of semi-criminal international activities which support this neocolonial US power. The image of a harmonious pioneering US society is undermined through the scenes of oppression and violence which culminates in a US grade school shooting. The rise in gun related violence is depicted as a US invention, creating an additional form of violence to be circulated globally: "the world's innovator, the flagging standard bearer in trade's westward migration, as first formulated by one of those Adams boys." (392) The references to John Adams, a Mayflower descendant who is frequently miscited by those who support the individual's right to bear arms, connects the destructive influence of contemporary

media and false-narratives with violence and the mythologised arrival of the Pilgrims in 1620.¹⁵⁴

The de-stabilising effects of man-made destruction and civil unrest link the circulation of contemporary iterations of progress to growing scenes of violence. In an attempt to bring order to this turbulent world, adults and children in *Operation Wandering Soul* repurpose myths and fables to reinforce their collective and individual identities. The lemniscate structure of the narrative is created by the intersecting national and individual retrospective accounts of history which amend the past and create a future based around fictionalised events. The notion of an enlightened society, separated from the pre-modern world, is undermined by the reliance on cohesive pre-enlightenment narratives in the late-twentieth century. These mythopoeic histories highlight the enduring need for a sense of cohesion in a fragmented world. Malinowski defines myth as, “a charter for the present-day social order; it supplies a retrospective pattern of moral values, sociological order, and magical belief... to strengthen tradition and endow it with a greater value and prestige by tracing it back to a higher, better, more supernatural reality of initial events.”¹⁵⁵ Hegemonic US identity narratives are similarly strengthened by mythic origin stories which problematically erase or repurpose pre-existing voices.

In contrast, the children’s story books which Kraft gives to Joy frame fiction as a potential form of escape for both adults and children. Kraft notes that “Joy will need myth much more outrageous – absurdly, magically more – to live through the mystery ahead of her.” (169) Despite this recognition that in times of upheaval individuals cling to myth and tradition to provide preordained answers to modern crises, Laurence Coupe notes that, “the drive towards completion and unity can create not only powerfully imaginative worlds, but also systemic violence. Myth may imply totality, but perfectionism is to be resisted where it becomes totalitarian.”¹⁵⁶ Powers highlights the similar desires embedded in fictional utopias, doomsday cults, and myth, whilst depicting the delineations between the fabular worlds Kraft hands to Joy and the myths entrenched in a national US imaginary.

¹⁵⁴ A quote which has been misattributed to John Adams - “Arms in the hands of individual citizens may be used at individual discretion... in private self-defense” - is frequently cited by pro-gun organisations, including the NRA.

¹⁵⁵ Malinowski quoted in Homi K. Bhabha, ed., *Nation and Narration*, 1 edition (London ; New York: Routledge, 1990), 45.

¹⁵⁶ Coupe, *Myth*, 8.

Powers draws attention to the enduring fictions embedded in a purportedly rational and empirical perception of reality and the continuing reliance on fiction to reclaim an uncertain future. The staged nature of reality and the interconnections between individual and collective identity narratives are highlighted through the re-staging of the Pied Piper of Hamelin fable within a late-twentieth-century US setting.¹⁵⁷ The allure of this destructive Piper's melody aligns trauma with unresolved atrocities and mythologised histories. The discarded children in the hospital ward, the shattered childhood dreams of Kraft, and Linda's unresolved memories of childhood abuse, provide three accounts of lost children or erased childhoods that are temporarily reclaimed through the purgative performance of this fable. The re-enactment and re-narration of the 'Pied Piper' recontextualises a pre-existing fiction, incorporating three distinct portrayals of missing childhoods. The children and adults, "locked into this endless circle of fifths... this parade catharsis," (258) are drawn into a hypnotic rhythm and partake in a spectacle of suffering in an attempt to release their respective repressed emotions. The lack of clear origins, or an ending, to the Pied Piper's tune has a continuing appeal to both adults and children facing unrelenting uncertainties. Fiction is depicted as a means of escape as well as a creative form that can engage with and shape histories: "corrupt survival fable... based, as always, on actual event but garbled in the retelling." (400) The purpose of fictional narratives fluctuates within the text, depicted as providing a haven from reality or acting as a grotesque mirror. The use of creative media and overtly fictional narratives to support or undermine a biased account of an event explores the dualities inherent in creative forms.

The child patients of Angel Hill hospital direct their own version of the 'Pied Piper' and regain a sense of autonomy through this subversive and cathartic act. The role of the US as "the omniscient narrator turning the whole crazed event back into fable" (315) is replicated in the children's decision to turn their own uncertain futures and tragedies into a revised play. The children stage the 'Pied Piper' play and craft a sense of control, deflecting from their incomprehensible reality. The enactment of a fable that includes vanishing children allows the children to address their suffering

¹⁵⁷ Originating as medieval folklore, the earliest known reference to the Pied Piper fable was c.1300 on a stained-glass window in the St Nicolai church, Hamelin. The earliest mentions of the event that inspired this fable, makes no mention of the plague of rats and only refers to the mystery of vanishing children associated with St Vitus fever.

through a creative medium. Farrell's study of trauma as a medical concept and a cultural trope explores the use of creative media and role-playing to address injustices. Farrell asserts that "in the early modern period, people used the trope that life is a play to come to terms with changing subjectivity... Elizabethan sumptuary laws tried to regulate clothing styles by class to keep upstarts from acting like their betters."¹⁵⁸ Powers similarly foregrounds the staged nature of reality alongside trauma within this embedded narrative, undermining prescribed social roles and histories. The parade in the 'Pied Piper' differs from the children's carnivalesque performance of the tale which subverts the status quo, revealing adult anxieties. The children, "who have not been around sufficient years yet to believe in any myth so transparent as permanence," (407) reveal the illusory sense of control and freedom found within the adult world whilst reclaiming their own agency. Nicolino and Joy undermine pre-established identities through their casting choices - "both poet and sicklings take part, trade places" (282) - questioning the pre-determined hierarchy. Conflict and injustices persist beyond their society inside the hospital walls, but the possibility of release offered by fiction allows the children to regain a sense of control within this microcosm. The purpose of this revised play comments upon the late-twentieth-century US identity narratives that continue to engage with mythic emancipatory foundation stories to instil a sense of order and stability.

The ability for Joy and the other patients to choose how their story is re-told is central to Powers's depiction of subversive art forms that restore a sense of agency amidst temporal irruptions and the return of repressed pasts. The potency of creative narratives can engender moments of temporary release or the suppression of an unbearable event. Kirby Farrell notes that the erasures of atrocity resemble the "neurophysiological processes which often keep an overwhelming threat from registering in memory.... In this sense trauma is a particular degree and form of our creaturely denial of death."¹⁵⁹ The individual responses of Kraft and Linda to the deaths of their young patients stem from their denial of specific atrocities and the denial of mortality. Their respective reactions to tragedy and beliefs in the curative power of fiction are linked to their traumatic repressed childhood memories: Linda promotes the healing qualities of story to her child patients, whilst the emancipatory

¹⁵⁸ Kirby Farrell, *Post-Traumatic Culture: Injury and Interpretation in the Nineties*, Illustrated edition (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998), 14.

¹⁵⁹ Farrell, 15.

qualities of fiction are rejected by Kraft in favour of empirical science. Catherine Albanese asserts that, “if any new popular religion arose in New World America, it was a nature religion of radical empiricism... turning human beings into gods.”¹⁶⁰ However, Kraft’s failure to heal Joy or to halt Nicolino’s accelerated aging undermines this concept of this supposedly popular religion and highlights the fallibility of scientific discoveries.

The discarded creative forms which amass and frame Kraft’s increasing recall of his past destabilise his identity as a rational man of science. The ongoing influence of art on the adult Kraft’s perception of the world is undeniable; sensory stimuli continually shape his shifting temporal frame. Conversely, Linda loses her faith in the potency of literature after Nicolino is taken by researchers who study his accelerated process of aging. The pursuit of knowledge and discovery comes with the cost of innocence, eroding the redemptive qualities Linda has instilled in fiction. Ultimately, Kraft searches in desperation for a panacea for the relentless scenes of violence and disease where “what remains is no longer life but contorted burlesque.” (390) Children’s pantomimes, puppet theatre, and fables seem as far removed from reality as life has become. Kraft eventually embraces the notion that fiction can provide a relief from reality and takes this idea to a tragic extreme, leading a band of infant apparitions in a flight from the hospital’s rooftop.

Kraft suffers an irresolvable crisis of faith when the utopian dreams and nightmare reality of conflict from his formative years, collides with the suffering of the children who populate the paediatric ward. The weight of these unresolvable losses overwhelms Kraft and his flight from the hospital roof offers an escape from a terminally repeating history. Kraft resorts to this suicidal exit strategy to escape the pattern of abuse and violence, retaining only “the bedtime book, common property, with the lavish illustrations.” (402) Children’s fictions retain the redemptive qualities that Kraft imagines will help build his new utopian collective. The potential tragedies emerging from the perpetual search for the discovery of new lands gains an additional form through this desperate quest for a transcendent eutopia, “a new direction, one that has been hiding in orientation’s rose until this moment, mimicking the other compass lines.” (402) This flight from reality re-engages with intertextual

¹⁶⁰ Erik Davis, *Techgnosis: Myth, Magic, and Mysticism in the Age of Information*, Reprint Edition (Berkeley, California: North Atlantic Books, 2015), 107.

allusions to the lost boys and Peter Pan whilst questioning the status of the US as the land of the free. Powers revisits the initial description of Kraft, “one day the boy fell from the sky and landed in the City of Angels, land of the free,” (295) returning the narrative to its own fabular origins.

However, the tragic end to this seemingly cyclical narrative is abruptly reversed when the previously anonymous narrator enters the text. This narrator reveals that Joy, “for better or worse... was saved,” (408) granting the reader a temporary reprieve from the relentless catalogue of traumas. Despite this momentary respite when the storyteller enters the frame, he continues to underline the inability to absolve the reality within constructed fantasies: “my best intentions have failed to disperse the bleakness of the real... the story meant nothing, except that it had happened.” (408) This younger brother of the real doctor turns the concluding focus to his own daughter, facing the discovery of the real in fiction: “*one discovery painful enough... tearing into her with the merciless discovery of the thing.*” (410) The repeating stories of lost innocence, fictional arcadias, and the malleable role of art, persist beyond Kraft’s probable death. When the text’s narrator interrupts the story’s trajectory the division between fiction and real-world events is further undermined and these fragmented, patchworked narratives build to a crescendo without reaching a satisfying coda. The regular font emerges between the italic, splicing together fiction, reality, and ambiguity in the reader’s concluding bedtime story: “*the pictures and recordings, the messages in all those languages. One day the rest will trace it back to us.*” (410) Powers highlights the unreality of the everyday through this combination of lemniscate narratives within narratives. The reliance on fictional worlds for a sense of respite from an increasingly artificial reality is imbued in the text and the construction of the conclusion. The instances of utopianism in the text are enmeshed with utopian traditions in literature, suggesting Kraft’s search for a mythological no-place stems from a desire to leave a dystopian city space. The enduring fables, fictive paradises, and US mythologies result in a pervading spectral reality that can never be attained.

The expectation of a conclusive ending is linked to the formation of a new unknown beginning, the ongoing reliance on flights of imagination is linked to the earlier declaration that “the settlement of the United States is shot through with millennium models.” (137) The sense of anticipation and anxiety in the last decade before the new millennium is threaded to the utopian legacies found throughout and

beyond a US specific history. Bruno Latour suggests that, “unable to believe the dual promises of socialism and ‘naturalism’, the post moderns are also careful not to reject them totally. They remain suspended between belief and doubt, waiting for the end of the millennium.”¹⁶¹ The burden of history and cultural trauma positions Kraft as a figurehead for these postmodern anxieties, standing between a position of cynicism and optimism. However, Kraft is unable to reconcile with the unending loss of children and his own lost childhood and is unwilling to wait, expectantly, for a new era of change. This unbearable interminable reality engages with modern and postmodern sensibilities, utopian desires, and the growing popularity of doomsday predictions prior to the millennium. The Enlightenment era which promoted the distinction between premodern and modern society has not led to a linear change or an end to comparable destructive events. The focus on end-times spirituality and the approaching Millennium infuses this US materialistic society which venerates the pursuit of technological and scientific innovations with an enduring mysticism: “The idea of a *progressing* history may itself derive from the hope for a new heaven and earth. Prediction of the end, like historical ‘*progress*’, is eternal.” (138) Powers suggests that these eschatological, yet repeating histories are linked to the notion of development and stasis within this contemporary US society: “all predictions are perverted remembrance” (215). The notion of a present divorced from the legacy of a European or US history is undermined, revealing the ongoing relevance of something which Rush Welter describes as the US inclination “to refer conservatively to their recent past whilst identifying the simple perpetuations of its institutions with what the Europeans termed ‘*progress*’.”¹⁶² The sense of the wholly new is disrupted by the warped spectres from the global and local accounts of world history, the projections of the past within the present undermine the distinction between the real and imaginary.

The echoing instances of atrocities and interlinked creative media in *Operation Wandering Soul* evoke a quasi-ahistorical landscape. Powers creates an expansive millennial landscape via the evocative descriptions of transmedial narratives. Fredric Jameson’s essay, ‘Musical: An Allegorical Symphony?’, analyses the properties of aesthetic forms which can enhance speculations on the nature of

¹⁶¹ Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, trans. Catherine Porter (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1993), 9.

¹⁶² Welter, ‘The Idea of Progress in America’, 406.

time. Jameson begins with an assertion that aligns musical compositions with the drive towards completion which Coupe feels myth may grant: “in art, beginnings and endings are demonstrable.”¹⁶³ In contrast, Powers’s depiction of ambiguous forms and elongated time frames relies on interwoven narratives across a range of artistic traditions, instead of one distinct musical arrangement or myth. These transmedial references defy a singular point of origin or fidelity to one style of expression, subverting the desire to locate the beginning or end in these interlinked creations. Despite this initial dissimilarity, Jameson ultimately concludes that within these creative designs, “all these differences do converge somewhere, even if it is in a place where inconclusiveness has become a kind of Absolute in its own right.”¹⁶⁴ The varied forms of inconclusive compositions throughout the text create a complementary lemniscate temporal frame, amplifying Kraft’s own patterns of recall and projection within his present. The repeating histories enlarge upon Kraft’s perception of a timeless nightmarish expanse, foregrounding replicating unresolved narratives which diminish a linear perception of time.

The connections Powers makes between pre-modern and modern fictional and factual cultural narratives align with Latour’s examination of translation and purification in this contemporary era. Latour asserts that within the postmodern era there is an increasing interrogation of the viability of the “luminous dawn that cleanly separated material causality from human fantasy.”¹⁶⁵ The advent of this age is similarly questioned by this vast network of cities and eras, crossing the purportedly Great Divide between premodern and modern. The Roman Empire is linked to the founding of the US, “the zero milestone from which all migratory sweeps set out,” (124) drawing parallels between ancient imperialism and contemporary overseas territories. Powers undermines the impulse to arrange time in a unilinear upward trajectory through these cumulative instances of conflict and conquest within a lemniscate narrative structure. The characters search for salvation or transcendence within Los Angeles is enlarged via interwoven fictional accounts of erasure and escape. The sense of temporal imminence associated with ‘Americans’ who “think everything begins and ends here, this time. No return, no earth,” (290) is disrupted by networks of interrelated histories and fictions which reveal the similarities within

¹⁶³ Fredric Jameson, *Allegory and Ideology* (London: Verso Books, 2019), 126.

¹⁶⁴ Jameson. *Ibid*

¹⁶⁵ Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, 35.

seemingly distinct eras. These strategies create a moving image of interrelated discourses which resembles Latour's definition of networks within this late-twentieth-century modern era. Latour asserts that "networks are simultaneously real, like nature, narrated like discourse, and collective, like society."¹⁶⁶ Powers creates an image of interacting and unpredictable artificial and natural elements through the depiction of interwoven forms of individual and collective narratives impacting upon the wider landscape.

Childhood fictions frame the depictions of conflicted forms of innovation and change which are related to utopian longings and arcadian rhetoric associated with the settlement of the US that began with the first colony in Jamestown, Virginia, in 1607. The lure of the Pied Piper's tune, "a perpetually postponed, eternally almost announcement of new arrival, that long awaited descent of formal ecstasy," (256) similarly entices adults throughout this text's account of history to pursue the Sisyphean task of attaining their image of a perfected world. The fabricated and factual accounts of vanishing children are woven into these children's lives within the wider framework of a US interventionist history and the legacy of colonialism and conquest. Powers depicts a complex heterotemporality by including lost childhoods and an imaginative re-telling of history and fictions within one text. This lemniscate temporal structure links contemporary issues to the pre-existing suspended sense of arrival and exit that permeates the US imaginary: "the idea of a progressing history may itself derive from the hope for a new heaven on earth." (138) The potentially emancipatory qualities of the imagination and the unending pursuit of a power are thematic concerns that encompass both modernist and postmodernist perspectives on society, approaching a metamodernist literary style. The ongoing images of the end of the world, utopian communities, and histories of conquest highlight the past which still repeats within the present.

Powers questions US expansionism and the ideology of manifest destiny by relating historical accounts of failed utopias and abandoned children to the legacy created by US overseas involvement in conflict. The range of accounts of pilgrimage, crusades, and war, throughout the text repeatedly interconnects seemingly disparate forms to create a wider account of US history. The intricate web of creative media in *Operation Wandering Soul* affirms or repudiates hegemonic national narratives.

¹⁶⁶ Latour, 6.

Powers's depiction of what is lost or wilfully abandoned in collective and personal histories, alongside an examination of the effects of trauma on memory, engages with a myriad of fictions inspired by historical events. The problem of evil is articulated through creative forms which reappear in transhistorical and transcultural contexts, exploring the possibility of collaborative change: "the piece hints at cross-border calls for help." (256) Powers emphasises that cycling images of suffering and the paradox of progress remain and have evolved in this post-Enlightenment era. The labyrinthine pilgrimage through numerous interconnected narratives does not conclude with the reassertion of agency for the primary characters. Powers's depiction of subversive interpretations of pre-existing fictions successfully challenges the interpretation of creative forms which are embedded into a US hegemonic discourse, without creating an optimistic vision of the future.

Comparison

In *Operation Wandering Soul*, the depiction of violence, mass media, and childhood trauma occurs against the backdrop of enduring fables. Finally, Kraft seeks to repair his shattered sense of reality and identity through a desperate departure into a fictional world. This porous line between detachment and transcendence is explored in *Plowing the Dark* within a similar frame. The narratives of Taimur Martin, a hostage held in Beirut, Lebanon and Adie Klarpol, an artist recreating works of art within a virtual reality project, explores the role of creative media in relation to the pursuit of power and innovation within the late-twentieth century. The world-building achieved via innovative technologies is juxtaposed with a series of self-created worlds and fictions that sustain the protagonists as they combat a loss of agency. The characters who experience unconventional perceptions of time and turbulent human histories utilise varied creative forms to add structure to their unpredictable world. The liminality, confinement, or disillusionment of the characters in *Operation Wandering Soul* and *Plowing the Dark* allows for varied interwoven desires for transcendence to emerge.

In each text, the impact which fictional narratives continue to have in the protagonists' contemporary era is accompanied by depictions of devastation and inequality. The legacy of the contentious nineteenth-century US belief in Manifest Destiny is explored in relation to conflict and the erasure of marginalised histories within each text's past, present, and potential future. The legacy of this era is found within the creative traditions that are used to endorse US neocolonial ideologies and legitimise contemporary US interventionist activities. Rob Wilson states that the updated appearance of the American Sublime in the late twentieth century has supplanted the image of a world crafted by a divine being with one of man as an omnipotent creator. However, Wilson asserts that this tradition "remains much the same... speaking not so much of a pantheistic God but of the globally beneficent forces of American power."¹⁶⁷ The seemingly benign and charitable face of US intervention, that is promoted via this creative tradition, is undermined through the repeated scenes of violence and associated trauma in each text. The media-

¹⁶⁷ Rob Wilson, 'The Postmodern Sublime: Local Definitions, Global Deformations of the US National Imaginary', *Amerikastudien/American Studies* 43, no. 3 (1998): 517–27, 518.

managed accounts of warfare and the depictions of occupation and confinement are woven together into a multifaceted image of conflict and neocolonial actions.

Alongside the overt attention paid to the ahistorical narratives that accompany conquest, Powers includes references to multiple faith-based beliefs and further dismantles temporal and spatial divides. The Buddhist and Islamic beliefs included in *Operation Wandering Soul* and *Plowing the Dark* offer differing perceptions of societal development and transcendence, challenging dogmatic approaches to interconnected histories. Powers accumulates varied concepts of linearity and decentralises secular and Western Christian perspectives. The references to Buddhism insert an alternative concept of time into *Operation Wandering Soul*, expanding the treatment of repeating temporalities: “The child learned of the three planes, the shape of time’s cycle, and the names of many fixed points in the spinning sphere.” (OWS 302) This multi-dimensional view of time coheres with the multi-layered, lemniscate narrative structure of each text. The content and form of both texts eschews a one-dimensional linearity whilst returning to pivotal fixed moments. The pre-modern nonlinear time, and the purportedly modern and progressive society, is a discourse which is challenged through Powers’s narrative strategies.

Powers further questions and destabilises a Western-centric concept of linearity via the depiction of a range of contested spaces. Both texts frame a narrative set in the US in relation to a protagonist’s experiences as a US citizen overseas. Powers provides examples within each text of physical spaces that have changed in status according to redefined boundaries and categories. The doubling of spaces and place names in *Operation Wandering Soul* and the function of Hagia Sophia in *Plowing the Dark* undermine these finite boundaries. In *Operation Wandering Soul*, two city spaces claim the same mythic liberatory characteristics. Powers employs the rhetoric used to promote the US in his description of Bangkok, “the City of Angels, land of the free,” (295 OWS) creating a mirror city for Los Angeles whilst critically examining the ambiguous language used in US founding myths. Kraft’s rapid movements back and forth from his memories of Bangkok to his present life in Los Angeles, emphasises the shared desires embedded in the establishment of these cities and exposes the unstable boundaries between these two distinct places. This doubling of space leads to comparisons beyond country borders whilst engaging with the matrix of relations established by a neocolonial US power. Powers achieves a disorientating, subversive temporal frame by moving back

and forth through time, shortening the distance between this Western city and its constructed other.

In *Plowing the Dark*, interrelated forms of repetition emerge alongside the reoccurring sites of illusion which persist in the late-twentieth century: “thirty-two places in the United States went by the same name, half of them having started existence as utopias... this particular Lebanon now existed... as a theme park version of itself” (PTD 313). Powers provides examples of spaces with multiple connotations and emphasises the legacy of failed US utopian communities to contemporary contested spaces. The repetition of place names in the US and Beirut explores the doubling of space and closes the gap between Taimur’s and Adie’s narratives. Johannes Fabian’s critique of cultural anthropology explores the purpose of the temporal distance created between object and observer by neocolonial forces: “geopolitics has its ideological foundation in *chronopolitics*... Anthropology emerged and established itself as an allochronic discourse; it is a science of other men in another Time.”¹⁶⁸ This discourse is established and then undermined in each text, restructuring the preconceived notion of spatial and temporal gaps between the US and its Others and destabilising imposed Western chronopolitics. In each text, Powers shortens the perceived gap between the US and Europe and re-positions a non-western Other within pre-established hegemonic narratives, emphasising multivalent power dynamics embedded in this constructed temporal distancing. The destabilised US toponyms and the movements back and forth through time undermine a US-centric, linear history.

The portrayal of immigrants in both texts further emphasises the imposition of spatial boundaries, subverting the image of freedom promoted via airbrushed accounts of US history. The experiences of the Stepaneevongs in *Operation Wandering Soul*, and the immigrant architects who helped to design the Cavern in *Plowing the Dark*, provide alternative accounts of life in the US. Tim Ingold’s perception of the linearity enforced by colonial forces is pertinent to Powers’s depiction of permeable boundaries and an immigrant’s experience within the neocolonial US. Ingold asserts that colonialism “is not the imposition of linearity upon a non-linear world, but the imposition of one line upon another. It proceeds first by

¹⁶⁸ Johannes Fabian, ‘Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes Its Object’ quoted in Georgina Born and David Hesmondhalgh, eds., *Western Music and Its Others: Difference, Representation, and Appropriation in Music* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 167.

converting the paths along which life is lived into boundaries in which it is contained, and then by joining up these now enclosed communities."¹⁶⁹ The enforcement of divisive lines and boundaries in each text are woven into an expansive image of the US in the late-twentieth century. Powers considers how these containments are legitimised via the use of varied narrative forms which aim to reinforce or expand the US sphere of influence. In both texts, the repeating histories of conflict and disputed borders intersect with scientific and technological advancements and the pursuit of global hegemony.

The entangled depiction of fluctuating spaces and narratives highlights how constructed national and global histories can perpetuate or resist cycles of conflict. The protagonists' relationships with enduring fictions interlink personal and collective identities and disrupt notions of linear progress and spatial divides between Western societies and their Others. The varied motivations behind their engagements with repeating fictions are linked to their respective desire for detachment from a fragmented present and the longing for the realisation of a communal utopian reality. The ongoing scenes of internal and external societal unrest are linked to the impulse to recreate fictions and the desire to create alternative utopian realities or smaller collectives. The efforts by the protagonists to reshape society amidst the backdrop of conflict and upheaval combines interconnected motivations for creating speculative histories. Their counter-narratives are often woven from foundational myths, fables, and emerging creative forms, developing alongside the permutating depiction of a US national imaginary. These lemniscate constructs connect the persisting impulse to create alternative worlds with the unending quest for ascendancy, undermining the façade of unilinear societal development.

¹⁶⁹ Ingold, *Lines*, 3.

Plowing the Dark

In *Plowing the Dark*, Powers continues the depiction of humanity perpetually re-shaping their environment, foregrounding the relationship between collaborative creative forms and technological advancements. These entwined developments have the potential to influence collective identities on a larger scale: promoting harmful political agendas, distancing the spectator from reality, or generating a virtual manifestation of the human desire to create a perfected world. The experiences of Adie Klarpol and Taimur Martin are connected via their relationships with potent artificial or reconstructed worlds. The emerging approaches to warfare and forms of distanced yet imminent combat are related to both the advent of virtual reality and the psychological impact of being taken hostage, aligning repeating yet mutable patterns of conflict with forms of disassociation and detachment. The examination of the relevance of pre-existing artistic forms to the emergence of new modes of constructing and perceiving reality is shaped by these two narrative strands which improbably merge towards the text's conclusion. Adie's work on an innovative narrative-building platform engages with both protagonists' underlying desire to chart a clear, predictable path through a chaotic world: "I was going to get inside of reality and extract its essence, write down on paper the magic metrical words that, read aloud, would do their open sesame." (214) The attempts to disengage with a tumultuous reality through creative media and construct an alternate path through a seemingly conquerable underlying code, charts a course back and forth through interrelated timelines. The movements between the virtual or internal worlds created by Adie Klarpol and Taimur Martin align divergent fictional constructs whilst exploring the potential for self-created worlds to preserve a sense of agency when facing crisis or confinement.

Adie, an artist who creates virtual worlds for the Cavern project in Seattle, provides a US-based narrative. Whereas Taimur, a US civilian and an English teacher who is taken hostage in Beirut, Lebanon, during the Lebanese Civil War, highlights the potential ramifications of US interventionist actions. The motivation for taking civilians captive during the Lebanon hostage crisis between 1982 and 1992 remains the subject of speculation. However, some of the hostages taken are seen to have provided Hezbollah with a form of insurance, protecting the group from US or Syrian retaliation following an embassy bombing in Beirut. Despite these differences,

both protagonists construct spaces that emphasise the permeable boundary between creating alternative realities and producing forms of disassociation. Adie and Taimur employ varied means of forming artificial realities to facilitate a retreat from reality; their individual motivations for re-creating fictional worlds and re-living the past stem from a similar desire for control and detachment. The problem of time, as a phenomenon to outrun or one which defines your existence when stripped of sensory data, is explored in Powers's depiction of the two protagonists' alternative worlds. These collaborative and dissociative forms of creativity, construction of alternate realities, and returns to fictional worlds, take place between the late 1980s and early 1990s. After Taimur's period in captivity begins in 1986, the passage of time, which Adie voluntarily steps outside of, is something he strives to regain: "All life has been a fight against this slide into chaos... you look down into the abyss... this room is dark, and without dimension." (390) The atemporality which Adie seeks in the Cavern heightens Taimur's loss of control and sensory deprivation within a darkened cell. Despite focusing on US characters in spaces removed from their everyday reality, the impact of pivotal global historical events remains central to their desire to create a different world. The theatre of war, the end of the Cold War, and the challenge of representation in this postmodern era, motivate the protagonists to construct their own environments and master their perception of time.

Powers's depiction of overlapping journeys through reconstructed memories, creative forms, and places imbued with individual and collective significance engages with differing accounts of history. The movements back and forth through time are anchored to enduring yet mutable fictions, forming a framework which can strengthen or undermine authorised national narratives. The visual, written, and musical artworks which stimulate the subjective recollection of past events also play a role within the ongoing quest for knowledge, development, and supremacy. The architects of the Cavern create immersive paintings and interactive landscapes, creating a space which contains an amalgamation of collective desires. This virtual reality platform is the latest iteration of an attempt to control the projection of reality and history, "the race's deepest taboo dream, the thing humanity was trying to turn itself into." (30) This collaborative space provides an opportunity to shape or transcend reality, producing alternative speculative worlds from computer generated code. In this virtual world, pasts are revived, fictional worlds become tangible and malleable, and accurate forecasts of future change and potential devastation seem

possible. The ability for humanity to exceed the imminent temporal plane and ascend to a deified position engages with myths of progress with a finite end, whilst allowing humanity to pursue the desire to assume the coveted role of the ultimate creator. The architects who create the Cavern's rooms articulate their varied motivations for pursuing the compulsion to create another world via their distinct creative practices. The range of artistic production depicted within the Cavern enables Powers to encompass varied modes of narrative world building within a textual form. The evocation of sounds, images, and architecture within this virtual world parallels Powers's own attempts to produce a written text which evokes varied extra-literary sources.

A conventional perception of time and linearity is undermined via this intermediality which frames the protagonists' distinct approaches and motivations for world building with a non-linear tapestry of societal narratives. The depictions of innovation, disassociation, trauma, and conflict are framed as generating interrelated forms of multi-linearity. The initial pages of the text set-out the lemniscate perception of infinity, the past, the present, and the future, which develops throughout the text: "time does not keep to these parts, nor do these parts keep time. Time is too straight a line." (3) The varied interactions with innovative technology and art enhances the protagonists' repetitions and zig-zagging progressions through the fictional worlds they create. The relationship between creative media, innovation, and conflict that shapes Taimur's and Adie's narratives is established in the epigraph. The epigraph highlights the interconnected role of these forms, referencing artists and writers who blurred the boundaries between fictional and real worlds. The quote from Gertrude Stein's *The Autobiography of Alice B Toklas* describes Toklas's reaction upon seeing a canon painted with a camouflage design, and the effect that this has on Pablo Picasso: "It is we that have created that...From Cezanne through him they had come to that. His foresight was justified."¹⁷⁰ Adie's and Taimur's resurfacing pasts and unstable presents link varied forms of prophecy, recall, and progress, mirroring the text's epigraph. The links between creative innovations and the reciprocal relationship between fictions and reality increase as their narratives develop.

The references to a range of historical and ongoing conflicts are aligned with the worlds inhabited and created by Adie and Taimur. Taimur's mosaic memories

¹⁷⁰Gertrude Stein, 'The Autobiography of Alice B Toklas' quoted in Powers, *Plowing the Dark*.

and Adie's collaged cultural symbols are paralleled with the fragile borders between countries and contested cultural spaces. The frontier of the mind and human-made innovations are repeatedly affiliated with sites of conflict and disputed histories. The ultimate convergence of Taimur's and Adie's narratives in the reimagined cultural crucible, Hagia Sophia, facilitates each protagonist's transcendence of their immediate space, providing a momentary reprieve from reality whilst imploding conventional Western linear timelines.¹⁷¹ Hagia Sophia is a site of overlapping meaning in Turkey. Originally built in the sixth century, Hagia Sophia initially was a Justinian church decorated in an early Byzantine style on the site of two pre-existing churches, from 1453 to 1931 the building served as an Ottoman Mosque before being secularised in 1935 and becoming a museum, most recently, in 2020, Hagia Sophia returned to its status as a place of worship and once again became a Mosque. This site of historical crossroads is significant to multiple faith-based histories, a space where, "all your memorised Qur'an and Bible verses ran jumbled together. A temple on the mind's Green Line, its decoration seeping up from awful subterranean streams inside you." (413) Powers's description of the unification of these narratives in a reconstructed Hagia Sophia, links sites of conflict to the demarcation between tangible and symbolic spaces. The return of the repressed which Powers alludes to, aligns this site with repeating histories of contested spaces and Taimur's individual trauma. This improbable unification of worlds in Hagia Sophia fuses the two plotlines together, highlighting their shared reworking of pre-existing forms and similar motivations for creating internal and external immersive worlds.

The final convergence of timelines in Hagia Sophia thwarts rational explanation - "that angel terror lay beyond decoding" (414) - inducing a contemporary sublime experience. Powers collapses distinct eras and provides examples of the repeating desire throughout human history to create sublime works of art which surpass natural inimitable designs. Adie transcends virtual reality's illusion of infinite space and closes the distance created between disparate cultural iconography, eras, and political boundaries. The recreation of this architecture revives multiples pasts and emphasises the significance of creative forms to the

¹⁷¹See - Antony Eastmond, 'Narratives of the Fall: Structure and Meaning in the Genesis Frieze at Hagia Sophia, Trebizond', *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 53 (1999): 219–36.

spaces we inhabit: “Buildings were art’s skin, the pictures we lived in... Frozen music, yes. But also thawed paint.” (138) Powers’s text moves beyond realism whilst still considering the significance of architecture and monuments within a landscape suffused with repeating histories. This monument does not function as a crystallised moment in time and instead exposes the living nature of history via the simultaneity of forms in one space. Bissera Pentcheva’s article on the multisensory nature of Byzantine art and architecture, expands upon the significance of Powers’s choice of Hagia Sophia for this convergence of reconstituted spaces. Pentcheva asserts that Byzantine art is an evocative artistic style with an immersive effect on the viewer: “These transient manifestations trigger the spectator’s memory and imagination to conjure up images. Byzantine’s ekphrasis both documents and sustains this interaction between the real, the perceived, and the imagined.”¹⁷² The effects of this religious style are not dissimilar to Taimur’s attempts to conjure visual landscapes via his recollection of literary works whilst in captivity. The detailed mental world Taimur creates ultimately collides with Adie’s image-based world, combining the depiction of their venerated spaces as they attempt to escape the present.

Despite the sense of liberation generated by this multisensory space, the illusion of permeable boundaries and malleable distances remain tied to the unreachable histories that these constructs cannot replicate - “a distance that no amount of technology would ever be able to close.” (302) The recreation of artworks tied to specific moments in time does not recapture a lost moment and instead leads to an improbable merging of two worlds and the simultaneity of two temporalities. In this pivotal scene, Hagia Sophia exemplifies the changing roles occupied by physical spaces and their contestable place within national and faith-based narratives. The lemniscate narrative form is mirrored by the content - the overarching narrative’s two interlocking strands are framed by references to spaces of transformative and transportative significance. The composition of the text is marked by these temporal convergences, functioning as part of Powers’s ongoing composite depiction of the enduring themes and fictions found throughout history, undermining a sequential temporality: “The world’s events emerged as a resonance, the shifting states of mutually reshaping interactions, each fed back into the other in eternal circulation.” (78) The thematic echoes found within each protagonist’s strand enhances Powers’s

¹⁷² Bissera V. Pentcheva, ‘Hagia Sophia and Multisensory Aesthetics’, *Gesta* 50, no. 2 (2011): 93–111, 93.

depiction of a feedback loop, enlarging this temporal frame. The cyclical image of history is disrupted by the creation of crossroads, creating a lemniscate model of human history with regressions and projections through time. Hagia Sophia, reimagined within the Cavern, becomes an unworldly meeting place for Adie and Taimur despite its spiritual and specific historical connotations: “only through this crack can you see where things lead. You step through the forsaken symbols, into something brighter.” (401) The seemingly endless echo of societal events is disrupted by this meeting which explores the materialisation of new forms of collaboration, shattering the divide between internal and externally realised revised histories. Emerging digital technology has led to pre-existing symbols and histories being rewritten in a collaborative form. In *Future Histories*, Lizzie O’Shea considers the potential for cooperative futures to emerge in the digital age and contends that “another world is possible, where society is collective and humans have agency over their digital futures. But to get there we need to create a past with living value.”¹⁷³ Powers’s depiction of the joint engagements which occur with the aid of emerging digital technology successfully reframes authorised histories and contested spaces, emphasising their changeable value.

Adie and Taimur’s shared transformative experience in Hagia Sophia rends the established boundaries between societies, and between cultural symbols, mapping a vast web of connections beyond established borders. Powers’s description of a virtual space, realised within the creator’s minds, moves beyond postmodernist considerations of the real, simulacra, and simulation. Powers’s depiction of this symbolic space achieves an effect similar to cyberspace in William Gibson’s *Neuromancer*.¹⁷⁴ Jameson describes this space as something which “looks like some stereotypical postmodern lapse into visual representation [that] is on the contrary a complex mapping of the incalculable connections... between all multiple powers and vectors of the real world, that is the underlying and invisible one, that we cannot see with our normal bodily senses.”¹⁷⁵ The inarticulable forms that structure society are highlighted through the desires which shape the construction of virtual reality. The symbolism imbued in Hagia Sophia exposes the myriad of invisible

¹⁷³ O’Shea, *Future Histories: What Ada Lovelace, Tom Paine, and the Paris Commune Can Teach Us About Digital Technology*, 8.

¹⁷⁴ William Gibson, *Neuromancer* (Edinburgh: Harper Voyager, 2013).

¹⁷⁵ Jameson, *The Ancients and the Postmoderns*, 222.

connections between society and creative forms. The individual motivations to produce change combine within the Cavern and are projected onto the redesign of Hagia Sophia. This crucible connects significant histories to ongoing power struggles whilst functioning as the latest iteration of “the grail we’ve been after since the first campfire recital. The defeat of time and space.” (159) Powers’s evocation of the legacy of oral narratives, Grail Mythology, and references to the technological sublime, grounds these new modes of narrative construction within pre-modern history whilst projecting forward into possible eternal futures. Virtual reality and the realisation of these reconstructed spaces explore the potential for the repetitions found throughout human history to be fulfilled within this digital age whilst altering the passage of time for both protagonists.

Adie’s and Taimur’s desire to control or escape their immediate environment leads to their immersion in fictional worlds and alternate realities. Both protagonists strive to create the illusion that time can be temporarily defeated, “in this chamber, now and forever combine.” (3) The immediate and the eternal are presented as co-existing phenomena that occur when they create their own variations on pre-existing forms, engaging with a seemingly endless tradition within their present. The potential to conceive of intangible phenomena is facilitated via the immersive creative endeavours which engender the expression of, and response to, seemingly inarticulable human experiences. Fredric Jameson’s assertion that time and repetition are phenomena which can be articulated through aesthetic forms - “art alone seems to offer a laboratory in which these otherwise imponderables can be observed.”¹⁷⁶ – is supported via the art works recreated within the Cavern which explore the possibility of atemporality and emphasise the repetitions found throughout Western history. Taimur and Adie construct rooms which are both visible and invisible in order to detach themselves from their respective realities whilst revisiting the unresolved ghosts of their pasts. The Cavern project epitomises the changing applications of creative media and their ongoing role within the construction of group and individual identities. This innovative project interacts with and updates pre-existing narratives and creates a tangible rendition of imaginary spaces for both Adie and the Cavern’s user base. Conversely, Taimur relies on mental constructs to combat his loss of freedom, creating an internal, as opposed to

¹⁷⁶ Jameson, *Allegory and Ideology*, 126.

virtual, space where immersive atemporal worlds are formed. Adie's and Taimur's unmooring from a conventional timeline frames the subjective significance of their internal and external rooms, linking the state of transcendence and atemporality sought during traumatic experiences to the search for a detached utopia and ultimate realisation of artificial innovation.

The imaginative journeys undertaken by both characters engage with forms of unconventional linearity to undermine the restrictions they face in their lives. The states of transcendence that both protagonists seek lead to their respective retreats into fictional works and associated memories. Johanna Heil's article on narrative strands and Lacanian orders explores the purpose of Adie's and Taimur's withdrawals and their interlocking narrative arcs. The real, the symbolic, and the imaginary combine within the text and Heil relates this convergence to Jaques Lacan's definition of psychological reality. Heil asserts that Taimur's and Adie's designs "share the idea of a human need to create a virtual, non-factual, and non-actual reality as a form of resistance to finite human existence."¹⁷⁷ Heil's assessment of the motivation behind Taimur's and Adie's creation of alternative realities is also applicable to the motivation behind the investors who fund the Cavern project. This human need to create a form of transcendence or eternity motivates varied interpretations of progress. However, Heil's assessment does not consider the utopian impulses which inspired Adie as a young artist and continue to haunt her contemporary creative endeavours. This impulse is not necessarily a form of resistance to mortality but instead emphasises the plurality of forms of progress with which Powers engages.

Vastly different motivations lead to the protagonists' immersion within these self-created worlds. Once again, Powers depicts protagonists undertaking a pilgrimage through the underworld of personal and national histories after experiencing trauma or disillusionment. The melding of personal and collective histories is threaded throughout their respective internal and external pilgrimages through reassembled creations. The references to the underworld and Orpheus in a description of the potential for code to revive a past, "like causing huge chunks of unravished bride to rise up, just by singing to her," (215) provides insight on the

¹⁷⁷ Johanna Heil, 'Narrative Strands, Lacanian Orders, and the Borromean Knot: Reading Richard Powers' *Plowing the Dark*' in Kley and Kucharzewski, *Ideas of Order*, 145.

collective and individual yearnings contained within these creations. The analogy emphasises the interactions between new forms of narrative production and myth, alluding to the potential for innovation to resurrect a fantasy Arcadian past. The use of creative media to revive a fetishized fictive era of innocence encompasses the enmeshed personal and national histories which engage with the compulsion to recapture a mythic lost past. The overlapping paths between liberatory fictional worlds and oppressive hegemonic narratives expose the porous boundary between the regenerative and degenerative potential of utopian projects. Some of the Cavern architects articulate their dissatisfaction with society via the individual designs of their virtual reality rooms. Adie's own discontent and diminished idealism links her construction of immersive art rooms with a network of creators who seek to "fix all that had been wrong with civilization since the very beginning." (207) Despite this optimism, the wider scenes of violence and military-funded research which led Adie and fellow architect, Spiegel, to abandon their earlier utopian experiment continue to shadow their present endeavours. Spiegel's reference to the William Butler Yeats' poem, 'The Stare's Nest by My Window'¹⁷⁸ emphasises the unresolved utopian impulses and neocolonial histories which resurface within the Cavern: "we have fed our heart on fantasies, the heart's grown brutal from the fare... come build in the house of the empty stare." (211) The warped spectres of persisting dreams and disasters haunt the architects' respective creations.

The historical context of Adie's and Spiegel's attempt to live within a fledgling intentional community, Mahler House, at Wisconsin University is situated within a larger depiction of utopian projects clashing with violent histories.¹⁷⁹ In the wake of the Sterling Hall bombings¹⁸⁰ at the University of Wisconsin, Adie abandons this community and becomes disenchanted with the purely aesthetic potential of art, "*All I wanted to do was make something beautiful. Something that wouldn't hurt anyone.*" (397) The Cavern project provides an opportunity to create within a space which

¹⁷⁸ 'The Stare's Nest by My Window' in William Butler Yeats [1928], *Yeats' Poetry & Prose*, Critical edition (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2001).

¹⁷⁹ Intentional community is a term used here in adherence with Sargent's definition: "A group of five or more adults and their children, if any, who come from more than one nuclear family and who have chosen to live together to enhance their shared values or for some other mutually agreed upon purpose." Sargent, 'The Three Faces of Utopianism Revisited', 15.

¹⁸⁰ The Sterling Hall bombings on August 24th, 1970, at the university of Wisconsin-Madison led to the death of one professor and injured three students. The bombing was carried out by four men as a protest against the university's research connections with the US military and the Vietnam War.

revives Adie's illusion of achieving a total separation from outside society. However, the soundtracks of the other Cavern architects persistently remind Adie of the external world. The impossibility of separating entangled forms of narration is emphasised by the sonic interchange that permeates Adie's silent pictorial world, "trapped between both data channels... agitated by the chill intersection of polyphony and politics." (139) The cacophony created by Vulgamott and Ebesen's compromise, the combination of CNN news reports and William Byrd's *Great Service* or Johanne Ockeghem's '*Missa Prolationum*', are an audible reminder of the permeable boundaries between mass media, history, religion, music, and art. Powers once again references a composer whose structural techniques resemble his own compositional form and content. Powers includes Ockeghem's innovative contrapuntal work and expands upon the depictions of counterpoints and tonal imitations which reoccur throughout his texts. The condensed interchange between an array of creative media enlarges the depiction of the interrelated forms of production which take place within the Cavern in relation to this expansive lemniscate body of work. The references within this passage to information streams, the emerging renaissance period, imitation, and socio-politics, seamlessly links the seemingly incongruent forms of change and communication which can inform a single exchange.

Despite Adie's belief that art can exist as an impartial creative form, distinct from the multitude of sounds and sources that surround her, she unwittingly embeds her designs within a platform which has far-reaching intentions and military funding. The mass shooting which shattered the idealism of her student days reverberates within this project. The decision to work on the Cavern once more exposes Adie to research associated with a US military agenda; the rooms Adie created for purely immersive aesthetic purposes become part of a wider matrix of interconnected cells. This virtual reality is a platform for disseminating authorised fictions, creating utopian worlds, and predicting patterns of change. Powers emphasises that technological platforms can be used to control and weaponize new iterations of narrative design. Once Adie has connected the televised scenes of conflict and turmoil to the creation of these virtual worlds, the illusion of her retreat from an external US reality is shattered: "The road to Basra turned into a hundred-mile-long human ash. Helicopters filmed it in detailed pan from a thousand attentive angles." (398) The technology, which turns devastation into spectacle, distancing the viewer from the

unfolding warfare, is aligned with the immersive yet detached rooms Adie has constructed.

The Cavern project's funding links art with conflict and, by extension, with Taimur's own experience as a hostage during the Beirut hostage crisis: "the Joint Chiefs wanted what art promised: to break the bonds of matter and make the mind real." (396) The attempts to externalise internal constructs and project a highly malleable virtual reality onto a fragmented world is explored through the non-linear narrative which charts varied forms of self-creation in conjunction with conflict and devastation. Taimur's recollection of his entry into Hagia Sophia emphasises the trauma which led to this merging of worlds: "you dropped into the darkness... you broke and fell, you never hit." (413) Taimur's and Adie's desire to recreate pre-existing fictions or works of art in their respective spaces compensates for the loss of creative or physical freedom associated with ongoing US involvement in overseas conflicts. The US military investment in the Cavern emphasises how the speculative or alternative worlds generated by utopian art projects and creative media are repurposed to justify interventionist and quasi-expansionist operations. Once Adie realises the potential uses for the Cavern and her paradisaical art rooms, she destroys her work. Adie enters her ultimate simulation, the remodelled Hagia Sophia, one final time to uncover "what that illusion looked like, stripped of belief," (399) merging with Taimur's world. Once both Adie and Taimur have lost faith in the restorative or protective qualities of their respective havens, their narratives converge within this site of contested meaning.

Powers exposes the junctions between the desires and traumas that contour both narrative arcs, interrelating seemingly incongruous belief systems and ideologies. The fundamental duality in Powers's depiction of creation and devastation, escape and confinement, is viewed through multiple lenses. The proximity of an overpopulated urban area to Taimur's captivity is associated with a faith-based perspective on immanence and transcendence: "your Qur'an is right: the God of creation is as close as your own jugular. And as far." (350) The desire to assume the role of a creator or captor is juxtaposed with an intangible divine presence, aligning spirituality and conflict. Powers contrasts the range of narratives used to solidify group identities with Taimur's wish fulfilment fantasies and self-conscious modification of memories. Taimur's interactions with his memories and fictions shortens the distance between the US and Lebanon. These imagined

interactions with the external world are central to Taimur's enduring sense of agency, connecting the two forms of virtual reality created by each protagonist. The memories of fiction, his childhood, and his failed relationship with Gwen in Chicago are redesigned within Taimur's mind - "You've learned the ability to venture forth... full-color, high-resolution" (350) - creating a parallel cavern construction, designed using the mind's own data stores. Taimur becomes the author of the fictions and memories he re-constructs, undermining the authority assigned to the original events and authors, reclaiming a sense of agency when faced with limited external points of reference. The unpredictable present and malleable past are entwined within Taimur's narrative and create a crossroad between renewal and restriction. The mind's reconstruction of places, events, and literature is central to Taimur's survival whilst heightening the distorted perception of the passing of time experienced as a hostage. These retreats into the past alter the passage of time and distances Taimur from the reality of his situation, allowing for a temporary reprieve from his ongoing trauma.

The repetitions within Taimur's self-created world provide a form of escape during solitary confinement and are not a compulsive recreation of traumatic memories. Although irrepressible reappearances and perpetual returns to the past are frequently depicted in trauma fiction, Powers avoids reproducing this familiar theme. Taimur's narrative occurs whilst this traumatic event is taking place. The repetitions within this aspect of *Plowing the Dark* are related to the wider position of creative media and history within a digital age. Powers engages with the trauma genre without relying solely on pre-existing tropes. Alan Gibbs asserts that the prevalence of this genre has "helped to produce a situation where the once experimental and disorientating narrative forms of trauma – and at a wider level postmodernism – have become both blunted and unmoored from their original purpose."¹⁸¹ Powers avoids this unmooring by situating Taimur's narrative arc within a mosaic of wider irrepressible histories whilst still engaging with the specifics of his trauma. Although Taimur's story line was partly informed by the varied accounts of hostages, the epilogue which quotes Terry Waite, the former negotiator and envoy for the Church of England who himself became a hostage during the Lebanon crisis, balances this specific context with an indication of the artificial and cooperative

¹⁸¹ Gibbs, *Contemporary American Trauma Narratives*, 47.

nature of human history: “Freeing hostages is like putting up a stage set, which you do with the captors, agreeing on each piece as you slowly put it together.” (417) This epilogue reiterates the staged nature of reality and conflict which both the depiction of the hostage crisis in Lebanon and the emergence of virtual reality emphasise. Powers’s non-linear temporal frame successfully depicts the disorientating effects of both trauma and captivity whilst engaging with his wider thematic concerns of mutually beneficial or destructive endeavours.

The repetitions and elongated, looping images of time are specific to each protagonist’s lived experience whilst engaging with the issues of representation and authenticity within wider postmodern society. The shadow of US identity, and how this impinges on societies beyond a national border, is explored before and after Taimur is taken captive. The sense of an overwhelming US cultural and political presence within this space leads to the production of counter-narratives which cast the US as pantomime villains. Taimur’s English class lead him on a brief cultural journey and share their view of the US. The children living through civil war are enamoured with US cultural icons - “Mr. Martin? What means this? ‘I am leaving the material world, and I am immaterial girl” (45) - whilst remaining aware of the true scope of this cultural influence: “Americans speak nothing and own everything. The world needs to learn English, just to talk back to its owner.” (45) The lyric missteps and the children’s perspective on the influence of US forces emphasises the potency of the projection of US hegemonic discourse and mass media in a neocolonial, postmodern era. The children’s sense of identity and autonomy is reduced through their interactions with the increasingly commodified artists who characterise their perception of US postmodern culture.

The depiction of unfolding history from a Western perspective encompasses a range of creative media and merges art theory with aspects of control. Phillip Löffler describes the duality in Powers’s narrative form as invoking “classical postmodernist theories of representation and authorship, whilst simultaneously referencing modernist avant-gardes, as they insist on the authenticity of artistic self-expression.”¹⁸² Despite the potential for innovative collaborations across creative platforms, the suggestion that an individual style can be generated by machines

¹⁸² Phillip Löffler, ‘The Ability to make Worlds’: Lukácsian Aesthetics , Self-Creation, and Richard Powers’ *Plowing the Dark* in Kley and Kucharzewski, *Ideas of Order*, 91.

implies that digital technology can diminish individual creative agency. The ease of recreation in the Cavern is aligned with the problem of authentic representation: “You mean to tell me I can be anyone?... every conceivable style... everyone’s hand in the history of Western...?” (42) Wish fulfilment and artifice combine in these staged realities. The ability to assume someone else’s identity explores the anonymity granted in online spaces in tandem with the forms of surveillance and monitoring associated with televised warfare and data stores.

The potential for collaboration to affect positive change in contrast with the presence of hegemonic forces who can reshape these joint narratives is a thematic concern underpinning the entire text. The loss of autonomy which can occur through the dissemination of fictions explores the porous boundary between utopian and dystopian imagined futures. The potential for these cells or caverns to provide the stage on which to reproduce or reconfigure pre-existing experiences or forms is something which Benny Pock considers in his essay on narrative patterns in Powers’s text. Pock contends, “the realism of Powers’ novel may... reside in the staging of mediality of all experience, of the constant mutual interchanges between facts and fictions.”¹⁸³ US foundational myths are reworked and related to the emerging digital sublime via the Cavern platform. Powers comments upon the desire to create utopian futures whilst mastering chaotic unfurling histories through the inclusion of ancient and contemporary artworks that reference this persisting drive. Adie’s references to pre-existing artwork¹⁸⁴ within her version of Rousseau’s ‘The Dream’: “shepherds huddled around a rock tomb that bore a strange inscription,” (128) provides extra-textual sources which engage with the tradition of fictional paradises embedded with sinister potential.¹⁸⁵ This re-created landscape is imbued with Arcadian imagery and a Memento Mori, enlarging the scope of the original painting to include a range of human impulses.

Adie’s ability to recreate old masters within this new space leads to new forms of collaboration whilst creating tangible links between old and new concepts of creativity and agency. Despite the possibility of using this platform for collaboration, Powers consistently reveals the loss of agency alongside the illusion of a vast digital

¹⁸³ Benny Pock, “‘The Fabulous Persian Machine’: The Function of Narrative Patterns in the Age of Networked Media and in Richard Powers’ *Plowing the Dark*” in Kley and Kucharzewski, 130.

¹⁸⁴ Nicolas Poussin, *Et in Arcadia Ego*, 1639, Oil on Canvas, 85 cm x 121 cm, 1639, Louvre Museum, Paris.

¹⁸⁵ Henri Rousseau, *The Dream*, 1910, Oil Paint, 2.04 m x 2.98 m, 1910, Museum of Modern Art, New York.

space. This immeasurable open expanse creates a new cultural space which is moderated by the same inequalities of power. James Bridle similarly engages with fears relating to digitalisation and cultural space in *New Dark Age*, examining the digital sublime and limits of technology. Bridle asserts, “the danger of this emphasis on the coproduction of physical and cultural space by computation is that it in turn occludes the vast inequalities of power that it both relies upon and reproduces.”¹⁸⁶ When Adie first enters the Cavern project, this new corporate world and the menacing technological sublime are depicted as a human-made evil of cartoonish proportions: “she bobbed in a sea of digital serpents... who had let these devices into the world.” (11) This overwhelming sinister technology is initially portrayed as the new manifestation of the serpent in the garden, an artificial opponent that will damage pre-existing modes of production. The pre-empted loss of innocence is amplified by the biblical references which align supernatural and human evil. The depiction of emerging innovations and handcrafted designs engaged in an epic battle of opposing forms turns Adie’s distrust of a digital platform into an ancient enduring struggle: “she wanted to hack at the silicon swarms – Michael driving off the fallen angels.” (11-12) Despite these original reservations, Powers ultimately emphasises the similarities between these forms of creativity. The persisting underlying desire to produce expressive works of art that evince a sense of transcendence and eternity expands within this vast digital landscape. The fears associated with a veiled imbalance of power and the erasure of agency are connected to pre-existing creative narratives which similarly employed the illusion of an infinite space.

In contrast with Adie’s fears, Spiegel believes that the search for transformative spaces imbued with a sense of eternity, innovation, and awe can be found within computer-programmed designs. These innovative spaces, “where we can be subsumed by forces larger than ourselves... places where we can reconstruct ourselves and nature. Where people can share transforming experiences,” (158) are imbued with a new collective potential, creating a new nature where a sense of atemporality can be temporarily achieved. O’Shea’s hopes for the positive potential of the digital age are similarly depicted in *Plowing the Dark*. O’Shea suggests that, “by stitching historical ideas and moments together and applying them to contemporary problems, it is possible to create a useable past, an agenda

¹⁸⁶ James Bridle, *New Dark Age: Technology and the End of the Future* (London: Verso Books, 2019), 39.

for an alternative digital future.”¹⁸⁷ The range of “messy exiles” (266) involved in the creation of the cavern have fled from people, countries, or dreams and combine their individual histories within their constructed rooms. The spectres of the past are embedded into their designs and their faith in the advent of a digital sublime. However, the creators’ dreams of building a haven and an alternative future are shattered when they once again witness the staged realities imposed on societies. The illusion of a new Arcadian space unravels as the narrative progresses, “the old, mass hallucination came apart at the seams.” (237) The possibility for future change is undermined by the ongoing scenes of conflict which are disseminated through mass media and emerging digital technology.

The accumulation of fictions and creative media occurs alongside the fall of the Berlin Wall and the start of the next decade: “the builders of the next world gathered together in the Cavern to witness the end of the previous one... mass disaster tinged with religious awe.” (236-7) This televised event, a symbol for the eradication of boundaries, holds significance for each of the Cavern’s architects. The evolving technological frontier through which the Cavern artists seek to gain a sense of eternity and agency is depicted as a site of migration as well as the location of another potential utopian future. The architects of the Cavern project seek refuge within this new world, and the stories which unfold amongst Adie’s personal pilgrimage explore this evolving new pioneer spirit. Ronan O’Reilly, an Irish immigrant architect working within the Cavern, comments on the vast digital landscape populated from within this Seattle building: “the Americans were launching an out-and-out frontal attack on electronic transcendence. Mankind’s next migration.” (75) O’Reilly connects their journeys into a digital space with the legacy of spirituality, purported discovery, and mass movement. The oscillations between Taimur’s and Adie’s reality and revisionary creations, alongside the journey into this new intangible frontier, frustrate simplistic notions of movement and migration whilst returning to foundational myths.

Despite the predominately visual nature of the creative forms explored within *Plowing the Dark*, Powers still considers the role of sound within the archives of memory and the Cavern. Spiegel’s latest creation in The Cavern is inspired by his

¹⁸⁷ O’Shea, *Future Histories: What Ada Lovelace, Tom Paine, and the Paris Commune Can Teach Us About Digital Technology*, 9.

friend, and Adie's ex-husband, Ted Zimmerman. Zimmerman's progressive illness restricts his ability to be involved with the Cavern project directly and, instead, Spiegel constructs a room where music can be played virtually. Zimmerman's compositions haunt Adie's and Spiegel's respective motivations to create an alternative future: "the tune swelled and scudded off, elsewhere down a further spectral corridor. The notes spilled from some hammerklavier of speculation." (302) Powers emphasises the subjective responses to organised sound to enhance the image of transmedial lemniscate narratives transposed into a digital consciousness. Friedrich Nietzsche's assertion in the 'Fourth Division: Concerning the Soul of Artists and Authors' of *Human, All Too Human*, references this complex Beethoven sonata and the impulse to extend and improve upon an artist's work: "In such cases the artist of a later day must endeavour to fill out the life of a great man, - what, for instance, he would do who, as master of all orchestral effects, would call into life that symphony which has fallen into the piano-trance."¹⁸⁸ Adie and Spiegel belong to a legacy of artists who engage with pre-existing art, emphasising the perpetual returns within progress. The combination of sound and memory shape Spiegel's interactive platform, highlighting the innovative forms of recreation and restoration which can occur within a virtual reality. The potential for the revivification of art and the renewal of bodily autonomy through virtual composition and alternative realities inspires both Spiegel and Adie to create increasingly multisensory designs.

As the 1990s begin the attempts at full immersion are heightened and incremental layers are added to the architects' narrative-building constructs; Adie's 3D renderings of artwork are transforming from collaged landscapes into mimetic spectacles. Within The Arles¹⁸⁹ room, sound is used to simulate memories and create a heightened immersive experience: "*sound is better than visual... more virtual to begin with. It hangs in space, getting sharper in memory.*" (257) This room foregrounds the evocative potential of sonic forms and provides a collaborative platform where the architects meld their visions of a fully rendered virtual space. This development expands upon the initial depictions of the Cavern as a massive polyphonic scene: "countless dots in a cosmic halftone process, the hammers of a trillion player pianos, the programmed nubs on the drum of a galaxy sized music

¹⁸⁸ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Human All-Too-Human*, trans. Helen Zimmern (Edinburgh: T.N. Foulis, 1910), 175-6.

¹⁸⁹ Vincent Van Gough, *Bedroom in Arles*, 1888, Oil on Canvas, 72 cm x 90 cm, 1888, Van Gough Museum, Amsterdam.

box.” (31) Powers aligns the Cavern with innovative vast organic and inorganic designs, fusing imagery of the universe with semi-reprographic productions and emphasising the spliced forms of patternmaking generated in this digital platform.

Powers aligns these accelerating forms of technological and artistic innovation with conquest, connecting these computer-generated environments with enduring aspirations and ideologies. O’Reilly believes that this new technology will allow society to master the design of mapped organic codes: “we’d filled the map with knowledge. Now we had a tool with which to look inside.” (80) O’Reilly’s faith that these emerging technologies will facilitate the dawn of a digital Promethean Man and a utopian society, articulates a contemporary permutation of the pursuit of progress. Lizzie O’Shea’s interpretation of Adam Greenfield’s ‘unreconstructed logical positivism’ aligns Greenfield and O’Reilly’s ideologies: “A belief that... with the correct inputs and algorithms, technical systems can generate solutions to all collective human needs.”¹⁹⁰ However, O’Reilly’s simulated world cannot predict the tumult caused by unexpected crisis: “his numbers hit that geopolitical slick patch, and the loss of traction sent them skidding off into an alternate universe.” (121) Powers cautions against this unfounded faith in emerging technologies, emphasising that the trajectory of unresolved conflict, presence of neocolonial forces, and changing shape of contested geographic spaces cannot be predicted or resolved by an algorithm.

Rajan Rajasundaran sees O’Reilly’s desire to predict the future as representational of “*these white people,*” who are “*truly dangerous.*” (122) Powers repeatedly relates the image of an innovative virtual space, replete with conquerable frontiers, to a Western perception of linear development with potentially destructive outcomes. Jacques Acquerelli, another Cavern architect, traces his belief in the autonomous benefits of interacting with immersive technology to The Colossal Cave game he played at age 11 in 1977. Acquerelli’s desire for agency over an unpredictable adult world led to his transformation into a modern-day pioneer traversing a computer-generated space: “for all that it lacked, Colossal Cave was still endless... However deterministic... it still promoted him from victim to collaborator.” (107) These depictions of emerging technologies engage with a legacy of oppression

¹⁹⁰ O’Shea, *Future Histories: What Ada Lovelace, Tom Paine, and the Paris Commune Can Teach Us About Digital Technology*, 56.

and conquest in tandem with an unresolved desire to achieve the role of an omnipotent creator. The importance placed upon freedom within these open expanses contrasts with the highly restricted agency afforded to Taimur, highlighting the persisting links between control and neocolonial conflict. Both narrative strands explore how these irruptions within society are reconciled by withdrawing into creative media and self-created worlds.

In *The Past Within Us*, Tessa Morris-Suzuki considers the role of popular media in contemporary representations of history. Suzuki asserts that “media and imagination are entwined in a complex dialectical, spiral... the politics of the imagination and the internal dynamics of media have worked together to shape accounts of the past.”¹⁹¹ Powers depicts this ongoing dynamic in *Plowing the Dark* and foregrounds the role of creative forms in an ongoing yet repeating history of conflict within the era of globalization. Taimur’s re-staged memories and Adie’s reinterpretations of recognizable art works examine the purpose of disorientating or reorientating counter-narratives within a wider pattern of US history. Alongside this, the Cavern platform provides an opportunity to examine the imaginative forms which shaped histories prior to the emergence of mass media. Powers persuasively depicts a range of creative forms which have partly shaped society in preceding eras. Adie, Spiegel, and Lim’s discussion on the significance of the Lascaux cave paintings to contemporary virtual reality projects brings a dialogue relating to symbolic order into the text: “*I read somewhere Lascaux has become a simulation of itself... they were simulations to begin with... an initiation ceremony for the new universe of symbolic thought.*” (130) Although the tools to create a symbolic order of things have developed, the desire to project a fictional internal narrative onto an external source via a creative medium remains unchanged. The transnational influence of many of these creative forms are recontextualised within the text’s contemporary setting whilst retaining traces of their prior status. The Cavern creates a space where these histories can be reimagined, redefining spaces of cultural significance and uncovering porous borders.

Alongside this engagement with seemingly infinite patterns of communication in human history, Powers depicts inexplicable moments of collision which eschew realism in favour of a sense of mystical transcendence, evading definition and the

¹⁹¹ Tessa Morris-Suzuki, *The Past Within Us: Media, Memory, History* (London: Verso Books, 2005), 30.

application of an underlying code. The convergence of events and memories which leads to these moments exceed the pursuit of an ultimate pattern: “*every so often someone stumbles onto a hidden wrinkle, one that puts the marbles into a surprise configuration.*” (263) Kladjan’s marble game analogy emphasises that seemingly infinite cycles within history can be disrupted by collaboration and the emergence of unanticipated patterns. The unexpected futures created when tradition and memory, speculation and design, combine to produce moments of innovation are generated by lemniscate models of development. Jameson’s assertion that the repetitions in musical composition can create a deliberate unbalancing of a developing melody, aligns the unexpected changes created by repetition within musical compositions with the structure and content of Powers’s novels: “as soon as you let repetition back in... tonal centers threaten to form which unbalance the system as a whole and unsettle what one cannot call its equilibrium but rather its planned and systematic disequilibrium.”¹⁹² Powers successfully creates an image of repetition with a transformative difference through this spliced transmedial narrative which reveals unexpected parallels between seemingly disparate experiences of the world.

Although both Adie and Taimur articulate their desire for a potential new narrative to emerge and restructure the staging of reality, the ongoing influence of restrictive histories is not displaced by the protagonists’ self-designed worlds and pursuit of freedom. The ongoing dissonance and ruptures between timelines and crafted worlds are not rectified by a harmonious resolution. The first meeting of Taimur and his daughter, who was born whilst he was held captive, concludes the image of fictional worlds intersecting with the real. The mythic figure of Taimur, “the fable she’s grown up on,” (415) enters his daughter’s life. Despite the potential for a fairy-tale ending, Taimur’s intrusive thoughts emphasise the ongoing ramifications of his experience as a hostage and his new outsider status. The daughter’s drawing of Taimur highlights both the childlike wish-fulfilment and simplistic account of complex events - with a clear beginning and end – which can be articulated via creative media: “a crayon man, returning to a crayon home... I made this for you.” (415) The enduring belief in the potency of art as a form of communication which can articulate complex emotions, influence the shape of a utopian society, or create simplified

¹⁹² Jameson, *The Ancients and the Postmoderns*, 203.

situational narratives to solidify large and small-scale group identities, persists and continues to emerge in unpredictable forms.

Conclusion

In *Operation Wandering Soul* and *Plowing the Dark*, the depiction of contestable histories and spaces alongside the myriad interpretations of pre-existing narratives emphasises the changeable nature of cultural symbols and national borders. The fluid boundaries created between or within countries in both texts are linked to sites of conflict and erasure. The border between Thailand and Vietnam is the site of Kraft's experience of warfare and violence as a child. Similarly, the Green Line established in Beirut, Lebanon between the 1970s and the Civil War in the 1990s, which separated a mainly Muslim West from the predominantly Christian East, is significant to Taimur's time as a hostage. Hagia Sophia is described as a manifestation of the unconscious's green line and functions as a reimagined space which facilitates an unlikely temporal transcendence. Powers enmeshes historical events into these respective texts to foreground the fluctuating meaning attached to spaces within society. These spaces and embedded histories are challenged by the protagonists' subversive attempts to create their own counter-narratives and combat the restrictions and fissures found within wider society. The porous nature of boundary lines is repeatedly examined and related to the changing hegemonic narrative impulses embedded in ideologies associated with innovation and progress.

The repeating pattern of multifaceted, interrelated histories and nonlinear timelines enables Powers to engage with similar themes within his novels whilst exploring a range of content matter and varied creative forms. The use of pre-existing works of literature, artworks, and music in *Plowing the Dark* and *Operation Wandering Soul* provide extra-textual sources which relate each text to established literary and creative traditions, offering a basis from which ambiguity and repetition can be further explored. In *Operation Wandering Soul*, Richard Kraft's childhood in Thailand resembles Powers's own childhood experiences, positioning the external author as a point of reference within the novel, destabilising the position of the narrator and blurring the lines between autobiography and fiction.¹⁹³ Robin Silbergleid's assessment of Tim O'Brien's work which emphasised the porous border between fiction and autobiography is pertinent to Powers's texts. Silbergleid argues that this structure results in "the rebirth of the author... offering an illusion of stability

¹⁹³ For further example see *Galatea 2:2*, *Orfeo*, and *Prisoners Dilemma*.

in texts that otherwise thrive on ambiguity and multiplicity.”¹⁹⁴ The vast expanse of unstable histories within these late-twentieth-century cities, coupled with the ambiguity and repetition associated with trauma, are anchored to the figure of a recrafted author. Powers once again inserts the author into the text, using elements of metafiction to highlight the constructed nature of purportedly factual histories and the hegemonic narratives which shape national identities. The interchanges between fact and fictions emphasise the staged nature of reality.

Powers’s depiction of the ongoing relevance of fictions and fables to each text’s adult protagonist charts a path from childhood tales to adult utopian desires: “That is how the world’s best storytellers always start: It was so. And it was not so... there was a time, and there was not a time.” (PTD 146) The lack of finite answers and clear delineations between fantasy and reality shape each text’s form and content. The depictions of the adult protagonists are embedded with references to fictions which continue to shape their perception of reality and time whilst they search for an alternative future. Fredric Jameson contends that “the content of Utopian form will emerge from that other form or genre which is the fairy tale.”¹⁹⁵ The links between children’s fables and permutating creative traditions are considered alongside US identity narratives and failed utopian projects in both texts. The endless cycle of child abuse and conflict in *Operation Wandering Soul* is scattered with utopian promises and the nightmarish realisations of these desires throughout history and fictions. Similarly, in *Plowing the Dark*, Powers considers the emerging forms used to disseminate hegemonic discourse and the search for the ultimate code to disrupt or control the temporal pattern, connecting ideologies, adaptations, and trauma. Salmon asserts that the technological advancements in the 1990s US meant that, “storytelling has been able to emerge as a technology of communications, control, and power.”¹⁹⁶ In both texts, the changing role of this form of communication within the US is embedded within an ongoing transmedial narrative, reframing the evolution of the positive or negative influence of creative forms in the US in relation to a wider transnational history.

¹⁹⁴ Robin Silbergleid, ‘Making things Present: Tim O’Brien’s Autobiographical Metafiction’, quoted in, Gibbs, *Contemporary American Trauma Narratives*, 69.

¹⁹⁵ Fredric Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions* (London: Verso Books, 2007), 85.

¹⁹⁶ Salmon, *Storytelling*, 6.

The creative forms which shape enduring US fictive histories are explored alongside the subversive or dissociative acts undertaken by each text's respective protagonists. Varied forms of composition are promoted by the characters in each text alongside their urge to detach from their current, unfolding history. The protagonist's immersion into alternative fictionalised worlds is achieved with varying degrees of success. The failure of fiction to provide Kraft with a viable escape from a deteriorating reality emphasises the tragic and dissociative potential of narratives. In contrast, Adie and Taimur temporarily achieve transcendence from reality when they simultaneously enter the reconstructed cultural crucible of Hagia Sophia, reframing the mind as pivotal to creating alternative realities – "*the mind is the first virtual reality.*" (PTD 130) Despite these differences, both texts emphasise the central role of repeating collaborative endeavours to their respective protagonists' sense of individual, national, and group identities. The oscillations back and forth through time, or to a projected future, allow for a temporary reprieve from restrictive spaces and narratives.

The journeys through individual and collective desires, and sites imbued with equivocal meaning, as the protagonists' search for perfected alternate realities demonstrate the ongoing relevance of mythic totality to US society. Kirby Farrell examines the post traumatic culture of the 1990s and asserts that oppression and advancement haunt US history: "trauma and triumph have been complementary masks in America from the beginning."¹⁹⁷ Powers similarly depicts these interlocking forces and explores the patterns of conflict which accompany promoted images of progress in each respective text's account of the contemporary US. The protagonists continue to search for an alternative future, engaging in shared acts of world building to move beyond repeating cycles of violence and conquest. However, these communal acts do not culminate in a cohesive new counter-narrative. The conclusion of each text emphasises that the impulse to blend fictions with an often-unbearable reality persists, engaging with the expanding trace memories of these communities. The instances of short-lived intentional communities create a similar impact to a work of fiction, recalling Sargent's description of an intentional community's legacy: "These influences, when they can be identified and traced are best thought of as similar to the influence of a book or reader. Both sorts of influence

¹⁹⁷Farrell, *Post-Traumatic Culture*, 168.

are the residual effects of an action – writing a book or founding a community.”¹⁹⁸

The entwined focus on the residual impact of art work and the role of the author, in tandem with the impact of intentional communities, emphasises the parallels between these forms of influence and action. In both texts, seemingly eternal repeating societal impulses and the characters’ longing to escape their immediate reality involves an intricate layering of varied enmeshed intertextual and intermedial references. These narratives within a narrative engage with entwined images of loss, desire, and transcendence as well as the notion of pilgrimages. Powers continues to create lemniscate models of human history, exploring the role a range of creative forms play in the ongoing search for, and promotion of, a potentially utopian society.

¹⁹⁸ Sargent, ‘The Three Faces of Utopianism Revisited’, 16.

Chapter Three: Prisoner's Dilemma and The Time of Our Singing

Introduction

Richard Powers's portrayal of the counter-narratives which emerge from fragments of factual history, fables, and pre-existing compositions, creates an image of a multi-faceted and expansive US history via the slow-accumulation of variations on pre-existing themes. This aspect of Powers's narratives continues in *Prisoner's Dilemma*¹⁹⁹ and *The Time of Our Singing*²⁰⁰. The central families in both texts anchor themselves to pertinent moments in time whilst rearranging pre-existing forms, creating a bespoke language suffused with hidden meanings within their respective private spheres. The approaches to communication promoted by both families are viewed as protective strategies, preserving their chosen identities whilst having the potential to create a utopic world beyond a small-scale community. The Hobsons' and Stroms' individual narratives explore the limits of freedom associated with creative media and the potential for change to be brought about via the fusion of differing forms of knowledge. The forms of storytelling embedded in national ideologies and utopianism are foregrounded in both texts.

In *Prisoner's Dilemma*, the central narrative follows the Hobson family as they struggle to contend with the mysterious illness of their father, Eddie Sr. At the same time, the patriarch compulsively erases and re-dictates the story of the all-American Hobstown and an alternative version of World War Two. Eddie Sr re-envisages the fate during this era of a group of Japanese Americans, casting them as assistant animators working on Walt Disney's film masterpiece, 'You Are the War'. The use of pre-existing forms within a new context occurs in *Prisoner's Dilemma* alongside the transcription of an alternative past. Powers interrogates the fabricated nature of national and global narratives through these revisionary orated chronicles. The liberatory and imprisoning potential of collaborative narratives rooted in unreconciled histories are explored via adjacent narratives strands. Ultimately, the spectre which the advent of the Atomic Age has cast over the Hobsons' lives is revealed to be the potential cause of the father's illness, as well as the source of his parallel narrative.

¹⁹⁹ Richard Powers, *Prisoner's Dilemma*. Subsequent references in the text.

²⁰⁰ Richard Powers, *The Time of Our Singing*. Subsequent references in the text.

This protagonist's nomadic efforts to find an alternative narrative within the US ends in Alamogordo. Eddie Sr's disappearance and presumed death at the site of his unresolved inner turmoil, the Trinity Test Site in New Mexico, completes his journey through a chaotic reordering of an irrepressible past. Multiple interpretations of the family's saga emerge as the Hobsons try and reconcile with both a family and a global history.

In *The Time of Our Singing*, Powers once again considers the restrictive and redemptive qualities of narratives in relation to music. The Strom family in *The Time of Our Singing* struggle to gain acceptance within an often hostile and discriminatory US society and place differing values on the liberatory qualities of musical performances. David Strom is a Caucasian German Jewish immigrant who arrives in the United States in the years preceding the beginning of World War Two. Delia Daley is an African American woman, whose mother left the Carolinas for Philadelphia in the early-twentieth century. David and Delia meet in 1939 and then have three children: Jonah, Joseph, and Ruth. The Strom family seek to create their own inclusive world and use musical improvisation as an outlet to promote the possibility for collaboration and transcendence from histories of oppression. The hybrid languages which are illustrative of the parents' world views are central to their vision of their children living in an inclusive, utopic US society. However, David Strom's conflicted roles create internal family divisions, exposing the ruptures created by differing notions of development. David, a keen amateur musician, a Jewish first-generation immigrant from Strasbourg, and a scientist working on the development of the atomic bomb, struggles to reconcile his differing identities during and after World War Two. David's external reality penetrates the Stroms' home environment and shadows David and Delia's utopian vision. These divisions intensify following the death of Delia and lead to further family dissonance. As the siblings grow older, they question their parents' creation of a utopian family home and the redemptive qualities of music to varying degrees. The Strom children reach maturity during the civil rights era; the prejudice found in the elitist classical music world is depicted in tandem with protests, riots, and the Vietnam War. The potential to escape the legacy of racism and conflict through combined creative narratives is countered by the image of revolution and ongoing oppression during the latter half of the twentieth century.

The shadow of the Manhattan project and the detonation of the first atomic bomb in New Mexico haunt the patriarchs of the Hobson and Strom families. Both fathers struggle to create a future divorced from their haunted pasts and strive to craft an idyllic reality via varied art forms, exposing the central role of storytelling and creative media to the past, present, and future. The fascination with ruptures within time and alternative futures is anchored to these repeating pasts which shape the present for both the family and wider society. The fluid boundaries between fact and fictions, and the potency of creative narrative forms within the twentieth-century US, are related to entwined personal and national identity narratives. In both texts, Powers's depiction of a range of shared media: storytelling, trivia, oral compositions, and artistic collaboration, enlarges the image of the enduring relevance of art to a contemporary US society. These engagements with a range of fictions are illustrative of both the cracks and harmonious compositions within the respective private spheres of the family. The cumulative image of the utopian legacy within the United States and Europe in the latter half of the twentieth century emphasises the links between utopian beliefs and devastating or regenerative events.

Prisoner's Dilemma

Richard Powers's second novel, *Prisoner's Dilemma*, focuses on revisionary narratives and the confines created by history. The title of the text hints at the thematic concerns of the narrative whilst referencing the famous dilemma created by Merrill Flood and Melvin Dresher in 1950. This puzzle dilemma explores rational behaviour in relation to loyalty: will the prisoners in solitary confinement betray each other when they are offered the possibility of a lesser sentence. The rational solution would be betrayal in exchange for a lesser sentence, however mutual cooperation would result in a greater overall outcome for both prisoners. The focus of this novel, the Hobson family, are similarly confined within their patriarch's suppressed past. The family struggle to navigate through a home life suffused with Eddie Sr's verbal diversions, hidden history, and unacknowledged illness. Alongside the depiction of the Hobson family as they struggle to combat Eddie Sr's declining health is an alternative account of World War Two. Ultimately, these past and present narratives reach the same destination in New Mexico, revealing the historic incident which imprisons the family. In 1945 Eddie Sr was transferred to a base near Amarillo, New Mexico, where he witnessed the detonation of the first atomic bomb at the Trinity test site. Following this pivotal event, Eddie Sr. starts recording the alternative narrative of World War Two, launching his unending task to alter the sequence of events which shaped the latter half of the twentieth-century US.

Powers includes multiple references to edited pasts and divisive ideologies and explores how these impact upon the private lives of US inhabitants and hinder open communication. The post-war era of panic and suspicion overshadows the Hobson home, their use of language, and Eddie Sr's alternative narrative. Eddie Sr's own use of the Prisoner's Dilemma scenario is related to a wider US history: "two men and McCarthy... no rubber hoses you understand. This is America; it's all done with logic." (69-71) The central role ideology plays within the 'Red Scare'-era US, separating and condemning the two prisoners, emphasises the danger and potency of words and seemingly rational interrogation 'games'. Similarly, the Hobson family are unable to separate themselves from their immediate situation and remain complicit in their paralysis, creating complex forms of communication reliant upon a shared store of knowledge and trivia: "Steeped in a harmless word game where reasoning from above was so much more difficult than the harmless and more

acceptable solution to the dilemma: stay still and preserve diplomatic relations.” (73) The transcendence or separation from reality is seen as the only possible alternative to continued confinement within a ruptured family sphere whilst combatting Eddie Sr’s dissociative decline.

The Hobstown narrative begun by Eddie Sr, is a creative re-telling of events which provides a way of amending or masking an unexplainable history. Eddie Sr repeatedly erases and dictates this project before arriving at the remaining Hobstown narrative which begins in 1939. Eddie Sr’s final narrative is influenced by the impact of the 1939 World’s Fair, the death of his older brother in combat, and his experiences as a trooper stationed at the first nuclear test site in New Mexico. This unending utopian project is influenced by Eddie Sr’s romanticised view of the US, highlighting the fusion of fact and fiction within US identity narratives. This speculative account systematically unwinds the narratives which promoted warfare and the innovation of the atomic bomb, highlighting the range of components involved in this vast cultural production. The varied creative media and innovators that reappear within Eddie Sr’s Hobstown narratives reveals the connections between a range of institutions whilst considering the role of the artist and the author as the propagator, or disruptor, of preconceived images of reality. Patricia Ewick’s and Susan Silbey’s assessment of the assumptions which go unchallenged within seemingly natural and objective narratives is pertinent to Eddie Sr’s subversive, alternative creation: “As narratives depict understandings of particular persons and events, they reproduce, without exposing, the connections of the specific story and persons to the structure of relations and institutions that made the story plausible.”²⁰¹ Powers exposes the structures which have forged a narrative of these events by producing an alternative account of this era, foregrounding one man’s understanding of the interconnected institutions and cultural artefacts which have shaped his perception of reality and history.

The restrictive or freeing potential of language and narratives is explored via the perspective of this one family as they struggle to contend with the legacy created by their father’s and the US’s living past. The Hobsons’ use and perception of language reflects upon the role of language within society. The family need to

²⁰¹ Patricia Ewick and Susan S. Silbey, ‘Subversive Stories and Hegemonic Tales: Toward a Sociology of Narrative’, *Law & Society Review* 29, no. 2 (1995): 197–226, 214.

cooperate to receive a lesser sentence and ultimately escape their captivity: “Hobstown, evolving as it had through endless jails, had come back full circle... having listened in, they were now each of them condemned to do something about the ending.” (344) The potential for Eddie Sr’s children to create an effective change and escape this dilemma together explores the struggle for autonomy within a romanticised US landscape. The repeated attempts to update or amend societal narratives highlights the potential to create or destroy through a process of renewal.

In the opening chapter, ‘Riddles’, Powers’s reference to Johann Wolfgang von Goethe’s poem, ‘Eins Und Alles’ articulates the thematic content and temporal structure of the narrative: “*For all must into Nothing fall... If it will persist in Being,*” (14). The proximity of erasure and eternity, legacy and liberation, and the seemingly immeasurable passing of time are underlying themes throughout the text. The emphasis placed on both the individual and society, and the processes of emergence, metamorphosis, and transcendence, are encompassed within this brief quotation. This process of expansion and contraction creates a broad narrative form, moving between family minutiae and large-scale images of global history in relation to past, present, and emerging utopian sentiments. These thematic concerns are replicated by Powers in the lemniscate narrative form. Although the text may at first appear to have an ouroboros form, the interwoven past and future timelines intersect in the present and create a figure of eight timeline. The movements between Eddie Sr’s accounts of the reimagined past, fragmented present, and alternative future, and his children’s accounts of family life and their recollections of the past create multiple expansive timelines. The different time frames occupied by this narrative are fused together, frustrating attempts at forming a linear account of historical events. The lemniscate model of time which structures *Prisoner’s Dilemma* allows Powers to foreground the accumulation of staggered narratives which are anchored to one man’s response to a pivotal event.

In the narrative’s present, the Hobson children struggle to decipher their father’s dizzying web of invention and preoccupation with patchworked knowledge and quotes. The entwined narrative strands form chapters that switch from the events occurring as Eddie Sr becomes increasingly ill to the narrative he has created. As the narrative and his illness progress, the line between Eddie Sr’s illness and the desire to unravel his internal Hobstown world blur. The separate spaces occupied by these narratives merge into one as the Hobson family become more

aware of the tragic significance of this hidden world. Eddie Sr's children eventually listen to their father's personal narrative and acknowledge the changes which occur as the story unfolds: "as the fable went on, it slowly changed from being about the disease of history to being the story of his father, sick with that disease." (317) The physical manifestation of historical trauma and atrocity radiate within the family's and the US nation's present. This bodily manifestation of trauma, and Eddie Sr's increasing seizures, are aligned with his frequent retreats into his own revisionary history. The two manifestations of this disease collide when Eddie Sr returns to New Mexico and confronts the museum's narratives of the atomic bomb innovation.

Eddie Sr's compulsion to create and escape past events in the present remains inextricably linked to experiences during his childhood, World War Two, and his subsequent radiation poisoning. Eddie Sr's quest to create the ultimate revisionary account of the World War Two-era US, is a response to the dawn of the Atomic Age. The Manhattan project and its destructive implications are one of the major catalysts for Eddie Sr's compulsion to create an alternative history - "everything has changed except my father's power to make any difference." (322) The promotion of man as the ultimate creator and redeemer is embedded within the rhetoric surrounding this man-made feat of destruction. In Eddie Sr's recollection of this event, introspective narratives collide with monumental moments from the past. The unremarkable artefacts of US cultural life are forever melded to J. Robert Oppenheimer's famous words and the explosion credited with beginning the resolution of World War Two:

The light, three times brighter than midday, simply persists. At the moment that Oppenheimer, a few miles west, speaks to himself those often quoted words from the Bhagavad Gita, "I am become Death, the destroyer of worlds," my father hears, at his back, the unchanged chatter of card players, Sinatra's sinners still smooching angels, in an early and unexplainable sun-shower.
(321)

The depiction of this everyday backdrop amidst scenes of historic change and devastation relates pivotal moments of change to the banal. Powers melds the mundane and the sublime to create an image of innovation where the lines drawn between popular culture, scientific achievement, and ancient narratives are erased. Oppenheimer's fusion of science and art within this speech are a key influence on Powers's focus on the connections between seemingly distinct forms. The influence of Hindu scripture and the poet John Donne's devotional poems highlights the role of

man as a creator, freed from the bounds of a greater power who controls the fate of humanity. The association of unbridled force with a higher power is interrogated through these scenes and engages with a legacy of US authors and poets who failed to reconcile with the use of creative forms to promote warfare and US power.²⁰²

Seyla Benhabib's perception of the communitarians' critique of liberalism is pertinent to Eddie Sr's futile attempts at crafting his own world in the wake of the irrevocable damage caused by atomic bombs. Benhabib notes that, "faced with the myth of Promethean humanity, communitarians argue that the liberal conception of historical progress is illusory, and that history has brought with it irreversible losses."²⁰³ This myth of the Promethean man is similarly critiqued through Powers's depiction of the apex of Enlightenment-era notions of development as Oppenheimer repossesses the title of creator and potentially destroys the world. The initial reference to Goethe continues with the implications of the legacy of 'Prometheus'. The flawed attempts at omnipotence culminate in this mythologised desert space: "Did you suppose/ I should hate life,/ Flee into the wilderness,/ Because not all/ My blossoming dreams bore fruit."²⁰⁴ The creation of the atomic bomb engages with the notion of the Promethean man whilst interrelating the legacy of collaborative forms of innovation and devastation to flawed dreams. The nodes connecting regression and progression, and art and science, are consistently shown to be porous and in an endless state of renewal. Eddie Sr creates a counter narrative in the hopes of amending this blinding new dawn before ultimately vanishing at the reconstituted site of his fatal transformation.

Eddie Sr's return to New Mexico in the closing chapters of the text includes his visit to the museums which hold the carefully curated version of the Nuclear test sites, concluding his pilgrimage through the US landscape. This final journey to Alamogordo places the concurrent narratives within a shared textual space. The previously italicised chapters, where Eddie Sr's alternate histories were at first confined, appears here as an accepted occurrence. Powers highlights spaces where fantasy overlays reality within the US landscape as Eddie Jr traces his father's

²⁰² "Post-Whitmanic poets... had recognized and indeed had long struggled with this discourse of American supremacy and distinction founded in the sacralization of force." Wilson, *American Sublime*, 7.

²⁰³ Seyla Benhabib, *Situating the Self: Gender, Community and Postmodernism in Contemporary Ethics* (Cambridge: Polity, 1992), 69.

²⁰⁴ 'Prometheus' in Johann Wolfgang Goethe, *The Book of Lieder*, trans. Richard Stokes (London: Faber, [1819] 2005).

journey to Alamogordo, combining two accounts of the atomic bomb within one artificial space. Tessa Morris-Suzuki's analysis of the purpose of war photography is similarly communicated by Eddie Sr in these museum scenes. Morris-Suzuki concludes that images of the atomic bombings were sometimes "edited and presented in ways which seek to avert the eye from the problems of responsibility."²⁰⁵ The carefully arranged interpretation of history within this space creates a narrative of victory and innovation as opposed to devastation and loss, utilising a creative medium to promote a biased partial account of events.

The artificial quasi-fantastical veneer that is imposed on history and the US cultural landscape is something which Judie Newman associates with US utopian thought. Newman asserts that compulsory positivity is a "central plank in American ideology... [and] the enemy of utopian thought and action, masking social problems and returning them to the plane of ineffectual individualism."²⁰⁶ The omnipresent nostalgia infused in the depiction of a US national identity is articulated via Eddie Sr's ceaseless passion for Americana artifacts. The rupture created by the atomic bomb in the depiction of Americana creates a fragmented image of a US national identity which Eddie seeks to repair. Eddie Sr alters a space within the Visitor Information Center at the National Atomic Museum, jarringly inserting a narrative into a location imbued with an air of authority to highlight this obscured reality. The Mickey Mouse ears in the cash till and the Donald Duck cartoon, which replaces the newsreel in the projector, undermines the authorised account of atomic bomb testing and World War Two whilst revealing the forms of propaganda which still shape history.²⁰⁷ Powers inserts pop culture and cartoon history into the text and highlights the instances of positivity which shape collective identities. Eddie Sr plants subversive forms into this museum space to expose the role of propaganda and stagecraft within seemingly objective spaces; the Hobstown project is exposed as a national endeavour. Artie's observations that "we are invariably trapped by immediate concerns into missing the long run, the big picture" and that his father acts as the "caretaker for the entire tribe... for all the imprisoning of innocents the

²⁰⁵ Tessa Morris-Suzuki, *The Past Within Us* (London: Verso, 2005), 117.

²⁰⁶ Newman, *Utopia and Terror in Contemporary American Fiction: 21*, 10.

²⁰⁷ When US involvement in World War Two increased, animation studios began to assist with the war effort. Bugs Bunny and Donald Duck featured in propaganda films and animators created light-hearted training cartoons for servicemen.

group continually commits,” (317) exposes the significance of Eddie Sr’s role as both the Hobson patriarch and a scribe of US mythopoeic narratives. Eddie Sr’s attempts to restage a buried history epitomise the fictional US founding narratives which echo within the late-twentieth century, obscuring hidden histories.

The ‘Prisoner’s Song’ which plays over the PA system in the museum, signals that Eddie Sr has returned to this site of cultural and individual importance to end his life. The exit from the confines of this world into another occurs within the natural landscape. Powers describes the white desert sand crystals in semi-supernatural terms: “they vibrated, gave off a pure musical pitch, almost all fundamental, without partials or overtones.” (341) In the absence of a body, the ritual of cremation and dispersal of ashes occurs with the sand as a substitute, returning from man-made narratives to natural forms. A return to the lowest frequency, or first harmonic, implies a return to organic repeating simplicity and the root of Eddie Sr’s interwoven lemniscate journey. The image of the desert as a place which allows for a return to absence is similarly explored by Jean Baudrillard. Baudrillard considers the significance of Death Valley in his text, *America*, and notes the significance of the absence of artificial human constructions within this Desert. Baudrillard observes, “if humanity’s language, technology, and building are an extension of its constructive faculties, the desert alone is an extension of its capacity for absence.”²⁰⁸ The juxtaposition of the museum setting with this natural expanse emphasises how constructed narratives and curated histories are impeding on the pre-existing images of a vast US landscape to create overlapping, vibrating absences.

The loss of control over his personal narrative, the effects of radiation poisoning, and the restraints of history are combatted by Eddie Sr’s final decisive act. Disappearing into the desert, choosing his means of erasure from the landscape, allows Eddie Sr to regain a sense of mastery over his life’s trajectory, concluding his search for a fantastical u-topia, or no place. Ultimately, Eddie Sr remains a spectral figure within his family’s lives through his unfinished narrative and uncertain cause of death. This absence and erasure results in a form of narrative renewal and the metamorphosis of a family dynamic. The concluding line of the narrative, “*Tell me how free I am,*” (348) repeats the earlier dialogue between father

²⁰⁸ Jean Baudrillard, *America* (Verso, 2010), 72.

and son.²⁰⁹ However, this is no longer a dialogue between two individuals, the anonymous fatherless narrator has taken control of the italicised chapters. This narrator creates a new iteration of this ventriloquist act and addresses the reader “*through the side of his mouth,*” (348) questioning his own agency as the new puppeteer of a revisionary history. The children struggle to assert the freedom of expression which they are taught to believe is available to them. Powers explores the potential for retrospective or speculative narratives to expose or conceal the tensions found within communities via the depiction of the inherited fictions imbued in the Hobson family legacy.

The legacy of Eddie Sr’s compulsive form of repetition and revision is ultimately inherited by his son, the new architect of the italicised speculative chapter spaces. The final chapter, ‘1979’, suggests that despite the possibility for change Eddie Sr’s middle son has continued the pattern of an alternative wish-fulfilment narrative and remains bound to this preordained trajectory. The narrative returns to the anonymous narrator of the alternative italicised recollective accounts of Eddie Sr, re-iterating the preoccupation with lost pasts and the uncertain future, concealing or exposing family and national histories. This narrator’s cathartic narrative begins in 1979, 40 years after his father’s own reflective story, ‘Hobstown’. In this brief concluding chapter, Eddie Sr is resurrected and reunited with the family. The son ostensibly continues with his father’s wish fulfilment style of fiction. In these concluding sentences Powers emphasises that language allows these characters to gain a sense of control over spectral histories, “at last Artie masters the apparition.” (348) The renewed narrator can examine how free he is within the confines of his history whilst exploring the potential for emerging collaborations to arise from previous and successive generations. The pervading sense of loss and renewal is related to the passing of a patriarch and the continuation of his narrative by his children from the family home in DeKalb, Illinois.²¹⁰ Powers questions the desire for eternity and preservation in relation to enmeshed large-scale and personal losses

²⁰⁹ On page 153 of *Prisoner’s Dilemma*.

²¹⁰ The patent for modern barbed wire was issued to Joseph F. Gidden of DeKalb, Illinois in 1874. Barbed wire allowed for large scale areas to be fenced and for animals to be reared on a large scale for commercial means. This fencing allowed the enclosure of vast open expanses and an increase in large scale farming practices, significantly curtailing access to the mythologised US landscape.

and instances of reduced agency, creating a confessional space with the potential for a liberation from repeating, restricted histories.

Powers explores the cathartic appeal of narratives during times of conflict and loss whilst examining the all-pervasive nature of ideologies which shape historical accounts of US society. In Eddie Sr's alternative past, Walt Disney strives to create a live motion and animated film which will be the panacea to this conflict. The animation team working on this project are Japanese Americans who are freed from US-run Japanese internment camps. The possibility of amending the future by rewriting past atrocities explores the potential power of creative media alongside the use of art as a form of propaganda. The role of Walt Disney and animation within the Hobstown narrative is significant to Powers's depiction of the permeable arts and science divide. Michael Denning notes that in a 1942 study of Disney, the art historian, Robert Field, , "celebrated Disney's union of 'the Arts and the Sciences' and carefully analyzed the aesthetics of animation."²¹¹ The growing popularity of animated films accompanies the atomic bomb innovation, highlighting the combination of these two innovations within national ideologies. Eddie Sr's use of varied forms of storytelling narratives interacts with how the dominant ideologies of this specific era were disseminated. These creative endeavours are depicted as platforms which can shape national identities and utopian visions during times of conflict. The misconception of an American utopia which can arise during a state of crisis is something which Jameson notes in his essay, 'An American Utopia'. Jameson suggests that "in America, wars *are* the moral equivalent of collective action, as witness the great American utopia of World War II."²¹² Initially Eddie Sr actively participates in this state of crisis or state of exception, eagerly waiting to enlist in the US army as a young boy. However, the death of his brother and his exposure to atomic bomb test sites leads to his disillusionment with this collective action, rejecting the ideological presence of war within a US utopian imaginary.

The alternative Hobstown narrative, is representative of cathartic historical accounts which overtly fuse fact and fiction to highlight atrocities whilst exposing unreconciled memories of significant events. These narratives are often edited by multiple individuals who are facing their own experiences of loss and upheaval,

²¹¹ Denning, 404.

²¹² Fredric Jameson, *An American Utopia: Dual Power and the Universal Army*, ed. Slavoj Zizek (London; New York: Verso Books, 2016), 21.

layering multiple interpretations of pivotal events to create a multilinear, intertextual account of a global history. These fictional accounts can express the author's desire to create a utopian society and their dissatisfaction with present reality. Sargent argues that the utopian collectives who create fictional works share a similar motivation - "the desire to communicate a social dream, a eutopia."²¹³ These references to works of literature which explore the potential for narratives to facilitate moments of cathartic release whilst inspiring change, emphasise the potency of oral and written forms of storytelling. Powers's intertextual references to Giovanni Boccaccio's *Decameron* alongside the Hobson and Hobstown narratives accentuates the depiction of co-existing, malleable past and present narrative temporal frames.²¹⁴ *The Decameron* describes how, "a handful of people escape the Black Death and keep themselves alive and entertained in their exile by telling one another fantastic stories." (327) Eddie Sr repeatedly returns to this fiction, reading it aloud to his family to provide them with another antidote to the crises of this contemporary US.

These utopian narratives, and Eddie Sr's perpetual uprooting of the Hobson family in his search for the idealised all-American town, emphasise the legacy of the past and the stagnating present which can be challenged by emerging utopian views, functioning as a form of critique and a vision of improvement. The imagination provides a place of refuge for these literary characters and Eddie Sr alike. However, Eddie Sr chooses to exist in this self-imposed exile, creating "a web of bewildering invention designed for its curative power alone." (317). The possibility of a cooperative therapeutic creation is thwarted by Eddie Sr's decision to exist in creative isolation. This compulsive desire to amend and redeem history leaves Eddie Sr a perpetual prisoner of the past, who in turn imprisons his own family. Powers depicts a surplus of communication between disconnected individuals within one family: "*my father... has always instructed me that one should attempt, hopelessly, to know everything, never once tells me... why trying to know has left him so fiercely alone and lost.*" (15) Throughout his preoccupation with this entangled revisionary history, Eddie remains seemingly oblivious to the oppressive existence he has subjected his family to whilst searching for emancipation from his metaphorical cell.

²¹³ Sargent, 'The Three Faces of Utopianism Revisited', 19.

²¹⁴ Giovanni Boccaccio, *The Decameron* [1350], trans. George Henry McWilliam, 2nd Revised ed (London: Penguin Classics, 2003).

Hobstown becomes a sprawling all-consuming narrative which remains shrouded in mystery whilst permeating his family's reality.

In contrast with Eddie Sr's isolated pursuit of a perfected version of World War Two, Powers depicts collaborative, revisionary forms of communication within the Hobson family narrative. The role of factual knowledge and creative media in the ongoing creation of personal and collective histories is revealed through the depiction of the Hobson family's verbal exchanges. The "*secret code of family*," (13) is a form of interaction which dominates the private sphere and plays a significant role in the depiction of the Hobsons. The narrative world Eddie Sr strives to create emerges as the persistent reassembly of pre-existing forms within the private sphere. The anonymous narrator of the opening chapter, 'Riddles', establishes that the malleability of language holds a significant influence over the family's lives: Eddie Sr "*talks to us only in riddles... he warns us about language with, 'when is a door not a door?'"* (13) The fluid potential of language is emphasised through the family's verbal exchanges, establishing that verbal communication can be used to isolate or engender moments of collaboration and intimacy. The family's exchanges provide instances of transformative words shaping our understanding of the present. In one exchange, defence functions as a noun and an action with a subject and an object: "*defense became a transitive verb. Alarms create the nightmare emergencies they warn against. Each does unto the other before they can do first.*" (310) The malleable nature of language emphasises the changing potential inherent in these communicative forms. This ambiguity highlights the potential for narratives to engender a sense of belonging or panic, potentially reinforcing ideologies and/or divisions within society.

As the narrative develops the language of the family adjusts to address or mask their shared turmoil. Eddie Sr often uses clichéd sayings to obscure reality and avoid transparent communication with his family, diminishing the sense of a cohesive family unit. Meanwhile, Ailene Hobson strives to have a name and a narrative to define her husband's illness, continuing to rely upon the aspects of verbal exchanges promoted by Eddie Sr: "she would have the experts name the name, the name in medical manuals. And then she could translate the agreed-on term into Hobson dialect." (125) This subversive narrative strategy allows the family to have a form of dialogue beyond prescribed terminology whilst diminishing the reality of their shared tragedy. The shared use of language through which they filter publicly approved

definitions gives the Hobson family a sense of independence and control. To supplement this private language system, the Hobson children are encouraged to amass knowledge and trivia as a means of protecting themselves against a seemingly chaotic world. The Hobson family exchange collaged fragments of trivia which are pertinent to their specific situation and understanding of unfolding national history. Eddie Sr revises or repeats seemingly comforting phrases, highlighting his reliance on the textual world to create a haven from reality: "*Whenever the world threatened to do us in, whenever we most needed him to assure us that life could still be reinvented, he would resort to one favourite saying or another.*" (153)

The innovative use of time-worn sayings and trivia in unexpected contexts is central to the private exchanges between members of the family, revealing their individual world view whilst offering a temporary reprieve from an encroaching sense of instability. This form of communication evinces a controllable facet of the past, perpetually creating palimpsests to demonstrate the ability to reinvent the past through fluid verbal and written exchanges.

Beth McFarland-Wilson's analysis of the narrative structure of the text places emphasis upon the role of the family in relation to the interwoven narrative structure. McFarland-Wilson asserts that "within the family myth, family metaphors create familiarity and establish an exclusive filial language that promotes a sense of belonging within the family system."²¹⁵ Despite the sense of belonging established by a private code, the children's respective reactions to their father's use of language and their mother's diminished role within the creation of this evolving system suggests that this code isolates as much as it creates a sense of belonging. The ritualistic and collaborative nature of their communicative exchanges does not diminish the sense that their father has created and promoted this form of dialogue. The family structure in the text serves as a metaphor for a larger oppressive national identity as much as it comments upon the role of the family or smaller community within larger society. These forms of exchange enable Powers to depict a wider US psyche through a single-family unit. The larger cultural significance of their interactions somewhat universalises these exchanges, without diminishing the more specific significance they hold for the family unit.

²¹⁵ Beth McFarland-Wilson, 'The Hobson Family System in Richard Powers's *Prisoner's Dilemma*', *Style* 44, no. 1-2 (Spring/Summer 2010): 99-122, 110.

The longstanding ideology of the pursuit of liberty within the US is examined through the family's relationship with an isolated patriarchal figure. Eddie Sr encourages the children's individual autonomy via the adherence to his rigid worldview: "*There was the paradoxical, 'we sometimes need coaxing to act on our own.' Whenever he resorted to this one, I would throw back 'Tell us how free we are, Pop. Tell me how free I am'.*" (153) Powers's description of Eddie Sr's returning theme of self-sufficiency is aligned with the suppression and erasure of communities throughout US history in pursuit of this liberty. The family's perpetual movements to a series of all-American towns contours the Hobsons' reality and links the atomic bomb to the revived search for the fictitious all-American Utopia. The hostile landscape of the mid-twentieth-century US is linked to the blinding Atomic Age whilst inverting the popular image of US pilgrims, "*the stunned, bewildered trauma victims of this new landscape. He sets them on their way, marooned in the unforgiving place.*" (333) The pioneer myths and the postmodern wasteland are placed within the same scene to highlight the repeating yet expanding nature of a US utopian tradition. The search for a place which will recapture an imaginary lost time and deliver an idealised form of positive change, encapsulates the unfulfilled utopian promise of the US.

Chris Jennings surveys early US utopian movements, such as the Shakers and the Oneida Community, in his text on American Utopianism and concludes that "unlike other modes of critique, utopian thinking goes further, inevitably generating its own solidarity and enthusiasm, thereby stimulating the numberless private exertions that add up to social progress."²¹⁶ Powers similarly depicts utopian dreams and idealism within smaller private spheres or utopian collectives, illustrating how these are bound to the promoted forms of innovation which emerged in the US in the latter half of the twentieth century. The sense of loss experienced during the latter half of the twentieth century reignites this desire for stable change and a reimagined harmonious tomorrow. Recalling the challenges faced in 1978, Artie expresses the end of the façade of the idyllic post war years in this postmodern era: "*I had no idea of what the present was. All the headlines agreed the old place was dead.*" (85). The idyllic image of US society is scrutinised through the lens of Eddie Sr's own utopian fiction and his children's experiences within a postmodern society. The ongoing

²¹⁶ Jennings, *Paradise Now* 383.

relevance of idealised futures to the terminal pursuit of progress within the US is embedded in the creation of Eddie Sr's speculative historical narrative and the fragmented Hobson private sphere. The Hobson children articulate the sense of burden created by this legacy and strive to amend their inheritance.

Powers's depiction of communication within the Hobson household examines familiar patterns found in societal narratives through a revisionary lens – "*we could never be sure what fresh derangement he might squeeze out of the overused maxims, what foreign situation he might wedge them into. He let them mean everything and its opposite.*" (153) The new associations and connections formed between pre-existing performances, literature, and phrases expands the focus beyond the familiar and the immediate to encompass a wider scope of reference. The constructed dichotomy between literary narratives and seemingly verifiable historical narratives is dismantled by the figurative articulations of time, eternity, and mortality which are continually framed by references to a range of general knowledge. The culmination of this form of communication, the subtext running through the exchanges of trivia and quotations, takes place in the VA hospital where Eddie Sr has been admitted after agreeing to seek help for his mystery illness. The dialogue between father and son, the exchanges with hidden meanings and subtexts which begin in childhood and persist into adulthood, ends in this final duet. Artie demonstrates to his father the knowledge he has amassed over the years, beginning and ending with T.S Eliot: "he's going to write the definitive literary statement on the world apocalypse... The end of all our exploring/ Will be to arrive where we started..." (260). Father and son's game of 'Complete the Quotation' foreshadows Eddie Sr's return to Alamogordo and allows him to tacitly acknowledge his terminal illness.

This recitation of segments of Eliot's *Four Quartets* at the VA hospital implicitly traces the far-reaching effects of Oppenheimer's work on the Atomic bomb to Eddie Sr's radiation poisoning and subsequent cancer diagnosis.²¹⁷ T.S Eliot's, '*The Waste Land*' is featured on Oppenheimer's list of the ten texts which were most influential to his philosophy on life, emphasising the enmeshed narrative forms which shape human history.²¹⁸ The significance of T.S Eliot's poetry to Robert

²¹⁷ T. S. Eliot, *Four Quartets [1935-42]*, (London: Faber & Faber, 2001).

²¹⁸ Robert Oppenheimer, Interview in *Christian Century* (15th May 1963)

Oppenheimer and now to Eddie Sr amplifies the lemniscate image of time and the impact of World War Two. Multiple temporal structures intersect within these condensed exchanges, anticipating future events whilst exploring a hidden past and the finality of death. Eddie Sr is unable to ignore the ruins of a living history which surround him, determining the trajectory of his present and predicting a dystopian future: “He had never followed the universal self-protecting practice of flattening out the past, abstracting it, rendering it neuter and quaint... Dad’s problem was simply that he saw the destination.” (323) Powers creates associations between pre-existing literature and Eddie Sr’s narrative, achieving both a sense of analepsis and prolepsis within the same exchange. The past and future events, which are yet to be unambiguously revealed, are afforded a space within the narrative’s present temporal frame through this technique. While Eddie Sr returns to his past in his present, he intersects with his son’s own timeline and the potential futures emerging from these perpetual returns.

The difficulty distinguishing between the real and the representation of the real dominates Eddie Sr’s life and the Hobstown narrative, culminating in this final exchange between father and son. The miniature village Eddie Sr visits before entering the Veterans hospital provides one final glimpse of a perfected rendition of national progress. The staged realities, that Eddie Sr has tragically sought to emulate and amend, restrict individualised accounts of history, promoting collective understandings of an airbrushed version of history. The version of reality filtered and amended through creative media is central to Eddie Sr’s Hobstown narrative, exploring the retreat into comforting fictions that follows incomprehensible scenes of detrimental growth: “*The world is in flames because we told people they could cross the line into Anything goes and get away with it... now that the unreal has lured us into it, the war can only be comprehended through the same portal.*” (219) The central role of film within Eddie Sr’s Hobstown narrative re-iterates the power of imagined worlds and their ability to sway and shape our understanding of reality. Image, text, and music are woven together within Eddie Sr’s shattered memories, revealing the varied forms involved in engagements with both the past and the present. The moments of cathartic release afforded by fictive narratives creates troubling imprints within reality, at times obscuring or altering the course of events. Within Eddie Sr’s revisionary world creative media acts as a salve for, or the proponent of, irreversible histories. The Middleton family, originally featured in the

Westinghouse film at the 1939 New York World's fair, are the mythic All-American family who come to life in the Hobstown narrative. Eddie Sr's perspective on the growing popularity of Hollywood film is mediated through his creation of this symbolic family, exploring the significant role played by film in the promotion of authorised historical narratives: "*movies somehow replace the Middletons' lost hold on the real place, now too desperate and absentee to feel*" (44) The italicised font is interrupted by the word 'replace', highlighting the real within this construct. The growing anxieties associated with World War Two are comprehended through the comforting distance created by both the cinema screen and Eddie Sr's revisionary narrative.

Eddie Sr's "miraculous invention" (100) transforms Walt Disney from the "benevolent dictator" (100), who limited the autonomy of artists at his studio and faced a large-scale walk-out and strike action in 1941, into a proponent for global peace. In the Hobstown account of Disney's oeuvre, the fallout from Pearl Harbour reignites Disney's career - multiple animated films are produced to support the government's promotion of the Draft Act. In reality, this legacy continued in the post-war years, linking the dissociative qualities of film to the dissemination of hegemonic narratives and capitalist ideologies. Michael Denning describes the role Disney played in the post-war years and focuses on his role as one of the founding members of the Motion Picture Alliance for the Preservation of American Ideals. Denning asserts that "Disney used his anger over the strike and his growing hostility to the radical labor movement to fuel the Red-baiting reaction of the post war years."²¹⁹ However, in Eddie Sr's alternative world, Disney becomes disenchanted with the potency of cartoons that support the divide between allies and enemies and subsequently creates 'You Are the War'. The animator then promotes an innovative, less distanced, approach to film making – blending live-action with animation to create a more immersive effect. Disney views himself as the only person "capable of bringing moonlight into a chamber, of enchanting history" (135) – a director who shares Peter Quince's desire to craft an ambitious feat which will render the audience incapable of distinguishing fiction from reality. The lines between overtly designed fictions and tumultuous histories are repeatedly erased and redrawn within the Hobstown narrative, illuminating the pervasive influence of art.

²¹⁹ Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century* (London: Verso, 2011), 413.

The use of fictional worlds within seemingly uncontrollable ideologies is established via Powers's portrayal of the Middletons' retreat into the security of cinema and the production of Disney's 'You Are the War' film. Walt Disney's fictive film plays a central role in this Hobstown speculative history and explores the role the film industry plays in disseminating propaganda. Powers describes this animated film spreading into reality in a scene which uses Disney's roster of cartoon villains to emphasise the malevolent potency of ideology: "*The scene easily surpasses the Wicked Witch... these amorphous phantoms take shape and fly out of frame. They grow to unbelievable size and infest whole continents.*" (308-9) Eddie Sr's perception of the role played by creative forms in the creation of World War Two era ideologies is articulated via the image of Mickey Mouse guiding Bud Middleton through an animated projection of the world's future. Eddie Sr engages with the promoted national identity and ideologies formulated during these historical crises, highlighting the inequalities experienced during these specific times through his depiction of Walt Disney's role in the World War Two era film industry.

The state of induced panic which followed Pearl Harbour is creatively re-examined through the lens of the characters who eventually occupy Disney's alternative internment camp. Defining moments within Eddie Sr's earlier life are linked not only to his personal experiences of loss but also those of a marginalised ethnic group within the US. The refracting images of prisoners within an array of alternative histories leads to the accumulation of counter-narratives which highlight the prejudices within this purportedly liberatory era. The pursuit of wealth is tied to the erasure of the freedom for an internalised Other, emphasising the inequalities camouflaged by the longstanding narratives which present the US as a progressive country benefitting from impartial free market capitalism: "*pressured by protectionist interests to remove the Japanese small businessman from the land of free competition.*" (132) To vastly different degrees, the Hobson family and the Americans of Japanese Ancestry are imprisoned within a history created by external forces. Ralph Sato and Tom Ishi return to work as animators once Disney acknowledges the perception of Americans of Japanese Ancestry as an internal threat. These animators work alongside Disney to end their imprisonment and create a resolution to World War Two via the creation of the 'You Are the War' film. Sato is given a protected space from which he asserts his creative autonomy before ultimately choosing to leave the fantasy behind for a hostile reality. The power of Disney's film -

“their fable must be their weapon. Any more direct opposition risks making things worse” (270) - is something which also exists within the wide-reaching oppositional ideologies and narratives of US nationalism. Emphasis is repeatedly placed on the role of the artist and author to create art which can be destructive or regenerative, enhancing the lemniscate depiction of time. Despite this opportunity, Sato ultimately chooses to return to reality and join the 442nd US infantry regiment: *“We belong out there Walt. Nothing can be fixed, except from the inside.”* (272)²²⁰ The potential to create change from within an isolated animation camp is rejected in favour of action from within a segregated society. The animators working in semi-isolation parallels Eddie Sr’s increasing retreat from the world as he strives to locate a better future within fantasy.

In one pivotal scene a disillusioned Sato articulates his perception of the consonance and dissonance in US society, adding a further multi-faceted, spliced composition to the text. The importance of agency is magnified via its disassembly in a country operating at a different frequency: *“losing our tune in a world at battle pitch.”* (176). The composite image of a racial identity projected onto Sato’s own identity is warped further by the events following Pearl Harbour and the ensuing US ideologies which demonised Americans of Japanese Ancestry. Sato’s improvised piano performance in this scene explores his identity and the potential for subversive creative media to affect change against the backdrop of an enduring mythic US national identity.

“The tune soon crumbles into malicious and dissonant burlesque... grows increasingly strange. Bird Parker jumps around in there, and Copeland, and W.C Handy, and snippets of Protestant hymnody and patriotic marches by William Billings. He migrates to the black keys, a parody of oriental pentatonic, before returning back home to Ives, and Tin Pan Alley.” (270)

This subversive musical arrangement is composed from reassembled parts of preexisting forms, reframing the familiar.

Sato’s performance creates something new out of established musical techniques and familiar songs. The amalgamation of genres and scales dismantles divisions between racial identities in the US. The seamless movement from jazz and blues musicians to protestant song, the five-note tradition and modernist composers

²²⁰ The 442nd US infantry regiment was a World War Two regiment of soldiers who were mainly second-generation US citizens of Japanese ancestry.

to song writers who had commercial success and produced large numbers of World War Two songs, emphasises the interrelated yet distinct compositions associated with US national identities. This performance expresses Sato's view of his own US identity and the commercialisation of creative forms in the twentieth century. Powers builds layers of intermediality to create an elongated textual structure through the accumulation of overlapping layers of song, text, and pictorial compositions. These massive, modulating renditions of twentieth-century US history examine the past and present, considering the significance of creative media to the ongoing collaborations which hold the potential to affect future change. The performance of Ralph Sato mirrors Eddie Sr's daily verbal exchanges with his family and similarly underlines the ambiguity in pre-established symbols. Powers frames and reframes the familiar from new perspectives to examine the malleability of pre-existing creative forms and of language itself. The reliance upon permutating narratives to re-structure the discarded past and uncertain present emphasises that history is continually re-written in the future.

The expectation of accelerating progress in the twentieth century is perpetually undermined by the oscillations back and forth to pre-existing traditions. Eddie Sr's experiences of the 1939 World's Fair shape his fascination with personalised curated histories and flawed improvements. The theme of the 1939 World's Fair, each year speeds the rate of change, emphasises the changing perception of time and the expectations of modernity which Eddie Sr's Hobstown narrative undermines. There are significant similarities between the 1946 film, *The Beginning or the End?*²²¹ – a film which captures the beginnings of the state of fear which follows the invention of the atomic bomb and the end of the era of celebratory wartime films – and Eddie Sr's narrative. Kenneth Cameron describes the film's narrative techniques as a “small personalization of the historical... woven through real events... the fictional hook is the burying of the time capsule in 1946... the film we are watching is in the time capsule, and thus itself an image of the event that buries it – a cinematic Mobius strip.”²²² Both Norman Taurog and Powers depict a nonlinear repeating history centred around the development of the atomic bomb and narrative time capsules.

²²¹ *The Beginning or the End*, Docudrama (Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, 1947).

²²² Kenneth M. Cameron, *America on Film: Hollywood and American History* (New York: Continuum International Publishing Group Ltd., 1997), 73.

The time capsule functions as a cultural artifact that preserves the cultural symbolism imbued within objects which define the promoted image of US societal identity in 1939. Eddie Sr is captivated by the time capsule created for this World's Fair. However, the idealistic image of this era is shattered by the ensuing scenes of devastation – “*an unimaginable gap opens up between the place people make to live in and the places springing up all around them and despite them.*” (46). The curated and distilled images of community at this specific time are transformed as Eddie Sr attempts to recapture and amend lost moments in time. The fictive Bud Middleton contends that “*this message in a bottle is so crucial, a note from ourselves to our later selves, when all is forgotten.*” (41) This time capsule looks to the future whilst preserving a present which will ultimately be viewed as a lost past, inspiring Eddie Sr to create a counter narrative to combat the world which unexpectedly emerged around him. The time capsule embellishes Powers's depiction of a fluctuating interpretation of history, foregrounding the intermedial components of cultural production which generate the natural veneer pasted onto hegemonic narratives and promoted social values.

The alternative versions of the World War Two-era US Eddie Sr records on his dictaphone link reimagined oral transcriptions of the past to hope, preservation, and loss, creating a lemniscate temporal narrative frame anchored in unrealised futures. The concerns of the latter half of the twentieth century, the failures of modernity and the rise of postmodernist thought, are themes which Powers engages with whilst creating a broader backdrop beyond national borders. The space which the critic Scott Hermanson feels this text occupies “between great hope and great destruction,” is something which extends beyond the aims of the Enlightenment era and the work of Oppenheimer to the duality found in the creation of utopian collectives and the wider utopian tradition.²²³ Powers transcends the twentieth century and charts the depiction of loss, metamorphoses, and renewal in relation to a wider transmedial and transhistorical frame. The shadow of past utopian communities and the pursuit of progress are related to Eddie Sr's personal participation in the explosions at the Trinity Test Site and the unfulfilled promise of rapid development associated with the World's Fair of 1939. Eddie Sr creates his

²²³ Scott Hermanson, ‘Just behind the billboard: The instability of *Prisoner's Dilemma*’, in Dempsey and Burn, *Intersections: Essays on Richard Powers*, 61.

own utopian Hobstown world and through this process reveals his disappointments with the future that was first promised during the 1939 World's Fair. The authorised accounts of US history are shown to be as fantastical as the world Eddie Sr habitually re-creates, emphasising the gap between promoted US ideals and reality.

The reoccurring temporal structure of Powers's text once again situates an end in the beginning, and a beginning in the end, with moments of collision and transference between the past and the narrative's future throughout the text. The moments of absence and erasure experienced by the father echo throughout the family as inherited and individual trauma. The legacy created by national narratives and unrealised utopian visions echoes throughout their lives and the search for understanding and order within repeating histories is perpetually rewritten. The three concluding chapters of the text emphasise the lemniscate temporality of the narrative and the role of the arts as a lens through which to mediate reality. The chapter '21' begins this process of renewal and questions how successful Eddie Sr was in his attempts to free his family from the suffering associated with the beginning of the Atomic Age. The writing and rewriting of events is depicted as an endeavour that allows for potential growth as well as the possibility for isolation and entrapment. Powers examines the ripple effect of conflict and mortality through successive generations of the Hobson family in relation to wider society. The Hobson family act as a cypher for the all-American family who are searching for their own voice amidst an oppressive and potentially destructive inherited history. However, the question of whether or not individuals can create an effective redeeming narrative remains unresolved. The text's conclusion poses the question to the reader of how free they are to create their own future, leaving the search for a liberatory future unresolved. The potential for the next generation to move beyond the confines of an idealised past, via the continuation of their father's narrative, suggests that pre-existing histories can play a pivotal role in an imagined future.

Comparison

The themes developed in *Prisoner's Dilemma* engage with the pre-existing form and content of Powers's texts, depicting another iteration of a splintered group dynamic and a form of cultural production which evinces a lemniscate temporality. In *The Time of Our Singing*, the portrayal of a family striving to redefine an unresolved past, chaotic present, and precarious future through a distinctive form of communication is revisited. In response to an at times hostile post-World War Two landscape, the Strom family turns to music and group compositions to articulate their identities and dreams for an inclusive US society. The families in both texts disassemble overlapping authorised accounts of national identity and design counter-narratives within the domestic sphere. The Hobsons' and Stroms' individualised forms of communication are inextricably bound to their experiences of a disjointed national identity, trauma, and the search for a utopian home. The trauma anchored to the advent of the atomic bomb and the beginning of the Atomic Age is mediated via multiple engagements with creative media. The porous boundaries between arts and science are explored in relation to a monumental moment of innovation and destruction, engaging with a legacy of creative compositions bound to seemingly rational advancements.

Powers situates art as a medium through which collective instances of shock and civil unrest can be rationalised or contested, enlarging the pattern of loss and change throughout human history. Dominick LaCapra elaborates upon the role of art as a fluid form between categories, contending that art works which examine the effects of trauma can create a traumatic realism, produce surrealistic situations, or engage directly with social reality, and are "counter to formalistic or sociological conceptions of discrete spheres and instead calls for inquiry into mutual interactions and resistances."²²⁴ The enmeshed counter-narratives and repeated intertextual references in each text cohere with Capra's observation that art can undermine the creation of discrete spheres and engender dialogue. The lemniscate timelines in each text enhances the depiction of non-sequential interactions whilst charting an expansive course through a repeating history saturated with unresolved or obscured traumas.

²²⁴ LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma*, 186.

The significant role of World War Two, and more specifically the impact of the Manhattan project, ties Powers's portrayal of family dynamics, utopian communities, and US identity narratives to the creation of the atomic bomb. The hegemonic narratives which emerged in the years after World War Two are explored through the lens of these families, binding their perception of the US, the search for a utopia, and a perfected history to this pivotal historic moment. In an article on the atomic sublime, Peter Hales contends that atomic culture became an integral part of post-World War Two US life and endeavours to uncover the roots of this culture within an evolving US identity. Hales asserts that this study of atomic culture explores "the process of enculturation itself, the ways in which 'freedom' and 'individualism' are hemmed in and defined by the surrounding net of history, institutions, beliefs."²²⁵ Powers repeatedly uses the fusion of creative media and scientific advancements in both texts to create multifaceted images of national identity and US utopian traditions, exposing the different components within hegemonic narratives. In an article on hegemonic and subversive narratives, Patricia Ewick and Susan Silbey state that "narratives contribute to hegemony to the extent that they conceal the social organization of their production and plausibility. Narratives embody general understandings of the world that by their deployment and repetition come to constitute and sustain the world."²²⁶ Both the Stroms' and the Hobsons' collaborative linguistic compositions overtly splice and reconstitute the meaning of pre-existing forms, revealing the malleable and artificial nature of cultural productions. The role these narratives play in the establishment of group identities and accounts of history foregrounds the subjective perspective of events which can restrict individual freedoms.

Despite the comparisons to postmodern literature, the continuing preoccupation with legacy and the potential for future renewal suggests that Powers's texts are not strictly aligned with postmodernist sensibilities. Jameson asserts that works of fiction which are representative of postmodernity are characterised by "this new dialectic of omnipresent space and the living temporal present," in which, "the sense of history, is the loser: the past is gone and we can no longer imagine the future."²²⁷ Unlike these postmodern narratives, Powers's texts

²²⁵ Peter B. Hales, 'The Atomic Sublime', *American Studies* 32, no. 1 (1991): 5–31, 5.

²²⁶ Ewick and Silbey, 'Subversive Stories and Hegemonic Tales: Toward a Sociology of Narrative', 214.

²²⁷ Jameson, *An American Utopia: Dual Power and the Universal Army*, 13.

depict an omnipresent past and a variable future; the weight of future responsibility is a pervasive concern. Although the significance placed on the continuing importance of creative narrative forms is related to postmodernity, Powers does not endorse or condemn this perception of reality. In his essay, 'Stepping into History', Sven Birkerts outlines Powers's main thematic interests. Birkerts asserts that Powers has "sought a solution to the crisis afflicting art: how to create the terms of mattering in a culture that has divested itself of faith in all anchoring premises."²²⁸ The intertextual and intermedial references in both texts provide an expanding roadmap for the protagonists as they navigate postmodern landscapes. The role of the artist, and the redemptive possibilities of interwoven creative forms, are foregrounded as transformative and enduring traditions that provide essential interpretive frameworks to re-examine the past and imagine a harmonious future.

The fluidity of history and a concurrent desire to recapture the past are threaded throughout the narrative strands of *Prisoner's Dilemma* and *The Time of Our Singing*. Eddie Sr rearranges US accounts of history and fragments of quotes to form a private identity narrative from pre-existing fragments. These revised archives of knowledge provide Eddie Sr with an individualised, controllable account of his past and present, reasserting his agency and the plausibility of creating future change. Likewise, the Strom family's 'Crazed Quotations' game masks or creates a living past to potentially alter the trajectory of the future. Eddie Hobson Sr and David Strom both try to recapture lost moments in time to amend their reality, conjuring up voices of deceased or imaginary persons to find respite in a restrictive present. The patriarchs in both texts seek to amend the past and alter the present, erasing the destructive realities borne from a legacy of conflict. Eddie Sr recreates the all-American Middleton family, forming an alternative family to revisit the events of the New York World's Fair in 1939 and undermine the militaristic view that "*History... is servitude.*" (PD 179) In contrast, the past is an alive yet intangible presence in the non-sequestered narrative spaces of *The Time of Our Singing*. The figurative cracks in time created by musical performances and the Strom family's long-discarded 'Crazed Quotations' game haunt David's present. In old age, David develops an increased interest in the possibility of time travel, articulating his desire to return to

²²⁸ Sven Birkerts, 'Stepping into History: Prisoner's Dilemma', in Dempsey and Burn Eds, *Intersections: Essays on Richard Powers*, 59.

the past and realise his and Delia's glimpse of history which continues to haunt his present. Delia remains an influential presence in the Strom's home after her unexpected death "until the man who chatted with her in the kitchen in the middle of the night fifteen years later joined her." (TOOS 470). The unreconciled loss of their mother overshadows the family home, keeping the husband and wife's dream of an inclusive society alive until David's death. The centrality of the private sphere in both texts foregrounds the confines and potential freedoms of this space and the impossibility of re-creating these utopian notions in the US public sphere. The potential to change the future is central to the treatment in both texts of historical echoes and re-spliced arrangements.

The creation of these alternative compositions and worlds provide temporary reprieve from the damage the past has inflicted on the US present whilst forming ripples within their children's present. In each narrative the children pursue or amend their parent's desires as they navigate the US during the latter half of the twentieth century, exploring the opportunities to co-author an alternative future. The endeavour to create in a collaborative manner remains at the conclusion of each text as the children strive to assert their individual freedom whilst engaging with their family's legacies. In the final pages of *The Time of Our Singing*, the narrative returns to the concert where David and Delia first met. Robert Strom appears within his grandparents' past, preceding his birth and joining the beginning of David and Delia's creation of a life together: "Singing himself into existence, starting up my piece, my song." (TOOS 631) In 'Calamine', the penultimate chapter of *Prisoner's Dilemma*, Artie Hobson writes from his family home in DeKalb, Illinois. This narrator ends the story of a family making sense of a personal loss and the interwoven national history with the beginning of his own: "I have an idea for how I might begin to make sense of the loss. The plans for a place to hide out in long enough to learn how to come back, Call it Powers world." (PD 345) Powers once again places an overt reference to himself in the narrative, highlighting the role of the artist and author in the ongoing lemniscate narrative of US history. The distinction between this work of fiction and reality is blurred by the erosion of borders between the author and the text, drawing attention to the artificial constructs which can shape civilisation's perception of reality.

The focus on the forms of communication created by splicing pre-existing compositions, quotations, or literary works portrays the binds between individual

freedom and a wider inescapable history. The racial inequalities and prejudices present in the US are revealed through the depictions of Japanese internment camps following Pearl Harbour and the experiences of the Strom family, exposing the unrealised futures and the limits of individual freedom in the US: “Our hellish utopia, that dream of time. The thing the future was invented for, to break and remake.” (TOOS 620) Ruth Strom’s first experience of Brussels is an overwhelming blend of novel anonymity and a multitude of languages, leaving her determined to assert her own US identity and amend the lemniscate collisions between individual and hegemonic narratives, designing a better future for her young sons. Powers explores the potential for new collaborations to challenge the repetition of problematic histories and exposes the unresolved histories of oppression, slavery, xenophobia, and racism, which shape the often unacknowledged aspects of a US national identity. The restrictions placed on Americans of Japanese Ancestry in Eddie Hobson Sr’s speculative history and the identity of David Strom as a German speaking Jewish immigrant, highlights the negative connotations non-Anglophonic language and ethnicity held within the US during and after World War Two.

In each text, Powers focuses on linguistic and narrative ambiguities in relation to multifaceted depictions of cultural production. The potential uses and abuses of language are combatted by the Strom husband and wife through their innovative approaches to musical arrangements - “safeguarding that sound against its many mobilized uses.” (TOOS 478) Eddie Sr’s and Delia and David Strom’s idealistic view of the potency of verbal exchanges, musical performances, and fictional narratives aligns with Ankersmit’s synopsis of Johann Gottfried von Herder’s perspective on language as the model for an unrestricted and equal society. Ankersmit outlines Herder’s perspective, contending “If legislation were as successful as language in combining universality and (the respect of) individuality... we would then know how to overcome the perennial opposition between the individual and society, between the private and the public, between freedom and compulsion.”²²⁹ Despite the supposed ‘prison house of language’ being routinely disassembled by both text’s protagonists, these confines are frequently reassembled in later scenes.²³⁰ Powers’s

²²⁹ F.R Ankersmit, *Sublime Historical Experience*, 76.

²³⁰“Barthes argues that oppression is intrinsic to the most fundamental representational system of all, our most basic medium for constructing the world and transacting with another, namely language... the syntax of

depiction of lexical semantics leaves the potential for language to be liberatory or oppressive.

the sentence is like a sentence in the juridical sense, incarceration in what Nietzsche called the prisonhouse of language." Christopher Prendergast, quoted in Ankersmit, 75.

The Time of Our Singing

Throughout *The Time of Our Singing*, a lemniscate image of the twentieth-century US is manifested via the instances of protest and performance which punctuate the Stroms' lives. The recollective history of the Strom family depicts the ways in which performances have shaped their identity narratives. The variations of pre-existing US identities which emerge during these pivotal collaborative moments suggests that societal change can be partly facilitated via intermedial counter-narratives. Despite focusing on one family, their involvement in events which occur beyond the Strom family home allows Powers to portray the role of the individual within seemingly all-consuming societal movements. Although there are immeasurable ways a performance can be received, these musical narratives remain tied to moments in time where the potential for future change seems plausible. The Promethean man and the Atomic Age, the Civil Rights Era and the Vietnam War, and the unfulfilled promise of a utopian society combine in this twentieth-century US narrative. The movements back and forth through time highlight enduring ideals relating to the depiction of utopianism and notions of progress in a contemporary US setting. Powers examines the possibility for reform and inclusivity during times of upheaval via the unravelling of an authorised linear history whilst counter-narratives surface. The constraints of established narratives intersect with an emerging sense of freedom, enhancing the unfulfilled expectations of US society in the latter half of the twentieth century and the ongoing attempts to achieve equality and liberty.

Powers engages with this legacy in relation to the marginalised Strom family. The Strom family occupy a liminal position within the United States and their individual interactions with hegemonic identity narratives are portrayed throughout the text. David Strom, a Caucasian German Jewish immigrant, and Delia Daley, an African American woman, meet at the 1939 Lincoln Memorial concert, marry shortly thereafter, and go on to have three children. . The Stroms' children, Jonah, Joseph, and Ruth subsequently question the range of identities projected onto them whilst navigating the changing US landscape in the latter half of the twentieth century. Ultimately, each Strom sibling becomes affiliated with varied communities outside of the family home, embracing their parents's idealistic belief in the liberatory power of music to differing degrees. The experiences of the adult Strom children from the

tumultuous civil rights era until the Rodney King riots in 1992 are relayed via Joseph Strom's narrative.

Joseph Strom's personal account repeatedly re-examines his parent's saga and the ramifications of his siblings' upbringing, exploring two strands of legacy in tandem. The retrospective yet progressive structure of the narrative allows for reinterpretations of pre-existing themes alongside ongoing variations. The chapters which chronicle the Strom family's origins and formative years are narrated from a third-person perspective, whilst Joseph Strom's recollective narrative is relayed from a first-person perspective. The third-person perspective on the family's past gives the illusion of a more distanced irretrievable time, whilst Joseph's narrative highlights the significance of the individual during instances of national social change, immersing the reader in his imminent perspective: "The arms race moved into space. Black students moved into white establishments. I spent less time inside my practice room fall-out shelter and more hours above ground... before the world went up in mushroom clouds." (198) Despite this difference, the moments of freedom and transcendence in each section are similarly framed by an oppressive version of history curated by a hegemonic power. This claustrophobic history continues to frame Joseph's identity, creating a strong sense of a continuum between the past and present via these enmeshed narratives. The interwoven narrative timelines emphasise the links between past, present, and predicted futures for future Strom generations. The colliding and dividing timelines share a preoccupation with emerging futures and persisting pasts, creating a non-linear image of time. Despite the distinct narrative strands which relate to succeeding generations of the Strom family the accumulation of timelines and ideologies undermines a linear sense of progression.

The movements between the US during the 1940s and 1950s, the 1960s and 70s amidst civil rights protests and the Vietnam war, and finally the early 1990s during the Rodney King Riots in Los Angeles, chart the rise and fall of optimism within these specific time periods. The hopes of David and Delia are indelibly tied to their first meeting in 1939, merging an inescapable US legacy with visions of a harmonious future: "American Dream and American Reality square off, their long trajectories arcing toward midair collision." (30) Joseph, Jonah, and Ruth reach maturity during the late 1950s and early 1960s whilst diverse communities, civil rights groups, and counter-culture movements promote various images of global

revolution and societal change. Powers traces this moment through one family's personal history, portraying the ongoing pursuit of an evolving American Dream in juxtaposition with an overtly splintered social reality. The family's response to these moments of crisis and change are enmeshed with long-standing traditions and classical and contemporary music performances. Lawrence Kramer states that classical music, when viewed through a postmodernist lens, "condenses the discursive field into music and at the same time reinterprets the discourse by means of music. The music and the discourse do not enter a text-context relationship, but rather into a relationship of dialogical exchange."²³¹ The innovative performances of medieval and classical compositions, and emerging musical styles, provide a range of modes through which a postmodern US landscape can be comprehended whilst extending the scope of this response beyond a postmodernist discourse. Steven Shaviro's assessment of breakbeats in hip-hop music - "This double logic of rupture and renovation by means of repetition." - is applicable to Powers's treatment of reverberating traditions in this text.²³² The significance placed upon adaptable associations and innovative world building during times of civil unrest explores the potential for change in both the public and the private sphere.

The hopes that the civil rights era will bring about an era of positive change is associated with new musical configurations and the disruption, or dismantling, of hegemonic narratives. Joseph and Jonah Strom move through their lives as musicians, performing together and later apart, filtering scenes of monumental unrest through their own musically tuned frequency: "everything's shaking loose. It's all coming down. New sounds, everywhere." (373) These entwined historical narratives, art forms, and persisting US utopian dreams create a broad image of society and the cultural productions through which a community can comprehend its surroundings. The narrative increases in scope via references to, or the evocation through language of, varied forms of media. This intermediality is something which Emily Petermann considers in *The Musical Novel*. Petermann defines intermediality as a term which aligns with Irina Rajewsky's category 'intermedial references': "forms of constituting meaning in a given media product through relation to a specific

²³¹ Lawrence Kramer, *Classical Music and Postmodern Knowledge*, Reprint (Berkeley Los Angeles London: University of California Press, 1996),. 71.

²³² Steven Shaviro, *Connected: Or What It Means To Live In The Network Society* (Minneapolis: University Of Minnesota Press, 2003), 68.

product or the semiotic system of another conventionally distinct medium.”²³³ The at times implicit focus on identity and US utopianism in the latter half of the twentieth century is explored through the frequent instances of intermediality. Music within this text relates performances to both a US identity and a utopian legacy without proposing a fixed dynamic or singular point of origin. The consistent use of musical terminology to describe large-scale movements and events, ensures that the varied thematic motifs of the text remain anchored to the examination of emerging utopian ideals and repeating histories.

The references to musical structures and intermediality play a pivotal role in the creation of a thematic subtext, allowing seemingly disparate cultural forms to enter into an overt dialogue and highlighting instances of exchange between art works and hegemonic narratives within an expansive image of cultural production. Proclamations of an identity beyond prescribed roles are facilitated via intermedial compositions which create ruptures within seemingly distinct categories. The significance of variable creative forms to changeable societal structures is threaded throughout the novel, illuminating the role of the cultural producer. Pierre Bourdieu’s work, *The Field of Cultural Production*, surveys the production, circulation, and consumption of art works. Bourdieu explores the homologies, or common origins, of the dominated class and dominant class in relation to his theory of the cultural field and asserts that “cultural producers are able to use the power conferred upon them, especially in periods of crisis, by their capacity to put forward a critical definition of the social world, to mobilise the potential strength of the dominated classes and subvert the order in the prevailing field of power.”²³⁴ Hegemonic US ideologies are undermined by the variations of endorsed musical compositions, exemplifying the mutability of seemingly fixed forms and the artist’s ability to challenge established narratives. Powers uses intermediality to portray the unification or further fragmentation of societal groups within the US in relation to utopian thought and restrictive power structures, depicting a family who sought to form a different image of progress through creative endeavours.

Powers explores the potential for the artist or author to act as an agent for change, focusing on the role of creative media within the construction of seemingly

²³³ Petermann, *The Musical Novel*, 22.

²³⁴ Pierre Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production* (Columbia University Press, 1993), 44.

factual histories and rational societies. The depiction of communal world-building is enhanced via the emphasis placed on the relationship between music and the moments in history which shape the non-linear temporal frame of the narrative. Music can evince a sense of transcendence, evoking the past or the possibility to imagine a unified future, creating instances of communal transportation beyond the present reality. The moments of internal and external contemplation associated with these performances are similarly explored in studies which consider the definitions of utopia. Notably, Ernst Bloch argued that literature is inherently utopian and criticised superficial explanations of compositions, instead aligning music with utopian forms:

Music becomes far too much a mere revenant, related all too historically to the past, instead of being illuminated from the direction of the future: as Spirit in utopian degree, which accordingly, in the middle of history and sociology, builds its own house, the framework for its own discoveries of inner levels of existence, albeit with countless elective affinities and free adaptations.²³⁵

The improvised performances of revised or patchworked song vocalise Delia and David's utopian desires, accentuating their view of music as a transportative creative tool for envisioning an inclusive society. Delia and David's updated version of the Daley family game, 'Crazed Quotations', adapts musical arrangements and lyrics to articulate their desires for a future unbound from a spectral past.

Delia and David's 'Crazed Quotations' game shifts the perspective on elitist traditions, turning classical compositions into childlike games whilst implicitly signifying on the divides created within society: "The game produced the wildest mixed marriages... Her Brahms *Alto Rhapsody* bickered with his growled Dixieland... Debussy, Tallis and Mendelssohn shackled up in unholy ménages à trois." (13) These associations suggest that Delia and David's alternative future and dreams of a utopian community are inspired by the imaginative rendering of seemingly distinct genres and musical arrangements. Yulia Kozyrakis suggests that the 'Crazed Quotations' game is a form of "musical syncretism" through which the text "suggestively combines and reconciles different epochs, histories and styles."²³⁶ However, this communal endeavour does not necessarily reconcile different histories. Despite 'Crazed Quotations' seemingly allowing the family to undermine predetermined identities, creating something new from a pre-existing order, the

²³⁵ Bloch, *The Spirit of Utopia*, 41.

²³⁶ Yulia Kozyrakis, 'Sightless Sound: Music and Racial Self-Fashioning in Richard Powers' *The Time of Our Singing*', in Kley and Kucharzewski, *Ideas of Order*, 178.

ruptures created by racist and neocolonial ideologies are not repaired and a multitude of difference exists within these combinations. Despite their best intentions, the challenges faced by the Strom children highlight the inequalities faced within creative fields and the racial identities imposed upon performances that ostensibly transcend or erase racial divides. The restructuring of pre-existing fragments within these sung identity narratives do not shield the Strom children from the lack of agency afforded to them within the public sphere. Instead, these improvised performances create a platform from which the children can explore the potential for change. The utopian visions of the Strom family does not include a reconciliation with the past or rectify contradictory histories.

Instead, the young Strom family create collaborative renditions that explore the potential to create a new form divorced from contemporary history. Susan McClary's essay on contemporary musical styles in the late-twentieth century explores the changing perception of African American music and the similar practice of reinterpretation and/or reframing of pre-existing material. McClary states that:

An earlier generation of critics, most of them trained to privilege structural complexity and innovation in their aesthetic judgments, often decried what they perceived as simple-mindedness of African American music and literature. But Small, Snead, Gates... have explained how these practices work to maintain a sense of community through the recycling of materials while individuals 'signify' imaginatively on those familiar materials.²³⁷

Although David and Delia successfully reframe preexisting material within the confines of the family home, the potential to manifest an alternative future for their children through these adaptations is repeatedly shown to be a futile pursuit. The trial following the murder of Emmett Till occurs whilst Joseph and Jonah Strom are "learning the lower lines in a vast choral fantasy about how all men are brothers... one child dies and another survives by not looking." (105) The sense of unity the parents seek to promote through their harmonious spliced compositions is juxtaposed with a violent reality, tracing the murder of Emmett Till in the earlier pages of the text to the four police officers who attacked Rodney King towards the conclusion. The establishment of a replica of David and Delia's ideal community beyond the borders of their family home is unrealisable. However, the potential to create a space which recognises a self-crafted identity remains achievable.

²³⁷ Susan McClary, 'Rap, Minimalism and Structure of Time in Late Twentieth-Century Culture' in Warner, *Audio Culture, Revised Edition*, 460.

Delia's desire to outrun the past and create a home environment which could protect her children from discriminatory identities is ultimately shown to be an unsustainable retreat from a reality anchored to an inescapable past: "Their children were supposed to be the first beyond all this, the first to jump clean into the future that this fossil hate so badly needs to recall." (274) The parents's view of racism as a preserved relic from another era emphasises their interpretation of history as something which can be excavated and discarded in the pursuit of a unified future. The Strom family's varied perceptions of time and identity amplify as the children leave home and engage with the wider public sphere. Eventually, Ruth Strom becomes a member of the Black Panthers and lives as a fugitive before tragically becoming a young widow, facing a hostile reality far removed from the utopian home environment her parents strove to create.

Ruth acknowledges the violence and racism in US society that has reverberated throughout their lives and rejects music as a sustainable, unifying haven from reality. The tensions between universalism and enduring iterations of racism are revealed through Ruth's experiences as a teenager and an adult during the civil rights and postmodern eras.²³⁸ Immanuel Wallerstein's essay, 'The Ideological Tensions of Capitalism: Universalism versus Racism and Sexism', considers the promotion of universalist doctrine and racist and sexist beliefs in the late-twentieth century and is pertinent to Ruth's separation from her parents's world view. Wallerstein asserts that "as the general contradictions of the modern world-system force the system into a long structural crisis... the search for a successor system is in fact located in the sharpening tension... between racism and sexism."²³⁹ David and Delia, the self-named bird and fish who sought to build a 'nest' together and create a future where communities can rebuild their environment divorced from the legacy of history, surpassing the imposed notion of race, cannot protect their adult children from the heightening tensions found in the external world.

The three generations of Delia's family respond to a changing society in varied ways. Delia's father cannot move beyond past atrocities - "The clamp of history slips loose. He doesn't stoop to forgiveness any more than whiteness will

²³⁸ Universalism here refers not only to the problematic image of the 'brotherhood of man', but also to David and Delia's naïve promotion of music as a shared universal experience which can unite a divided society.

²³⁹ Étienne Balibar and Immanuel Wallerstein, *Race, Nation, Class Ambiguous Identities* (London: Verso Books, 1991), 28.

ever forgive him for remembering.” (218) - whilst Delia and Ruth hold divergent views on the future’s proximity to previous eras and decades. The notion of varied voices emerging within a multi-strand history is explored in Elisabeth Reichel’s article on the integrative function of music in this text. Reichel suggests that the Stroms’ interactions with the legacy of racism creates moments of tension, contending that the contrapuntal music depicted in the text “is imitated by shifting between the history of American race relations and the Stroms’.”²⁴⁰ However, the estrangement from Delia’s parents, Dr William and Nettie Daley, linked to the Stroms’ creation of a home detached from the inherited trauma borne from slavery and segregation, doubles this image of tension in relation to inter-generational differences. Delia’s dreams of a new, inclusive US are implausible to her father who remains the guardian of an unforgettable past. The events which follow during the culmination of World War Two, expose further ruptures within the extended Strom and Daley family.

Alongside the optimism associated with emerging collaborations between scientific theories, art forms, musical genres, and new technology the larger historical context of the novel undermines the image of a unified society. The guests who gather for Delia and David’s wedding reception comprise of “singers versus sculptors, with no one knowing which art was more dangerous or had more power... to reverse the world’s hurt.” (284) Both scientists and artists are framed as facilitators of catastrophic or curative futures in the aftermath of World War Two. The significance placed upon David’s profession, a physicist studying the theory of relativity, highlights the links between contemporary instances of prejudice and violence and emerging forms of seemingly rational innovation and scientific discovery. The relationship between David and his father-in-law disintegrates after he fails to connect his work as a physicist to the realities of conflict: “I solved problems during the war. I helped with those weapons... He said those bombings were as racial as Hitler.” (465) David views his work on the Manhattan project as distinct from the destruction caused by the invention of the atomic bomb and does not overtly acknowledge the impact of, and the motivations behind, the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The accepted perspective on these bombings, promoted by the Allied forces, masked the suffering and loss of silenced

²⁴⁰ Elisabeth Reichel, ‘Fictionalising Music/ Musicalising Fiction: The Integrative Function of Music in Richard Powers’ *The Time of Our Singing*’, *SoundEffects* 4, no. 1 (2014): 145–60, 155.

victims and survivors, instead enmeshing images of destruction into a narrative of victory.²⁴¹ David's instances of separation from the reality of this innovation are unforgivable to Delia's father. William's memories of the past challenge the instances of amnesia found within the hegemonic accounts of US history. Whilst William and Ruth remain faithful to remembering the voices that have been silenced by these interpretations of history, David and Delia remain focused on a distanced future. Ruth's adherence to a counter-narrative borne from historic and contemporary inequalities and David's duty to past remembrance collide with David and Delia's image of the future, leading to irreconcilable differences between these three generations.

Despite their attempts to protect their children from history, the musical performances promoted by Delia and David manifest a platform which amplifies their individual voices whilst evincing an inescapable past. Despite classical music being increasingly perceived as an archaic form, the brothers seek recognition within this narrowing field. Although Joseph and Jonah find acceptance from some students during their school years, institutional discrimination and prejudice still occurs within the music industry. Joseph's and Jonah's careers as classical musicians remain framed by their ethnicity whilst they attempt to create a self-defined stage within a pre-existing performance of national identity. The brothers repeatedly gain media coverage which focuses on their imposed racial identity and engage with a mostly white audience. Instances of racial stereotypes and profiling, that are promoted by past and present external sources, resounds within their musical careers: "the engineers joked nervously with us, as if we might turn, in front of them, from Elizabethan troubadors to looters." (321) The virtuoso performances of Joseph and Jonah are central to the narrative's nonsequential structure and the ability to evince a lemniscate temporality through variations and repetitions of an aesthetic form. The ephemeral nature of their performances are imbued with their ancestors' dispossessed identities and entwines past, present, and potential futures: "we end everywhere, always stand still and gaze. This is the message in that sound, rushing backwards from the finish line it has reached." (317). This use of language merges

²⁴¹ Tessa Morris-Suzuki describes the reproduction in celebratory postwar publications of Yamahata Yôsuke's photographs of Japanese civilians on August 10, 1945 - the day after the Nagasaki bombing: "The self-congratulatory national narrative of Victory allows the text to end with an image of 'a world at peace': an image in which the continuing shadow of the atomic bomb in the postwar world has become completely invisible." Tessa Morris-Suzuki, *The Past Within Us* (London: Verso, 2005), 109.

inactivity with movement and emphasises the transient response to the performance alongside the evocation of the interminable. The performance recedes as it ends and the transcendence from the reality passes as the audience re-enters their immediate existence. The dispossessed and marginalised voices of the Strom's ancestors echo within Jonah's and Joseph's performances whilst remaining unacknowledged and unheard by the wider predominantly white audience.

The prejudice both Jonah and Joseph face within a variety of institutions exposes the unsustainability of an alternative world where art offers a permanent retreat from reality. The Strom brothers' developing musical careers are punctuated by numerous monumental events: John F. Kennedy's assassination in 1963, the Civil Rights Act of 1964, and the intensification of the Vietnam War following the arrival of US ground troops in 1965, form a composite disruptive background for Jonah's and Joseph's engagements with their parent's promotion of an identity and melody divorced from conceptions of race. Joseph struggles to assert his own perception of self, divorced from seemingly antiquated musical forms and history. This is articulated during a pivotal scene where Joseph finds a semi-cathartic release whilst listening to *Sketches of Spain*, identifying the sounds of a musical diaspora: "The lines play back and forth from Andalusia to the Sahara and southward, all cultures picking one another's pockets, not to mention the pockets of those who only stand and listen." (262) Miles Davis' recording expands on the 'Crazed Quotations' form of displaced musical arrangements and Joseph notes the passive and active agents within the creation of this performance, relating to this lack of a singular distilled identity. However, this borderless composition does not engender a sense of resolution or eradicate dissonance; Joseph recognises the disruptive legacy of colonialism which partly shapes this sound. Robin James's article on the sound and sonic phenomena that challenge the "ocular centric" nature of Western culture is relevant to this depiction of Davis's performance, undermining restrictive categories and associating "sound with dynamic, generative, relational processes that refute essentialism."²⁴² Despite the differences between these two performances, both collaborative musical collages promote a sense of self based on porous borders and adaptable identities which challenge the status quo.

²⁴² Robin James, 'Philosophies or Phonographies? On the Political Stakes of Theorizing About and Through "Music"', *The Journal of Speculative Philosophy* 32, no. 3 (2018): 499–513, 501.

The changing musical landscape accompanies images of wider societal change and the brothers' pursuit of a successful classical music career. The legacy of Delia and David's improvised musical performances which promoted autonomy are a phantom presence during the brothers' education, concerts, and first recording sessions during the Civil Rights Era. The suggestion that Jonah and Joseph are entirely isolated from civil unrest, and the problematic conception of race within the US, is consistently undermined by the links made between varied forms of performance and the context in which their musical recitals were initially composed. Kozyrakis assesses the performativity of race and racial self-fashioning in the text alongside the various strategies used by the Strom family to combat the inescapable events unfolding around them. Kozyrakis ultimately asserts that the protagonist's desire to surpass prejudiced categorisation is "a plea which the novel marks as clearly utopian especially in the turbulent sixties they live through."²⁴³ Although there is tragedy and failure scattered throughout the text, Kozyrakis' suggestion that the Strom brothers are pursuing an unfeasible dream during a disruptive era overlooks the liberatory agency gained via their personalised renditions of famous compositions. The inclusion of these nuances suggests that classical music, although often an exclusionary and elitist genre, remains open to flexible interpretations. The brothers can momentarily distance themselves from a preordained identity, embracing a disruptive performance of self which dismantles, but does not entirely surpass, an imposed race based identity.

The descriptions of the brothers' concerts differ from the purpose behind 'Crazed Quotations', emphasising the evocation of the past created via innovative renditions of pre-existing material. Despite the ephemeral nature of their performances, the momentary immersion in a seemingly timeless sound allows for a reflection on the nonlinear nature of an internal perception of temporality and the performative dimensions of race. Ihor Lubashevsky and Natalie Plavinska consider the human mind's experience of temporality as markedly different from the perception of objects in the external world: "For objects of physical reality, only the present exists, which may be conceived as a point-like moment in time. In the human temporality, the past retained in the memory, the imaginary future, and the present

²⁴³ Yulia Kozyrakis, 'Sightless Sound' in Kley and Kucharzewski, *Ideas of Order*, 175.

coexist and are closely intertwined and impact one another.”²⁴⁴ The ability for music to transcend the perception of objects which exist purely within the present, accessing instead the mental perception of intertwined times, creates ruptures within the image of a linear reality. The ostensibly spontaneous response of the audience contrasts with a mediated response to US society in which pre-existing societal narratives and associated ideologies entwine past, present, and future realities.

In addition to their conventional staged performances, the brothers encounter a range of spaces where performative utterances accompany action, engaging with both spontaneous and coordinated movements within the public sphere: “The surge of music that carries the marchers toward the Emancipator is all self-made. Pitched words eddy and mount: *We shall overcome. We shall not be moved.*” (271) Powers considers the potency of subversive performances and their ability to contribute to utopian movements within US society through Joseph’s recollection of the civil rights era and the Stroms’ on-stage performances. Despite depictions of music temporarily transcending societal differences, Powers ensures that large-scale congregations are not reduced to an anonymous unified mass. The crowds at riots, marches, and concerts are depicted as individuals within a larger movement, holding the potential to engage in group action to the benefit or detriment of the wider US society. The position of the individual within a national history and collective action is foregrounded throughout the text, moving between recognizable events and the characters’ distinct responses to them within a complex soundscape.

Jonah and Joseph’s recital tour of the US unfolds as utopian movements reemerge alongside scenes of violence and civil unrest; Joseph recalls the “whole recital as an enormous arc of death and transfiguration.” (309) The potential for change and innovation to result in destruction and tragedy is highlighted via Joseph’s account of the tour, recalling David’s contentious work on the transformative Manhattan Project. The language used to depict the brothers’ responses to an uncontrollable mass movement during the protests and rioting in Avalon reveals the staged nature of reality whilst highlighting facets of the brothers’ identities which have shaped their perception of protest and change. The surreal scene in which Jonah instinctively attempts to conduct and filter the chaos, picturing a living

²⁴⁴ Ihor Lubashevsky and Natalie Plavinska, *Physics of Human Temporality: Complex Present* (Switzerland: Springer Nature, 2021), li.

composition with multiple parts – “Beating time, phrasing the chaos... a drone rose up behind us, pitched but variable, matching his throb, a hybrid of rhythm and melody” (323) – precedes Joseph’s recollection of police, firemen, and looters all contributing to the scene in varied frenzied ways. Joseph remains a distanced observer whilst Jonah remains tragically naïve to the unpredictable potency of mass movements, immersing himself into the codified chaos as an eternal performer. The final tragic act of Jonah during the Rodney King riots recalls this earlier protest, creating a performative arc in tandem with the unfulfilled visions of change stemming from this era: “the curve of his life was calling for him to come and trace it, somewhere out there in the burning streets.” (617) Jonah’s movements back and forth through time as a perpetual performer collide with unresolved instances of inequality and racism, underlining the inextricable nature of his two identities.

Joseph’s role as a musician correspondingly leads him to filter the Avalon riots through a creative lens, shaping reality with inter-related forms of media and emphasising the brothers’ distanced yet imminent proximity to this vast scene of repressed frustrations coming to the surface: “No one scored out the chaos. It just unfolded around us in a horizon-wide ballet... the cadence was eerie, a slow, resistant, underwater paced rage.” (323) The similar choice of language later used to describe the response of Joseph, Jonah, and four other performers in Brussels to a recording of their version of a sixteenth century parody mass aligns responses to seemingly fixed performances and histories with unified yet polyphonic responses: “conducting our prior lives, singing unison encouragements to the fossil fixed record. We were a synchronised underwater ballet.” (535) Joseph engages with the legacy of David and Delia, updating their perception of past events as ‘fossils’ and emphasising the potential to engage with a pre-existing preserved form and create something new.

The depictions of these interacting musical legacies enhance the lemniscate narrative frame, exemplifying Robin James’ perception that sound diffraction is a valuable metaphor for comprehending the relationship between reciprocal intersections and underlying hegemonic structures: “Sound behaves like a wave. When two or more waves interact, they produce alternating patterns of wave intensity... constructive interference is consonance: the synced patterns amplify one

another. Destructive interference is dissonance.”²⁴⁵ The amplifying patterns of polyphonic voices in the text emphasise the multitude of distinct voices responding to, and interacting with, national and family legacies. Following Delia’s death in a probable arson attack, David increasingly theorises about the unheard future from a physicist’s perspective and disassociates from reality. The possibility of numerous alternative universes becomes an all-consuming obsession - “Living and dying by a clock in another system’s gravitational field... listening for sounds that run on ahead of time” (460) - ensuring David remains oblivious to the changing worlds around him: “nothing of course about the crazy things bringing this world down around his ears.” (458) Powers aligns different perceptions of silence and sound, loss and rebirth, and illuminates the gaps within the airbrushed accounts of turbulent national histories which mask discordant voices. The moments of dissonance associated with the erasure of a voice or sound are contrasted with multivalent responses to consonance.

The music which Joseph and Jonah hear and perform within their home, whilst studying at music conservatories, and while touring the US, link a changing US landscape to expanding musical tastes and their own evolving identities. The “absolute triumph of the three-chord song” (316) in 1965 signals the rise of youth-orientated culture and the increasing mainstream promotion of repetition within musical compositions. Although the brothers conform to expected standards of Western classical music, the forms of collaborative language and identity promoted by their parents are gradually entering pop culture. The interrelated emerging musical forms that are beginning to gain recognition within majority culture highlights the accumulation of identities within US society. The increasing recognition African American musicians received from the 1940s onwards popularised a musical lineage which engaged with the legacy of slavery, dismantling a linear conception of time. The soundtrack of the Civil Rights Era is linked to the innovative 1940s jazz scene which entered family homes via radio broadcasts and inspired the musical improvisations which accompanied the Strom’s ethos: “Down in the blistering bebop clubs, Gillespie and Parker were nightly warping the space time continuum. A cracker kid in a designated white house in a black neighborhood in fly-bitten Mississippi was about to let loose the secret beat of race music, forever blowing

²⁴⁵ James, ‘Philosophies or Phonographies?’, 502.

away the enriched-flour, box-stepping public.” (12) The fluidity of musical genres is depicted in tandem with the unfolding scenes of societal unrest and repeated returns to an unburied past.

Jonah’s introduction to avant-garde music and contemporary popular arrangements once again juxtaposes old and new ideals. Classical music, “the old imperial dream of coherence,” (177) intersects with emerging techniques. The layered instances of consonance created by emerging musical genres rejects the illusion of unity associated with silenced narratives and discord. Jonah is cautioned by Will to “never forsake melody just because of some bad dream of progress.” (175) The need for a reimagined past within the composition of an emerging future requires the preservation of preexisting melodies as opposed to the artifice of universalism. The continual links between established narratives and emerging voices traces a lineage between the idealism of unfulfilled pasts to present endeavours. Jonah’s pursuit of a detached and disembodied aesthetic world which could sonically obliterate differences evokes the utopian sensibilities of his early childhood: “giving up the self. Breathing as a group... making five voices sound as if they’re a single vibrating soul.” (515) The illusion of collective unity overshadows his quest to locate his self-actualised potential and pure tone, replacing the erasure of voices with the supposed universality of music.

Nomi Dave’s overview of the history of promoting music as a universal language, and contemporary ethnomusicological investigations into the tendency to romanticise music, is pertinent to Jonah’s short-sighted pursuit of a performance which will eradicate societal discord. Nomi quotes Marcello Sorce Keller - “no music is ever universalistic; it is always partisan, it always takes sides” - and emphasises that music can be used to enforce and/or resolve differences.²⁴⁶ David and Delia’s aspirations of reaching a future where lines of division and racial categorisation are eradicated remains unfulfilled. Despite this, Joseph’s description of a recital enacting his and Jonah’s personal journey – “part one was a retreat from the world into aesthetic solitude. Part two was a full-blooded race back into the mess of living” (309) – suggests that a reclamation of agency is possible through these performances. Joseph and Jonah are able temporarily to transcend the racial

²⁴⁶Marcello Sorce Keller, ‘What Makes Music European: Looking beyond sound’, quoted in Nomi Dave, ‘Music and the Myth of Universality: Sounding Human Rights and Capabilities’, *Journal of Human Rights Practice* 7, no. 1 (1 February 2015): 1–17, 5.

identities imposed upon them before returning from a place of contemplation to confront societal change.

The subversive role of musical performances, challenging pre-existing societal codes and hierarchies, is embedded within utopian movements and explores the possibility for large scale change to be catalysed by creative media. Similar sentiments have been articulated by philosophers and scholars in both the early and late-twentieth century, highlighting the enduring utopian qualities attributed to art and music. Julia Kristeva asserted that artistic productions have the ability to “break the code, to shatter language, to find a specific discourse closer to the body and emotions, to the unnameable repressed by social contract.”²⁴⁷ Whilst Ernst Bloch promoted the utopian possibilities expressed within an aesthetic reality: “The power of proclamation, or how it was and how it could have, should have been; the dignity of knowledge, of the specific knowledge of an ‘aesthetic’ reality and of its sphere’s utopia-potential idea-imperative.”²⁴⁸ Delia, David, and Jonah all similarly embrace the unifying and harmonious possibilities conjured by transcendent musical performances, pursuing the creation of an identity inspired by an aesthetic reality.

However, the potency of music is undermined by the insidious presence of the music industry and the commodification of the recorded and mass-produced performance. Delia’s claim, “music, Daddy. Nobody owns it,” (227) is reduced to baseless idealism as the text progresses. Although the finite configuration is changed and modified by each subsequent performer, the influence of technological advancements on the music industry during the twentieth century results in a loss of agency. Despite Jonah learning to “seduce the microphone and compensate for its brutalities,” (317) he remains resistant to the process of commercial recording sessions. Shaviro’s view of hip-hop’s recombination of pre-existing words and sounds - “existing fragments of commodity culture, wrenched violently out of their previous contexts” - is found in the similar styles embraced by these phantom predecessors.²⁴⁹ Powers highlights the lack of spontaneity in these studio produced performances alongside the loss of agency which occurs as creative media is increasingly commodified.

²⁴⁷ Julia Kristeva, *The Kristeva Reader*, ed. Toril Moi (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 1991), 200.

²⁴⁸ Bloch, *The Spirit of Utopia*, 116.

²⁴⁹ Shaviro, *Connected: Or What It Means To Live In The Network Society*, 45.

Despite this, Powers binds the image of national and global change to creative acts and emphasises the significance of innovative performances to narratives of collective advancement. Bloch's assessment of the presence of returns to the past within new sounds is similarly articulated throughout Joseph's recollective narrative:

Sonic constructs do not simply possess youth as an attribute: they become younger precisely by becoming older... and attaining the new-old quality of what is concealed in this repose. They thus advance as artists and as artworks, not senselessly, within time's empty, formalistic advance, rather what is new rounds itself off... a homecoming.²⁵⁰

The lemniscate structure of the narrative creates returns to familiar scenes whilst emphasising that this can never be a homecoming to the original event. David Strom's impression that "rhythm... is a closed timelike loop... it circles and reenters, canonic... each time embroidered into a new original" (272) is mirrored in the lemniscate structure of the text. The two simultaneously increasing loops back and forth through two timelines are linked through the expanding theme of utopian legacy and future possibility. The parallels created between an ambiguous future and elongated musical compositions emphasises the potential to reach positive change or a tragic end: "The world will someday hear what its cadence must be." (274) Despite anticipating a finite conclusion, the endless reinterpretations of a singular form or moment in time suggest that a perfect cadence is not a plausible outcome. The movements back and forth through time persist and develop whilst maintaining a hope for a harmonious future in the wake of a discordant present.

The smaller scale utopian hopes promoted within the Strom family home, intersect with wider social movements and evoke earlier nineteenth century utopian collectives or communities within the United States. In a study of American utopias, Chris Jennings argues that "the remnants of nineteenth-century utopianism... add up to the testament of American longing and American discontent."²⁵¹ The legacy of utopianism within the US is evident within Powers's depiction of the various members of the Strom family during the twentieth century. The Strom family language splices together pre-existing forms within their domestic environment, endeavouring to create new performances devoid of the spectre of discontent, whilst

²⁵⁰Bloch, *The Spirit of Utopia*, 44.

²⁵¹Jennings, *Paradise Now*, 381.

Ruth engages with Civil Rights movements and expresses both sides of this inheritance. Jennings notes that “we have made our history into a sort of utopia: a high white wall onto which we project our collective longings and anxieties.”²⁵² The fantastical US past, the boundless space and possibility for change, is adapted by the husband and wife who hope for a progressive future unbound from the prejudices which punctuate their respective pasts. However, David’s futile pursuit of time travel and the impossibility of changing the actions created by destructive accounts of history counters the optimism imbued in these repetitions with a difference. Unlike the utopian narratives which bear the legacy of the European Enlightenment – which has remained bound to neocolonial ideologies and the accompanying fusion of spirituality and progress - the utopian dreams in *The Time of Our Singing* occur within a specific US landscape without prescribing to a restrictive ‘utopia of the blueprint’.

Jean-François Lyotard’s definition of the Enlightenment narrative – “The rule of consensus between the sender and addressees of a statement with truth-value deemed acceptable if it is cast in terms of a possible unanimity between rational minds” – is challenged via Jonah and Joseph’s critique of the ramifications of this mythologised narrative.²⁵³ The Enlightenment narrative based on consensus between rational minds is consistently undermined via the unequal relationship between the sender and addressees of statements. Jonah attempts to conjure a pre-Enlightenment age and find a new voice in renditions of the innovative polyphonic songs composed by Pérotin. The perception of this 12th century French sound is filtered through an African American identity which has been shaped by the legacy of slavery and the unfulfilled utopian ideals that stem from Enlightenment ideologies: “Our parents had tried to raise us beyond race. Jonah decided to sing his way back before it... This is what happens when a boy learns history only from music schools.” (530) The parents’ utopian dreams of a US society where race ceases to exist, is translated by Jonah into the embrace of a sound he associates with an era before conquest and the Age of Discovery.

²⁵² Jennings, 382.

²⁵³ Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, XXIII.

Jonah's rendition of some of the first compositions to be recorded on parchment comments on the changing role of the artist and composer whilst evincing a nostalgia-infused image of Medieval Europe "before its expansion and outward contact." (529) Although the Enlightenment narrative is consistently undermined, and traced to the pursuit of the Promethean man and the dawn of the Atomic Age, the perception of a simplistic medieval France ignores the inequalities and conflicts of this age and the links between Pérotin's style and the rise of US minimalism. The Enlightenment era ideologies are scrutinised via Jonah's sonic lens without considering the legacy of the Medieval age within contemporary divisive narratives. The perception of democracy, progress, and a rational Enlightenment age is dismantled through depictions of inequality inherent in US hegemonic discourse and Jonah's reconnection with a romanticised polyphonic sound. This quest for a purely aesthetic reality follows-on from Jonah's growing disillusionment with the power of performances and the racist discrimination he faces in both the US and Europe. Jonah engages with his parents' improvisations, creating revised performances which evoke a time before Europe sought to conquer and colonise countries around the globe.

Kozyrakis compares the text's structure to a Rondo and aligns this form with the purpose of the Stroms' musical inventions and the repeating societal narratives found in the US.²⁵⁴ Despite these clear similarities, the temporal frame and the musicality of *The Time of Our Singing* can be viewed as more than facilitators of the text's main theme. Arguably, Enno Poppe's experimental techniques, and involvement in Ensemble Mosaik compositions, align with Powers's narrative structure and the manipulation of pre-existing perceptions of time more closely than the Rondo form: Poppe's approach "radically alters the balance between theme and form... what is expressed instead is the journey, the work's perpetual rootlessness and reinvention."²⁵⁵ Despite the focus on a changeable theme, these techniques differ in their accumulating structures. A Rondo composition comprises of a main theme and embedded subthemes which influence the changing shape of the central

²⁵⁴ "In a rondo, the main theme may disappear and resurface, vary or appear in its initial form. It permeates the whole piece, emphasizing the influence of subthemes upon its variation." Yulia Kozyrakis, 'Sightless Sound: Music and Racial Self-Fashioning in Richard Powers' *The Time of Our Singing*', in Kley and Kucharzewski, *Ideas of Order*, 179.

²⁵⁵ Tim Rutherford-Johnson, *Music after the Fall: Modern Composition and Culture since 1989* (Oakland, California: University of California Press, 2017), 110.

theme. In comparison, Powers's portrayal of the slow accumulation of voices more closely resembles late-twentieth-century minimal classical music techniques which were notably influenced by Pérotin's polyphonic compositions: "their voices ascended in slurred quarter tones, crested in held dissonant intervals, then cooled off by appoggiaturas." (533) This description links connected, legato, notes of different pitches with the influence of non-Western microtonal intervals on contemporary music.²⁵⁶ The creation of moments of tension-producing discord are resolved by a grace note, descending to join the chord tone of the harmony. The musical journey through interconnected eras, genres, and continents highlights moments of rupture and accord, binding the form of the musical arrangement to the theme to draw attention to the journey.

Daniel Barenboim's depiction of the finite nature of composition and the seemingly infinite responses to these finished works similarly examines the expanding whole. Barenboim affirms that "the interpretation of musical text creates for itself a subtext that develops, substantiates, varies and contrasts the actual text."²⁵⁷ Each performance of a composition becomes part of a shifting whole as the changing responses to each rendition create an inextricable subtext. The Strom family's varied performances and reinterpretations add to the slow accumulation of a lemniscate form, emphasising the significance of artistic collaboration to the new interpretations of societal narratives, histories, and collective identities. Ruth's son, Robert, continues the family legacy, reviving the voices of David and Delia and adding new meaning to dormant phrases: "someone walking toward her who she thought was buried... the message was for him... not beyond color; *into* it. Not or; *and*." (627) The embrace of multiple identities and perceived differences finds a new form in Robert's lifetime, updating David and Delia's vision of a society beyond imposed racial differences to embrace these divides and dismantle them. David's focus as he nears death on curves in time and the possibility of time travel elaborates on the focus on repetition and development found in the content, form, and conclusion of the narrative: "on such a curve, events can move continuously into their own local future while turning back onto their own past." (476) The intersecting timelines and narratives of David and Joseph entwine these two regressive and

²⁵⁶ The quarter tone scale was developed in the Middle East and can be found in traditional Persian music. The use of quarter tones in Western music occurred at a later date and was first used by Fromental Halévy in 1849.

²⁵⁷ Daniel Barenboim, *Music Quickens Time*, ed. Elena Cheah, Reprint (London: Verso, 2009). 43

progressive loops together, creating a figure-of-eight form which anticipates the changes which will emerge in their ancestor, Robert's, future.²⁵⁸

The continual reinvention which occurs during this lemniscate US odyssey enmeshes the text's theme and form. The returns to places imbued with multiple meanings allow for the accumulation of identities, enlarging the significance of these spaces: "we played the next day, for more ghosts than there were healthy bodies in the audience." (212) The past is repeatedly returned to within the present to allow history to become a perpetual spectral presence within Powers's depiction of the US: "In February of 1965, three men gunned down Malcolm X a few blocks from where Da fed us Mandelbrot and taught us the secret of time." (306) Powers creates breaches within seamless linear accounts of history, embedding one family's personal narrative within moments of monumental change and creating layered images of irrecoverable loss. The power of the performance to temporarily suspend time and disrupt a conventional temporality entwines personal and national loss with individual utopian longings. The enduring lesson Jonah is taught by his music teacher, "*if you can't be someone more than yourself, don't even think about waking out on stage,*" (617) resists a singular interpretation and ripples through each Strom's interpretation of the power of a performance to embrace, displace, or transcend perceived racial differences. The struggle to reconcile with their parents, and wider society's, unattained images of a more inclusive US leads to Ruth, Jonah, and Josephs rejection or embrace of self-styled musical creations.

Pertinent moments from a national history overlap with the significant private memories which shape the family's ongoing identity construction. Recognisable spaces and monuments are reshaped by the Strom family's individual legacy, creating a new perspective on established accounts of past events. The significance of the National Mall in Washington D.C to the family is revisited on multiple occasions: Marian Anderson's performance in 1939, the semi-finals for America's Next Voice in 1961, and the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom in 1963 which marked one hundred years of emancipation, explore varied instances of collective responses to public performances and protest. The semi-finals for

²⁵⁸ For further discussion of, and the argument for, the actual occurrence of time travel in the novel, see Joseph Dewey 'Little Knots, Tied In The Clothing of Time: *The Time Of Our Singing As A Dual-Time Narrative*' in Peter Dempsey and Stephen J. Burn, eds., *Intersections: Essays on Richard Powers* (Champaign: Dalkey Archive Press, 2008), 198-214.

America's Next Voice provides a public stage for the Strom brothers, adding another musical performance to the archives of voices echoing within the site of the family's "founding legend." (211) The dual role occupied by Joseph - a performer and a detached observer - creates a vivid image of a living, repeating past whilst generating another variation of the Strom family's musical inheritance: "My mother's voice grew into my brother... I must have been playing along... but I was pure audience." (213) Powers depicts an array of emerging and reanimated identities through the variations of passive and active performance within the narrative, embedding history and culture into Joseph's daily life. Joseph's recollective account revises the family's mythologised founding stories, adding his distanced performance to an array of interwoven narratives.

The first narrative event at the National Mall in Washington, Marian Anderson's performance of 'America, My country tis' of thee', provides the inspiration for David and Delia's dream of a utopian family life, the impossible convergence of timelines, and the creation of their family legend. Delia's recollection of the event articulates the potency of creative forms and how these performances can inspire utopian thought and reform. This pivotal moment creates "a crack in the air," (136) allowing the couple to question their status within the public sphere and inspiring them to cultivate a private form of communication and identity. Marc Augé's view on the power of the public performer coheres with Delia's and David's responses to Anderson's rendition of 'America, My country tis' of thee'. Augé believes that a performing artist's interpretation "reveals the abundance of virtualities that different voices, movements and bodies will succeed in actualizing... and render the social dimension of art more palpable."²⁵⁹ The potential for varied expressions of self to be acknowledged and included within a US identity is articulated via Anderson's performance, creating a fleeting glimpse of a potential future. After the concert concludes, David and Delia's timeline implausibly merges with their unborn grandson's, creating the pivotal lemniscate crossroad between these two narrative timelines. The imagined future finds human form in Robert, beginning the two journeys back and forth through expanding temporal planes in search of a unified future. The memories of this performance reappear once the family's litany of losses have been relayed. Joseph's tale ends in his parents' past whilst Robert continues

²⁵⁹ Marc Augé, *The Future* (London: Verso, 2014), 27-8.

this lineage, “singing himself into existence.” (631) Anderson’s performance exemplifies the use of a creative, individualised expression of national identity to undermine pre-existing narratives, using a public platform to challenge exclusionary histories.

The possible futures emerging from the assembled crowds’ spontaneous responses to Anderson’s rendition of ‘America’ provides an opportunity to conceive of an adaptable national identity. The sense of optimism evinced from this performance highlights the possibility for art to create change: “she sounded like God singing to Himself, the evening before the very first day.” (133) The potential for a utopian society to emerge following an inspirational performance is threaded throughout the text. The mythic status granted to a seemingly unchangeable US identity is reduced by the potency of this revisionary musical performance. Alastair Williams’ assessment of the reclamation of a submerged feminine voice in gendered music is applicable to this portrayal of performance and repressed identities within the US. The ability to simultaneously look at and listen to performers reduces the power of the gaze. Williams argues, “musical performers envelop the ear of the listener with something like an authorial function that does not surrender signification to the auditory gaze.”²⁶⁰ The role of the performer and the author are contextualised by dominant US identity narratives which constrain the reception of the interrelated forms of media. However, the possibility for a performance to challenge these limitations is the catalyst for the husband and wife’s creation of the alternative system of communication which echoes within their children’s and grandchildren’s distinct narratives.

Powers depicts decades within the twentieth century from multiple perspectives, creating an overtly subjective account of the past where the potential for positive change collides with large scale conflicts. Joseph’s, Jonah’s, and David’s preoccupation with change remains linked to their chosen professions and perception of reality. David’s work on the Manhattan project, Joseph’s conflicted role as a passive accompanist, and Jonah’s detached experience of reality as an elongated musical composition, combine within this contemporary landscape with tragic consequences. The instances of disassociation and dynamism, inertia and innovation, terminate in the images of a “dying city, burning out of control.” (616)

²⁶⁰ Alastair Williams, *Constructing Musicology* (Aldershot: Routledge, 2001), 66.

Jonah's search for a return to "an entirely new style so old it had passed out of collective memory" (514) and his unshakeable belief in the power of a group performance ends with his final performance, loss of hearing, and fatal injury at a Rodney King Riot. The Stroms' personal links to the optimism of the immediate post-war years and the Civil Rights-era culminates in the riots which follow the police brutality aimed at an unarmed Rodney King in 1992. Jonah's death following the subsequent riots provides the climax for the accumulating submerged frustrations which build throughout Joseph's narrative. The 'pulsing', 'buzzing', and 'underwater rage' of audiences, rioters, protestors, and crowds, surfaces during these scenes of violence in the last decade of the twentieth century. Jonah's role as the eternal performer leaves him deaf to the reality of society: "I might have been singing. Standing in the middle of the cross fire... snapping my fingers." (618) Jonah's lifelong identity frames his tragic death; the infinite possibilities of creative compositions are overshadowed by the overwhelming power of the crowd faced with televised scenes of institutional racism. Powers emphasises the impossibility of separating creative forms – however malleable or potent - from the prevailing cultural and social contexts which dominate the landscape.

The recollections of innovative musical performances alongside historical events examine the dynamic between private and public constructions of identity. The utopian impulse of the individual members of the Strom family during seven decades of the twentieth century emphasises that the anticipated emergence of a utopian society has endured. Powers enmeshes creative media, scientific advancements, and utopian traditions and collectives within one family's legacy, highlighting the varied roles of the individual within national and global events. Promises from the past remain unfulfilled and are revisited during times of heightened dissonance, culminating in scenes of large-scale protest and rioting in the 1990s. The potential for progress within a space suffused with crosscutting legacies highlights the struggle to construct a self-defined identity within the ruins of an unrealised US utopia. The potential for new, combined perspectives on US national histories emerges without depicting a monolithic crowd or a cohesive family unit. Throughout Joseph's and Jonah's performances in public venues the authorial intent encoded in their performances does not necessitate an equivalent response from the audience. The multiple perspectives from which a performance gains its potency for both the Strom family and the wider audience suggests that a unilateral

notion of progress is correspondingly idealistic. Despite the Strom children's early realisation that their original family identity does not resemble the identities they encounter within the public sphere the varied forms of performance explore the possibility of constructing alternative worlds. The depictions of unifying moments and the power of the crowd - "one pulsing, breath-holding creature made up of 75,000 single cells, fused by that voice" (220) - explore the varied forms of counter narratives induced by collaborative creative performances. Although Powers emphasises the performativity of identity, the multitude of subversive performances which challenge pre-existing identity tropes suggests that dominant ideologies and imposed narratives can be amended from a self-created stage.

Conclusion

Powers's portrayal of the Hobson and Strom families explores the connections between trauma, atrocity, and developing utopian sentiments in the US during the latter half of the twentieth century. The movements back and forth through time switches the focus between the older and younger generations of the families, charting the differing compulsions to build a new identity and create a utopian society. The focus on the post-World War Two ideals of parents, intersecting with those of their children provides a multi-generational perspective on the utopian legacy embedded into an increasingly destabilised national identity. Judie Newman contends that this response to turbulent, historic events is embedded within the US societal landscape and is inextricably linked to the history of US utopian communities: "Two models of feeling management in American society are particularly germane to the discussion of utopia: the relentless creed of positivity... and the compulsory grief-fest."²⁶¹ Each patriarch's responses to the possibility of devastation, or the realisation of a utopian society, cohere with a wider oscillation between loss and optimism that extends beyond the twentieth-century US. Eddie Hobson Sr and David Strom experience comparable retreats into solitary mourning whilst immersing themselves in the construction of a better tomorrow. These narrative themes are related to both utopianism and collaborative accounts of history. The pivotal scenes of loss and devastation which shape the protagonists' perception of society are followed by transient retreats from reality and revisionary compositions; the subjective pursuit of harmonious futures is inextricably bound to pre-existing identities and unreconciled pasts. The proximity between mourning and celebration is repeatedly explored in relation to the role artists and creative media play in the ongoing development of US identity narratives.

The permeable lines drawn in *Prisoner's Dilemma* between freedom or mutual imprisonment persist in *The Time of Our Singing*. Powers continues to depict combinations of creative media and twentieth-century US history in relation to the search for self-created consonance amongst imposed societal dissonance. Each family combats the effect of pivotal change on persisting national narratives, crafting speculative narratives or improvised musical arrangements. David and Delia "both

²⁶¹ Newman, *Utopia and Terror in Contemporary American Fiction*: 21, 10.

went to their graves swearing that any two melodies could fit together, given the right twists of tempo and turns of key.” (TOOS 462) The fusion of seemingly incongruous forms and revised narratives creates endless iterations of subversive performances which defy restrictive boundaries. Powers examines the purpose and potency of art amidst the enduring legacy of grand narratives and exclusionary hegemonic discourse in the Atomic Age and Civil Rights-era US. In each text the performances and communicative strategies fashioned within small community groups, collectives, or families, suggest that categories can be altered as new networks of social bonds are created with their own distinct set of rules.

Although Powers foregrounds the technological developments which influence twentieth century modes of cultural production emphasis is still placed on the influence of oral and audible modes of storytelling: “long after we’ve retooled for printed silence, we still feel residual meaning in the wake of how things sound.”²⁶² The references to musical composition and verbal exchanges emphasises the lasting role that sound plays in the creation of pivotal collaborative moments. The amalgamation of seemingly dissimilar histories and the focus on change through polyvocal accumulation, ambiguous statements, words with varied meanings, and idiomatic expressions, undermines the authority of pre-established written meaning. However, the creation of subversive compositions and redemptive narratives in the private sphere does not wholly amend pre-existing discourse and identities within the public sphere. Although the Hobson and Strom parents endeavour to provide an alternative education within their homes, their children’s expanding roles within the public sphere inevitably lead to the modification of these alternative forms of communication. The ongoing efforts of the Hobson and Strom children to engage with and update their parents’ legacy produces the lemniscate structure of each text. The narrative focus moves back and forth through time as they attempt to gain an increased understanding of their inheritance of both a national and family history in relation to their role as co-authors of an unfolding future.

The shared forms of engagement and innovative identity narratives sought by the protagonists encompass transmedial and intermedial references. Powers adds to the transmedial utopian tradition, joining the accumulation of voices that question the status quo via the creation of alternative worlds. The prejudices found within

²⁶² Powers, ‘How to Speak a Book’. (The New York Times, 2007)

twentieth-century US society are explored to varying degrees in each text whilst highlighting the network of powers involved in cultural production.²⁶³ Despite the recognition of the role of subjective accounts within the promotion of hegemonic narratives, both Eddie Hobson Sr and David Strom fail to acknowledge how their apparent denial of history - relating to and exceeding their involvement in the development of the atomic bomb - reproduces a pattern of history as interpretation. The desire to create a different timeline does not explicitly reflect on either character's sense of guilt over, or responsibility for, the design of destructive events and instead arises from an implicit longing to amend the trajectory of this legacy. Powers situates these narratives within an archive of creative forms that are produced within times of upheaval, cataloguing the variations on pre-existing themes and relating these to contemporary perspectives on positive change. The form of the narrative mirrors the interrelated inspirations for transmedial narratives, compounding the image of non-linear progress. This accumulation of interlinked art works and history charts the changing definition of a utopian society in parallel with scientific and technological developments. Despite the inability of these small-scale actions to create large-scale transformations, the Hobsons' and Stroms' joint narratives ripple throughout their interactions with wider society. These small incremental exchanges become part of the expanding shape of US identities, embracing variety and undermining the links between dissonance and erasure.

²⁶³ Twentieth century commercial methods of cultural production including film, television, tape recorders, and radio, enable the rapid creation and circulation of cultural forms which can amend or reinforce divisive ideologies.

Conclusion

The preceding analyses of six of Richard Powers's texts has focused on the comparable lemniscate temporal patterns found within each novel. Each text's figure of eight depiction of time provides an expansive framework which supports the promotion of intermedial collaboration. The movements back and forth through time are anchored to the protagonist's creative endeavours and their attempts to craft an alternative reality or identity from pre-existing designs. These collaborative forms are reinforced by the lemniscate image of societal history which reappears in all six of the texts. The multilinear temporalities enhance the patterns of tension and release within the protagonists' narrative arcs whilst also highlighting the enduring hegemonic narratives within a wider US history. The role art plays in the construction of pervasive ideologies is explored in parallel with the protagonists' developing self-styled narratives. The use of art to support problematic socio-political rhetoric is countered by the depiction of transmedial art which highlights the malleability of pre-existing narratives whilst exploring the possibility for change within and beyond the US: "sunlight breaks free for a moment, to shine on earth's most mutable country."²⁶⁴ The wide-scale societal changes in the late-twentieth and early twenty-first centuries US are related to an expansive history of art as well as a catalogue of historic events, emphasising the composite fluctuating forms embedded in a US national identity.

The potential for new narratives to emerge from pre-existing potentially destructive or oppressive societal narratives promotes the salvageable qualities of multiple cultural forms and values. The characters' forms of world-building via the use of modified codes, compositions, or forms of communication reaffirm their connection with history whilst renewing their sense of autonomy. The fragmented representations, and the importance placed on authentic self-expression, engage with both modern and post-modern sensibilities whilst speculating on forms of future innovation or destruction. The immediate post-World War Two US frames these narratives' present day and shapes the characters' perception of the US and images of the future: "Whatever future this war leaves intact, it will never again be

²⁶⁴ Powers, *The Time of Our Singing*, 43.

yesterday's tomorrow."²⁶⁵ The often-unreconciled vestiges of the expectations and idealism of modernity which occur alongside a postmodernist sense of disorder and irony are heightened by specific incidents of trauma, conflict, and civil discontent. The protagonists' perception of reality and their dissociative or utopian impulses are shaped by irrecoverable histories and personal traumas, as well as ongoing forms of loss and instability. As the novels unfold, the protagonists and their successors individually address these moments of rupture and transition, reassembling or disregarding strands of still-active traditions and designs.

In the first chapter, the analysis of *The Gold Bug Variations* and *Orfeo* considered Powers's depiction of the role of the artist and scientist during times of instability. Although these narratives' present-day takes place in the 1980s and early 2000s respectively, each protagonist's forms of self-creation stem from the discord found in a post-World War Two US. The ramifications of the Atomic Age are traced to the advertising campaigns created in 1980s New York and the inception of the Patriot Act after the September 11th attacks. Late capitalist society and emerging forms of surveillance are aligned with the increasing commodification of the processes of cultural production. Recollections of the past entwine the changing forms of recall and circulation associated with music, archival data, and digital media, expanding the non-linear temporal frame. The protagonists implant subversive codes into pre-existing platforms to highlight emerging cultural forms and values: Stuart Ressler repurposes an ATM and Peter Els creates an anti-hero persona via a Twitter-based narrative. The entwined designs contrast potentially oppressive hegemonic narratives and proliferating consumption with the protagonists' attempts at autonomous creation. The compositions and innovations attempted by Ressler and Els are situated within narratives which explore inheritance and succession, developing the image of collaboration beyond an individual innovator. The spliced love stories in *The Gold Bug Variations*, and the role of Els's daughter in *Orfeo*, explore the significance of legacy to forms of creation and collaboration whilst enhancing the lemniscate temporal frame. The attempts to create something new, repurpose a pre-existing form, or gain control over an uncontrollable narrative, shape Powers's depictions of a musician and scientist whose vision of the future is haunted by an unreconcilable past.

²⁶⁵ Powers, 345.

Chapter Two focused on the redemptive and destructive potential of narratives in relation to US involvement in conflicts. In *Operation Wandering Soul* and *Plowing the Dark*, emerging innovations in science, technology, and creative media are interwoven with scenes of violence, pollution, and loss. This amalgamation of interconnected experiences is complemented by each text's figure-of-eight timeline. Powers once again traces contemporary discord to the legacy of World War Two, colonialism, and expansionism. The role of the artist, the history of utopian communities, and mythologised national histories are explored in tandem with destructive forms of progress: "It sounded like one of those imperial last-century anachronisms, retuning to ancient and better days while the world around the island went to flames."²⁶⁶ The protagonists in both texts utilise a range of intermedial forms to construct their own narrative salves, mirroring the behaviour of previous generations. The recollections of the past within a tumultuous present are linked to projections into the future and their desire for an emancipated or utopian reality. Richard Kraft's attempt to escape an intolerable postmodern city re-enacts Peter Pan's flight in search of Neverland, exploring the dangerous potency of fictional and unrealisable utopian worlds in relation to a space suffused with contemporary illusions. The miraculous transcendence of Adie's and Martin's spatial reality results in the implausible merging of worlds in the reconstructed Hagia Sophia, similarly commenting upon the dissociative and redemptive potential of redesigned virtual spaces. The comparison of the potency of a virtual reality platform with children's fables, enlarges Powers's ongoing depiction of a neocolonial US landscape saturated with transmedial cultural narratives across interconnected timelines.

The final chapter returned to the impact of the Atomic Age and, more specifically, the Manhattan project. This concluding comparative analysis combines many of the elements of the two preceding chapters, exploring the potential liberatory results of composition and collaboration alongside the irrepressible memories associated with colonialism and the advent of the Atomic Age. In *Prisoner's Dilemma* and *The Time of Our Singing*, the attempts by communities or family units to create their own identity narratives once again occurs against the backdrop of seemingly imminent destruction, widespread inequality, and violence in the latter half of the twentieth century. The protagonists' attempts at world-building

²⁶⁶ Powers, *Operation Wandering Soul*, 50.

stem from pivotal moments within their private memories, wider shared histories, and their separation from a romanticised narrative of US life: “Maybe they could make an America more American than the one the country has for centuries lied to itself about being.”²⁶⁷ The characters’ perception of the present and their expectations for the future are shaped by these interwoven strands and their engagements with oral, visual, and written forms of storytelling. The protagonists’ recollective narratives and reappearing pasts focus on the potential for compositions to be rewritten and for histories to be retold. Powers draws attention to the amalgamation of world histories within the US national identity and the potential for reform to stem from new composite master narratives: “A mixed up puzzle picture... cut up in the old world and shipped off to the New for rebuilding.”²⁶⁸ The compressed histories repeatedly evoked via multivalent descriptive language emphasise the potential to reassemble collaged narratives and identities, creating a new shape. The protagonists promote modified forms of communication within their family units in order to erase or undermine seemingly fixed societal rules, histories, or ideologies. The protagonists’ reconstructed fragments create a counter-narrative strand which runs adjacent to hegemonic accounts of US history, illuminating the curated dioramas presented as reality.

Powers examines the artificial constructs within an interminable history via the accumulation of fictions within fiction without a finite end. The ongoing visions of a utopian society are explored in each text alongside a striving for a sense of transcendence or eternity, expanding the map of this tradition further to include quasi-mythological histories and narratives. The texts are replete with references which align mythic histories and journeys with the realisation of eternity or triumph over death.²⁶⁹ The varied quests for the attainment of infinity or escape act as palimpsests, retracing the shape of the lemniscate narrative framework. These seemingly endless searches for an idealised or liberatory life are central to the protagonists’ interactions with fiction, composition, and reality. The quest for immortality is seamlessly linked to community building, narrative traditions, utopian

²⁶⁷ Powers, *The Time of Our Singing*, 233.

²⁶⁸ Powers, 156.

²⁶⁹ The alchemist and explorer Xu Fu who set sail with 3000 boys and 3000 girls to obtain the elixir of life (c. 210 BC), ‘Sailing to Byzantium’, and the myth of Orpheus descending to the underworld, are just three examples of intertextual references found in Powers’s texts.

idealism, and destructive innovations. The spectre of the atomic bomb in all six narratives undeniably shapes the characters' connection to the US utopian tradition and their repressed or compulsive returns to an irrecoverable past. As Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o asserts, "the first explosion of a nuclear bomb in 1945 marks a clear ontological break with a past during which no human technology was capable of snuffing out life altogether and the beginning of a continuing present where such technology reigns supreme."²⁷⁰ The shadow of this destructive form of innovation and the yearning for the attainment of the unfulfilled dream of a utopian, united society are compounded by late stage capitalism and emerging forms of wide-scale planetary destruction in an unstable present. The depictions of the US landscape marred with the realities of nuclear test sites in New Mexico, and the urban centres of New York and Los Angeles heaving with traffic and toxic fumes, confront the reality behind an idealised US landscape.

The threads of colonialism, conquest, and enclosure are found throughout the depictions of US history buried beneath sprawling urban centres and vast desert or agrarian landscapes. The romanticised image of the US as a tabula rasa is deconstructed via the depictions of living histories and the claustrophobic accumulation of suppressed voices within contested spaces. Powers frequently situates characters within US towns or cities which form part of a US history of profiteering and myth-making. DeKalb, Illinois, home to the resident who patented barbed wire in 1874 and to the company which became United States Steel in 1898, and a former Shaker town in Lebanon, Ohio, are just two of the locales which emphasise the commodification of the natural landscape and the rise of the contemporary early twenty-first century prison-industrial complex : "A town whose chief industry had once been utopianism but was now the nearby close-security prison."²⁷¹ The emerging forms of societal unrest and increasing signs of ecological devastation are framed by failed utopian projects and the faint resonance of a romanticised US landscape. These nightmarish images of contemporary US society are contrasted with examples of counter-cultural movements, small scale communities or utopian collectives, and family units engaging with a utopian legacy and the redemptive power of art. Despite engagements with utopian rhetoric

²⁷⁰ Ngugi Wa Thiong'o, *Secure the Base: Making Africa Visible in the Globe* (New York: Seagull Books, 2016), xiv.

²⁷¹ Powers, *Plowing the Dark*, 218.

associated with destructive outcomes and inequality, the families and individual protagonists in each text strive to reframe this tradition within a new context. The protagonists in Powers's texts interact with, and often seek to subvert, this loss of autonomy whilst continuing the endless quest for transcendence or a utopian US.

Each text traces the enduring grand narratives of the past and the relevance of the myths of modernity through to a contemporary context: "It must still draw its audience... those who slip through their shell-shocked urban nightmare for a glimpse of the world before the crash of the continents, when art still imagined us as one."²⁷² The problematic perception of art as a unifying form is undermined by the proliferation of voices and identities within polyphonic designs. However, the utopian tradition persists within these varied narrative settings and is not discarded as an archaic dream. The potential for a grand narrative to mask or amend histories, promoting an idyllic utopian city upon a hill which never came to fruition, is challenged by the protagonists' updated vision of this US tradition. The protagonists' engagements with the utopian tradition simultaneously revive and undermine these narratives, foregrounding emerging forms of collaboration which posit an alternative, inclusive history. The facets of hegemonic US accounts of history are exposed and undermined by a range of subversive intermedial creative narratives which highlight "the chill intersection between polyphony and politics."²⁷³ The treatment of hegemonic discourse and master narratives in all six texts aligns with Upstone's and Shaw's definition of productive authenticity: "while the text may unravel the grand narrative... there remains the potential for a grand narrative that may encompass multiple perspectives and marginalised voices."²⁷⁴ Powers focuses on the dual traces of modernism and postmodernism alongside the possibility of reconstructing a grand narrative in an inclusive, multifaceted style. The speculative futures in each text enmesh large-scale movements with small-scale collaborations, highlighting the potential for change in varied forms.

The repeated use of language and leitmotifs which emphasise the interwoven forms of tradition and innovation explores potential forms of change in the late-twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Els' 'rose that nobody knows', Jan's and Joseph's 'living fossils' or 'fossil fixed records', Ressler's and Eddie Sr's dilemma of

²⁷² Powers, *The Time of Our Singing*, 162.

²⁷³ Powers, *Plowing the Dark*, 139.

²⁷⁴ Shaw and Upstone, 'The Transglossic: Contemporary Fiction and the Limitations of the Modern', 591.

‘bringing moonlight into a chamber’, and David and Delia Strom’s, ‘bird and fish making a nest together’, relate human progress and identity to the fragility and preservation of organic forms, gathering a layered significance as each text progresses towards scenes of loss. Powers’s description of his engagement with literary traditions in his latest novel, *Bewilderment*, sheds some light on the variations on pre-existing narratives and styles in these metamodernist, transglossic texts: “Can we find contentment despite our bottomless hunger? How do we surrender the increasingly isolated self to the terrifying diversity of ‘endless forms most beautiful’? All these questions form the time-honoured heart of fiction... I’ve just updated the fable for the age of pandemics, exoplanets, and mass extinction.”²⁷⁵ This desire for a better tomorrow is embedded into each protagonist’s narrative: the search for perfected progress, freedom, and harmony occurs against the backdrop of present-day conflicts and an increasingly commodified natural world.

Powers articulates a range of anxieties associated with the mid-twentieth century and beyond, placing these transitional texts within literary styles contemporary to the early twenty-first century. The focus on the utopian tradition, collaboration, and community building, alongside the portrayals of escalating ecological and societal devastation which exemplify the paradox of human progress, aligns Powers’s work with both the metamodernist and the transglossic form. The network of interconnected styles and global anxieties accentuate the sense of a developing planetary consciousness. This is more evident in later novels, such as *The Echomaker*, *The Overstory*, and *Bewilderment*, where Powers’s approach to history expands and overtly encompasses other organic forms of life. Although these later texts are not examined in detail in this study, Powers implicitly or explicitly highlights the detrimental ecological impact of the pursuit of progress and scientific innovation throughout his novels. The pursuit of dominance within the planetary system has led to wide-scale devastation and the construction of claustrophobic legacies: “history was a bad dream that the living were obliged to shake.”²⁷⁶ The artist is frequently depicted as a perpetual narrator of the fallout from histories of destruction, oppression, and abuse, attempting to combat irrepressible pasts through a creative medium.

²⁷⁵ ‘Richard Powers Q&A | The Booker Prizes’, <https://thebookerprizes.com/richard-powers-qa>.

²⁷⁶ Powers, *The Time of Our Singing*, 138.

The transformations of varied histories within each text coalesce and form speculative fictions, looking to the future by exploring the possibility of renarrating the past. Powers's novels highlight not only the similarities between seemingly incongruous forms but also places, histories, and cultural symbols by a complex and expansive process of interweaving within a nonlinear temporal frame. The immersive multisensory experiences on sites of contested meaning generate improbable visions of a future, provide sanctuary from a divided present, or rewrite the past. The temporal transcendence achieved within overlapping sites of memory creates a nonsequential image of the past, present, and future.²⁷⁷ These multivalent spaces act as catalysts for the protagonists' faith in the redemptive potential of art whilst cautioning against the dangers of idealism. The inter-relation of distinct forms, times, and narrative arcs create a vast depiction of society which emphasises the changing nature of a myriad of forms and spaces, undermining their seemingly fixed status within US ideologies. Depictions of a US landscape teeming with buried histories, and the symbolism imbued in vast cultural monuments, are complemented by frequent examples of enduring mutable fictional stories and musical compositions. Seemingly objective accounts of monumental events are challenged via numerous creative retellings of histories alongside fictional works. The intertextual references and transmedial narratives enhance the perpetual deconstruction and reconstruction of meaning within these dense textual landscapes.

Each comparative chapter in this study has focused on Powers's enmeshed depictions of innovation and tradition. These two strands move through the past, present, and future, creating multifaceted images of history and society: "I hear these two lines bending space as they speed away from each other, hitting outward [before returning to] the shared spot where they must impossibly meet back up."²⁷⁸ This reappearing theme is staggered throughout Powers's increasing body of work, forming an elongated cumulative textual configuration. The lemniscate narrative structure of each text supports the continuing images of multilinear collaboration, utopian ambitions, and the paradox of progress. Powers persuasively represents the author and artist as an advocate for change, challenging an accepted narrative whilst examining the state of an uncertain future. Although the promotion of this role could

²⁷⁷ The Court of All Nations, Krung Thep (City of Angels), Hagia Sofia, Alamogordo, and the National Mall hold multiple meanings and are associated with both discord and harmony.

²⁷⁸ Powers, *The Time of Our Singing*, 161.

lead to an overly didactic authorial tone, the open-ended narratives and the emphasis on collaboration create a space for communication and exchange as opposed to dogmatic proposals. These amplifying chronicles, unresolved conclusions, movements between forms, and unconventional linearities, are underpinned by a structure which is embedded with codes and patterns. These designs engender a sense of order whilst remaining mutable and evolving forms, avoiding the depiction of reality which exclusively reflects a postmodern fragmentation or modernist rationalisation. Powers's multilinear narrative temporalities create innovative engagements with tradition, emphasising the need for new forms of collaboration alongside continuing reappraisals of the living past, speculating on the future changes which may emerge from repeating histories.

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