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Demonizing Humans and Humanizing Demons:
Postmodernism's Revision of Historical Figures

by
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Advisor: Mary Foltz

Ethel Rosenberg was no opera singer. Yet Robert Coover's *The Public Burning* insists on casting Ethel as the consummate entertainer, transforming her pleas for a fair trial into a dramatic aria:

ETHEL

(*Aria da capo*:)¹ Grant us our day in court, Mr. Bennett!
 Let us live that we may prove our innocence!
 That's the decent way, the American way! (392)

Ethel's words in this scene are taken directly from her 1953 letters to her two young sons from her jail cell in Sing Sing prison.² James V. Bennett, Federal Director of the Bureau of Prisons, has just stopped by to encourage Ethel to cooperate and divulge espionage information in exchange for lifting the death penalty. What was originally a tragic and harrowing experience is turned into "A Last-Act Sing Sing Opera," complete with "choral effects, courtesy of *Congressional Records*" (381). Ethel's serious attempt to reason with the director comes across as a ridiculously dramatic, which makes the opera—functioning as one of the intermezzos between sections of the novel—all the more entertaining. Life and death become maudlin abstractions that, on the surface, seem to serve only to amuse the reader. Ethel references a type of "American way" exemplified by the integrity of the justice system and the assurance of a fair trial. However, *The Public Burning* abandons this interpretation of the "American way," which instead comes to be defined by the ability of the mass media to transform any event, no matter how solemn or controversial, into a source of entertainment.

This scene is representative of a trend within postmodern fiction to revise historic events and to create fictional protagonists from real national heroes and villains. Postmodern authors seem to be obsessed with re-writing history in fictional form, often representing actual historical

¹ A musical form common in opera, sung by a soloist with the accompaniment of instruments (Harvard Dictionary of Music).

² For the full letter, see "The Legacy of the Rosenbergs." Sid Resnick Historical Archive. *Jewish Currents*. 1953. <http://jewishcurrents.org/wp-content/uploads/2010/02/jcarchive011.pdf>

figures in a parodic light. E.L. Doctorow's *The Book of Daniel* also deals with the Rosenbergs, following one of their sons years after the trial. Another historical "villain," Lee Harvey Oswald, is characterized in a very different way in Don DeLillo's *Libra*. On the opposite side of the spectrum, the national metanarrative of the war hero is undermined by Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five*, a disjointed narrative of a World War II soldier suffering from post traumatic stress. Thomas Pynchon critiques both sides of totalizing political ideology in *Vineland*, a romp through 1960s counterculture as seen through the lens of 1980s conservative backlash. But what are the stakes of parody in terms of ethical representation of real people? Where is the line drawn between parody as constructive critique and parody as meaningless entertainment? Because these novels focus on major historical events, readers are left asking why revision of nationalist narratives is so important. How do these fictional accounts differ from hegemonic narratives?

Novels like Coover's *The Public Burning* and Don DeLillo's *Libra* intervene in history through their representations of the hysterical American nationalism that demonized the communist figure during the Cold War. Their revisions of hegemonic narratives cause readers to reevaluate dominant versions of history and reexamine how narrative forms such as journalism and biography shape the meaning ascribed to certain events. Coover's 1976 novel highlights the effects of the Red Scare and criticizes the way in which the media manipulated the Rosenbergs' trial in order to sell their own product. Throughout the novel, Coover highlights the absurd process by which the American news media spins their version of carefully selected facts into emotionally charged hegemonic narratives; he changes the form of the news articles from prose to poetry in order to reveal their underlying subjectivity. Coover's parodic treatment of Ethel has the potential to merely replicate the violent treatment of the Rosenbergs by the media, but I will

argue that scenes in the novel similar to the one above are not complicit critique.³ *The Public Burning* does something different from the original texts to which it alludes; it highlights for the reader how certain people end up as scapegoats as the result of a flawed media system that both eliminates their humanity and exploits them to forward a nationalist agenda. Coover's use of intertextuality changes the emphasis and even meaning of the original text in that the reader comes to interpret the article in a way that the original source did not intend, exposing these hegemonic narratives to critique and bringing out new, previously marginalized voices from the texts that silence them. Don DeLillo's *Libra* similarly challenges a demonizing metanarrative through his complex characterization of Lee Harvey Oswald. Within the novel, numerous conspirators, CIA agents, and even Oswald himself all try to construct or reconstruct the assassin's identity, making it impossible for the reader subscribe to dominating image of the crazy assassin that is perpetuated through conventional historical accounts. Instead, DeLillo ventures to present this historical figure in its human complexity, including both Oswald's captivating idealism and his deplorable misogyny. Thus, the novel exemplifies the continual revision and manipulation of history, showing the ability of narrative to demonize or humanize historical figures. DeLillo offers a new reading of Oswald as an idealistic, yet deeply flawed human being. Both Coover and DeLillo disrupt master narratives of demonized historical figures, subverting conventional sources of history such as news magazines and historical biographies. This allows both authors to create new ways of viewing the past and the meaning it holds for the present.

The following analysis of these two powerful parodies will counter other critics of postmodern literature who argue that they are complicit with a system they propose to critique and that there is no meaning to be found in their mere repetition of source texts. For example,

³ See Linda Hutcheon's discussion of complicit critique in *A Poetics of Postmodernism* (31).

Fredric Jameson and Perry Anderson argue that postmodernism is inseparable from the system in which it operates; therefore, it can never be more than a complicit critique of capitalist consumer culture or an image-driven media society. Anderson states, “Abstention from criticism . . . is subscription” (134). He argues that postmodernism’s subscription to or complicity with the system in which it operates precludes its ability to subvert the mechanisms of said system. Jameson notes that many postmodern narratives “do not represent our historical past so much as they represent our ideas and cultural stereotypes about that past” (10). According to Jameson, the relationship between present and past in contemporary culture is characterized by “historical amnesia” (20). However, Jameson asserts that the past remains forever out of reach, and postmodernism is neither willing nor able to offer a solution to the actual historical acts of violence. Postmodern fiction also tends to focus on the popular media, often repeating the way in which the media generates an excessive flow of images. Anderson echoes Jameson’s sentiments in his description of the news media as “a machinery of images” bombarding society with either hegemonic ideology or meaningless excess (88). For Anderson, postmodern texts merely replicate the negative effects of contemporary news media without critiquing the overarching hegemonic ideology. These two theorists would argue that *The Public Burning*’s use of articles from *Time* and *The New York Times* is complacent and devoid of critical agency. However, I intend to show that Coover is deliberate and constructive in his criticism of hegemonic news media. Jean Baudrillard also addresses a lack of meaning in his claim that there is no longer a real or original, but rather a “panic-stricken production of the real” (7). Copies are continually being created in order to mask the absence of an original, and we are forced to “reinvent the real as fiction” (124). Thus, my argument will also counter Baudrillard who argues that there is no overarching frame of reference in postmodernist works, and whatever reality that

once existed is now lost forever. He might contend that DeLillo's characterization of Oswald in *Libra* is just another copy of a copy that offers no clues as to the reality of the assassin. By analyzing DeLillo's copy of previous copies—previous renderings of Oswald in the media, his own journal, and subsequent historical biographies—I show that his constructions move beyond mere replication to reveal various layers of a complex individual. Even though readers may not come to know the “original” Oswald through DeLillo's fiction, I will argue that certain reconstructions of historical persons and events hold meaningful potential for political thought and agency.

While my account of postmodern historiographic fiction differs from the aforementioned critics, I support and extend Linda Hutcheon's claims that “historiographic metafiction” focuses on the way we make sense of facts through narrativized events. As narrative is subjective and always interpreted within the framework of a larger discourse, there can never be one singular, objective History. As Hutcheon writes, “postmodern fiction suggests that to re-write or to re-present the past in fiction and in history is, in both cases, to open it up to the present, to prevent it from being conclusive and teleological” (110). Postmodern literature blurs the line between objective history and subjective fiction, showing that in many cases History is a fictive construction, often leaving out the multiple truths that historiographic metafiction endeavors to reveal. Hutcheon also claims the irony in parody comes from a place of critique independent of the system, which prevents the type of empty nostalgia over which Jameson laments. The manipulation of form is revealed to be not only a powerful tool of postmodernism, but one of conventional productions of history and truth as well. As opposed to Anderson and Jameson's placement of postmodern fiction within the realm of complicity with the system and Baudrillard's placement of everything within the realm of meaningless simulacra, Hutcheon

argues that historiographic metafiction is able to utilize its inescapable complicity with the system in order to foster original thought. I would take this one step further and say that these novels, while unavoidably implicated with the culture in which they are produced, are not necessarily *complicit* with that culture. All texts are interpreted within the context of the dominant discourse of contemporary society, but it does not necessarily follow that they consciously or unconsciously comply with a hegemonic system. The power of novels like *The Public Burning* and *Libra* lies in their ability to provide a view of history that is both true and real in ways that other conventional historical texts cannot offer. To move beyond mere repetition of totalizing accounts of events and violent treatments of human beings opens up possibilities for the inclusion of marginalized voices and a more complex and complete understanding of history.

The National Poet Laureate: Propagandizing History

Coover's novel attacks the way in which the news media's selection of certain events—the scandalous details and incriminating evidence—and omission of others—namely those relating to the unfairness or inaccuracy of the Rosenbergs' trial—effectively determined the subjects of thought and discussion among the American public.⁴ Publications like *The New York Times* and *Time Magazine* subscribe to the format of the “news” genre in order to spread their own singular version of the truth. These sources of journalism, as well as film reviews, purposely omit multiple perspectives and experiences, bombarding Americans with totalizing accounts of History that are both inaccurate and detrimental to a more productive understanding

⁴ In his historical analysis of *The Press, the Rosenbergs, and the Cold War*, John F. Neville comments on the press's “ineffectual role as intermediary between reality and constructed reality, between the real and the sensationally apparent” (47).

of complex, interwoven *histories*.⁵ Because of *Time*'s prevalence in the United States, Coover chose to focus heavily on this news magazine in his analysis of form and history. He changes the entertainment stemming from original accounts of the Rosenbergs' trial through intertextuality. This reframing of the source text renders the reader unable to subsequently read texts like *Time* the same way and subverts the news media's violent treatment of those subjects. *The Public Burning*'s use of intertextuality uncovers the unavoidable bias and often times the flagrant emotionality of singular master narratives. Secondly, Coover's juxtaposing one text with another forces the reader to question the contradictory way in which we react to one situation compared to another similar one. A third effect of Coover's experimentation with form is to expose the complicity of a variety of sources of news, information, and entertainment, forcing the reader to question the given values and ideals of society that are taken for granted as normal, natural, and true. While I primarily focus on Coover's manipulation of *Time*, I also examine his treatment of two letters written by Richard Nixon and Ethel Rosenberg, respectively. Coover moves beyond mere repetition to engender an entirely different reaction to and interpretation of these articles. History is presented as objective truth in conventional forms such as newspapers and magazines, but these texts are inherently subjective and often unilateral accounts of the past. Through form Coover succeeds in disrupting master narratives and providing the reader with the necessary tools to subvert oppressive master narratives outside of the novel.

Many critics label *The Public Burning* as political satire; they focus on Coover's manipulation of form as solely an element of parody, deemed counterproductive by Anderson and Jameson. Another critic, Thomas LeClair, attempts to prove that the novels' use of pastiche

⁵ Coover comments, "'Objectivity' is in spite of itself a willful program for the stacking of perceptions; facts emerge not from life but from revelation" (191).

does successfully critique media culture. He proposes that Coover's over-stylization is an "art of excess" that serves to defamiliarize important subjects such as performance and entertainment (5). Still, LeClair asserts that the portion of chapters in the novel chock full of newspaper headlines are merely imitating the excess inherent in American culture, thereby justifying Baudrillard's theory that this perpetuates meaningless copies. I would take this one step further and say that the media, which LeClair cites as a major source of entertainment, is one big performance in and of itself. Media sources like *Time* and *The New York Times* are merely putting on a charade with their "inflated prose," as revealed in panoramic chapters filled with news headlines (11). LeClair's analysis remains focused on satire and excess as Coover's main instruments of critique, but I would also add that form serves a similar function. Just as Coover's use of excess reproduces the reader's everyday experience of being bombarded with information and entertainment, Coover's ability to manipulate form allows the reader to experience the source material in a different way. *The Public Burning* enables the reader to critically *engage* with news sources like *Time* rather than blindly accepting those texts as objective truth. Many critics, including Kathryn Hume⁶ and Molly Hite⁷, also focus on parody as a general critique and overlook the novel's potential for this type of ethical agency. One critic who attempts to move beyond parody into ethical critique is Ricardo Miguel-Alfonso. His article on the "ethics of understanding" focuses on "otherness," in particular how the existence of the Rosenbergs as scapegoats is necessary in order to justify the dominant ideology (16). While Miguel-Alfonso's exploration of "otherness" in the novel is engaging, he restricts any analysis of

⁶ Hume, Kathryn. "Robert Coover's Fiction: The Naked and the Mythic." *NOVEL: A Forum on Fiction*. 12.2 (1979): 127-148. Duke University Press. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1345440>

⁷ Hite, Molly. "'A Parody of Martyrdom': The Rosenbergs, Cold War Theology, and Robert Coover's *The Public Burning*." *NOVEL: A Forum on Fiction* 27.1 (1993): 85-101. Duke University Press. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1345982>

form to the realm of parody and satire. I would argue that Coover's use of form moves beyond a general critique of metanarratives. Just as words and images can be instruments of ideology, the *form* in which they are structured can likewise contribute to the construction of individuality and multiple forms of histories.

In order to make room for a multiplicity of voices, Coover must first dedoxify the traditional sources of history and news, revealing the way in which they present themselves as objective truth and preclude more than one interpretation of an event. One function of form is to provide emotional cues that guide the reader's interpretation of the text. Coover's rearranging of news articles effectively turns "objective truth" into poetic voice. Some chapters in *The Public Burning* rely on an omniscient narrator to objectively report and interpret any and all significant worldly events. Much of this news comes straight from the headlines of *Time* magazine, hailed as the National Poet Laureate. In the Prologue, a literal stage is set for the Rosenberg executions scheduled for the following day in Times Square. The chapter lists countless international events that reflect the imminent defeat of the evil Phantom (communism). Josef Stalin and Klement Gottwald have both died, and now "the East Germans, who until now have been fleeing Westward at the rate of nearly fifty thousand a month, suddenly stop, as though on cue, turn back, and confront their masters" (12). The narrator compares East Germans to slaves who have been desperately fleeing from oppression. Now the courageous working class of Soviet-controlled East Germany has decided to fight back against communism. Coover selects an article published on June 29, 1953 entitled "Cold War: Rebellion in the Rain" about an uprising in Berlin, Germany. Construction workers went on a strike that turned into a widespread rebellion against the German Democratic Republic government. The uprising was violently suppressed by Soviet forces in Germany, but not without considerable effort. Here Coover

chooses to lift certain words and phrases from the article and reassemble them in a new way. The conventional form of prose is broken down, and *Time*'s take on this event is transformed from a news article into what more closely resembles a six-stanza poem:

anger scudded in like a rain cloud
 "freedom" they chanted thousands
 began chanting the forbidden anthem
deutschland deutschland über alles
über alles in der welt! (13)

Time's original article was printed in conventional prose:

Anger scudded in like a rain cloud. 'Freedom!' they chanted. . . . Thousands began chanting the forbidden anthem: Deutschland, Deutschland über alles. Über alles in der Welt.⁸ (Rebellion 2)

Coover's text is more of a collage of sentences and phrases that flow together or run into each other rather than a carbon copy or a direct excerpt of the article. Showing that the article is already full of similes and metaphors, Coover shifts emphasis from the actual events being described to the excessive emotionality of the piece itself. The reader might not have noticed the dramatic language of the article while it was framed in the context of a prestigious news magazine and presented in its original prose form. Here Coover shows the power of form to generate preconceived notions of prose as compared to poetry, thereby priming the reader to elicit a certain response to the text. Coover distorts the article's form in order to expose *Time*'s ability to exploit the reader's emotions and emphasize certain aspects of a situation over others. The words are already there; it is the restructuring of those words that enables the reader to view them in a different light.

The framing and format of a text can have just as much an effect as the words themselves. Coover's version of the article utilizes the poetic technique of enjambment. Sentences run into each other, and the repetitive last line is indented to give the effect of multiple

⁸ English translation: Germany, Germany over all. Over all in the world.

people echoing one another. The Germans are struggling to get their voice heard as one singular, unified voice of the “people,” but they are still not perfectly in sync with one another. The writing of the article parallels the shouting of the people in that *Time* seems to be caught up in its own frenzy to have its voice heard as one singular, all-encompassing truth. *Time* may very well be shouting, “These are the facts how they were meant to be told!” This article is juxtaposed with preparations for the Rosenbergs’ deaths under the umbrella of events supposedly representative of the righteous defeat of immoral communism. Thanks to *Time*’s subliminally biased and emotional article, the narrator is easily able to associate the Rosenbergs with the Soviet oppressors of the East Germans, justifying their very graphic, very public deaths as a part of a spectacle surrounding the global decline of communism. Whereas Miguel-Alfonso argues that *The Public Burning* examines the origin of the problematic metanarrative and criticize the “positivistic need for objectivity and the artificial linearity of cause-effect thinking” (23-24), he essentially says that the novel offers no new alternatives. However, in this example Coover clearly goes beyond mere repetition by giving the reader the power to read future articles with a new critical eye.

Another way in which *The Public Burning* reveals the power of association is through juxtaposition of different source materials in such a way that allows the reader to forge new comparisons and generate new interpretations that deviate from the master narrative. In Chapter 2, master narratives are perpetuated by news headlines that flash in rapid succession across moving electric signs in Times Square. Coover subverts the master narrative, aptly summarized by the chapter’s title “A Rash of Evil Doings,” by cutting back and forth between a *Time* article also from June 29, 1953, “Japan: Worst Crash,”⁹ and a letter that Ethel Rosenberg wrote to her

⁹ The original article can be found at <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,889723,00.html>

framework of the Red Scare. If the frame itself is distorted, how can *Time* claim to be objective? Form serves to disguise the article as merely reflecting a dire reality while it in fact augments the irrational hysteria of 1950s America.

Here Coover manipulates an *already distorted* form, forcing the reader to imagine the deaths of the Rosenbergs in the context of the soldiers in the plane crash. While the deaths of American soldiers are tragically mourned, the upcoming execution of the Rosenbergs as unpatriotic conspirators is viewed as justified. The American soldiers suffered for less time—“120 seconds”—and, in a sense, to a lesser degree than Ethel in that their deaths were unexpected and likely instantaneous upon impact (43). Ethel’s trial, incarceration, and preparation for execution are drawn out over a period of months, throughout which she is isolated from her family and friends and forced to contemplate her impending death. When it finally does come time for Ethel’s execution, she must be shocked more than once, as her body still shows signs of life after the first dose. In *The Public Burning*, Coover notes that both Julius and Ethel are shocked three times. As opposed to the American soldiers who died on impact—“many soldiers were torn from their boots”—Ethel suffered multiple shocks before dying by electrocution (43). Coover seems to ask, what makes some deaths more meaningful than others? *Time* even goes to the trouble of listing the time in seconds; “120” has a much greater impact on a reader than “two” (minutes). Here, Ethel’s prolonged suffering is overridden by her construction as a demonic agent of communism. Is it fair, just, and right for us to decide which deaths deserve to be publicly scorned and which deserve to be respectfully mourned? The *Time* article is careful to mention that the American soldiers were on their way to defend the disheartened Koreans against the communist threat; it goes so far as to implicate the Rosenbergs in deaths resulting from a freak accident. Communists, let alone two incarcerated Americans,

could not possibly have had anything to do with two engines failing midair on a plane in Japan. By comparing Ethel to the plane crash victims, Coover implies that she too is the victim rather than the guilty party. And according to this chapter's title, of Ethel is not in fact one of the "evil doers," then she must be a victim of "evil doing." Coover ends the passage with a line from Ethel's letter: "All my love and all my kisses!" (44). This serves to further elicit sympathy for Ethel as a mother of two young soon-to-be-orphaned children. Through form, Coover humanizes Ethel in a way that the conventional news media—let alone popular culture—cannot or will not do.

Coover's manipulation of historical figures expands beyond Ethel. A portion of the novel's chapters are narrated in first person by Richard Nixon. Coover's Nixon is crass, self-conscious, and pathetic in his utter failure to gain a sense of control or understanding of the events surrounding him. At one point he ends up on the Rosenberg's execution scaffold in the middle of Times Square, his pants around his ankles and "I am a scamp" written across his rear end in red lipstick—courtesy of his failed attempt to romance Ethel. In another scene Nixon, determined to uncover the truth about the Rosenberg's role in a possible conspiracy ring, attempts to sift through various pieces of evidence in his office. When he comes across one of Ethel's final letters to her husband Julius, Nixon ruminates on his own past experiences of romance and letter-writing. In particular, Nixon fondly remembers the letters he used to write to his mother in which he would pretend he was a dog and sign them "Your good dog / Richard" (311). Coover reprints one such letter, leaving the original spelling errors intact, that briefly describes an outing with two boys and another dog during which Richard the dog is kicked by one of the boys and stung by a swarm of bees.¹¹ Nixon comments, "Even today that letter broke

¹¹ This letter is reprinted in David Greenberg's *Nixon's Shadow: The History of an Image*. New York: Norton, 2003. 247.

my heart—why hadn't the Rosenbergs been able to get that kind of feeling in their correspondence?" (311). While he admits that the letters between Julius and Ethel "seemed to be the most meaningful contact [they] had with each other," he refers to them as "pedantic and other-directed" (311, 312). He proceeds to read Ethel's letter:

Dearest Julie, I hold your dear face between my hands as I used to do so long ago and kiss you with all my heart. . . . I talk with you every night before I fall asleep and cry because you can't hear me. . . . I see your pale drawn face, your pleading eyes, your slender boyish body and your evident suffering. . . . Oh, what shall I do? Hold me close to you tonight, I'm so lonely. . . . Sweetheart, I draw you close into loving arms and warm you with my warmth.¹² (312-13)

Nixon immediately reacts, "Suddenly it occurred to me, what should have been obvious all along: she didn't love him. She never had. She needed him, but she never loved him. . . . She was using his slender boyish body as I had used Pat's cloth coat: to cop a plea" (312). Whereas the previous example framed Ethel's letter to her two sons within the context of a plane crash, this letter to her husband is set up by Nixon's reminiscence of a silly letter he wrote as a child. The contrast between the two letters is significant; in the first, Nixon imagines himself as a dog on an invented adventure, in the second, Ethel laments the loss of her husband's companionship in the face of their impending death. Whereas most readers would view the first letter as trivial and the second as emotionally moving, Nixon has the opposite reaction. Nixon declares Ethel's despair to be a self-serving ruse. The contrast between Nixon's interpretation of the letter and Ethel's actual words—"cry," "pleading," "suffering," and "lonely"—is both comedic and disturbing. Nixon's reading removes all substance from Ethel's letter, when in reality his own childish musings are what holds little meaning.¹³ Furthermore, Nixon sees this writing in the context of his own childhood struggles, not as a testimony to the suffering brought about by Cold

¹² See footnote ¹⁰ for information about the Rosenbergs' letters.

¹³ Except, as Greenberg notes, for psychobiographers concerned with analyzing Nixon's psychology.

War nationalism. This kind of relationship to the letter shows a willful replacement of marginalized voices with the “struggles” of up-standing American citizens.

Nixon fails to recognize Ethel’s genuinely dire situation and misinterprets the letter partly because the deeper meaning of human connection is lost on him, and partly because he is obsessed with rescuing Ethel from her tragic fate. He insists on painting himself as Ethel’s savior throughout the novel, even visiting her in prison to personally plead her to confess. His intentions of serving his country are equally mixed with an absurd desire to be alone together with Ethel. “She could as well have been speaking to me,” he remarks, as if it would be perfectly natural for Ethel to only be in want of a warm body (313). Nixon’s purported desire to “save” Ethel stems from his fantasies about a romance between them. His dismissal of the Rosenbergs’ “rhetoric” contradicts his own excessive display of sentimentality toward Ethel (312). Nixon’s seriously misguided endeavors are a source of comedy, but Coover also portrays Ethel in an overly dramatic way, suggesting a more general criticism of sentimentality. This leaves Coover open to accusations of subjugating Ethel’s voice and compromising the integrity of her letter in the same way as Nixon does. However, I would argue that Coover instead intends to show the ease with which the Rosenbergs’ very private words can be reappropriated in order to satisfy an individual’s own personal desires in addition to a more public source of entertainment. However, both of these are subservient to a larger national narrative. Despite Nixon’s somewhat irrational attraction to Ethel, he eventually supports her execution. In the end, Ethel remains, as the mass media declares, an agent of the evil Phantom. Still, Nixon oscillates between the media’s portrayal of Ethel as either a conniving temptress or a damsel in distress. At first Nixon reads Ethel’s letter with a cynical eye, reflective of the public’s distrust—due in large part to the mass media—of all those associated with communism. Once he

visits her in jail, however, he is overwhelmed by his feelings for her and declares, “The real Ethel Greenglass, childlike and exquisitely lovely—like Audrey Hepburn, I thought, whom I’d just seen on the cover of some magazine...” (439). Nixon’s statement is ironic in that Hepburn is also to a degree a victim of mass media. No one, including Nixon knows the real Audrey Hepburn—only the types of fictional characters she plays in the movies. Nixon resorts popular culture in order to define Ethel, emphasizing the way in which pop culture can be coopted to support a hegemonic national narrative. Coover’s use of form suggests that Ethel’s intimate feelings for her husband, as shown in her letters, come to be misread in nationalist meditations on women’s role in communism.

Intertextuality and restructuring of form in *The Public Burning* extends beyond news articles and letters into film and music, bringing to light the larger connection between media, entertainment, and politics in perpetuating master narratives. Following the Supreme Court decision to vacate the stay of execution, *Time* personified leads the parade to the White House, “singing his own words to the famous tune” (236). The tune is actually the text of *Time*’s July 14, 1952 review of the film *High Noon*, a western starring Gary Cooper as a marshal compelled to face a dangerous criminal despite the townspeople’s refusal to help. However, *High Noon* is not the typical 1950s western. It was actually written as an allegory for the blacklisting of Hollywood professionals by the House Un-American Activities Committee.¹⁴ The screenwriter, former communist Carl Foreman, was blacklisted during the film’s production and moved to England before its release. John Wayne called the film “the most un-American thing I’ve ever seen in my whole life” (Weidhorn 1). Despite its initially controversial reception, *High Noon* grew to become a favorite of presidents such as Ronald Reagan, Dwight Eisenhower, and Bill

¹⁴ See Tim Dirks’s article “High Noon” on AMC’s *Filmsite* for more information on the film’s production and reception. <http://www.filmsite.org/high.html>

Clinton largely due to its celebration of the individual, morality, and the law. Coover rearranges the text of *Time*'s review so that it resembles the very ballad to which it refers:

throughout the action dmitri tiomkin's
 plaintive high noon ballad sounds
 a recurring note of impending doo-oom
 as the heat and drama
 mount relentlessly to
 to the crisi-hiss of high noon . . . (237)

The symbiosis of American media, entertainment, and politics is exemplified in this passage. *Time* itself provides a degree of emotionally-stylized entertainment, but it can also serve as a vehicle for other modes of performance. The review functions as a trailer for the movie, as it is hard to imagine the trailer being any more patronizing. Here the objectivity of *Time* is compromised once again by its vocal support of a film that bombards the American public with trivial, excessive mass entertainment. Coover includes this as an example of how films—even those originally meant as a critique of American nationalism—can be co-opted within a nationalist discourse. Here, *High Noon*'s potential critique of the railroading of “communist sympathizers” is re-written through *Time* because American nationals are the ones fighting off the communist threat. Rather than see the Rosenbergs as victims of nationalist rhetoric, *Time* reads them through the film as the danger to nation. America is revealed as a film culture obsessed with impending doom; the movie itself, as well as the review, emphasizes the mounting suspense leading up to the showdown. Coover spends countless chapters describing the elaborate production of the Rosenbergs' executions in Times Square and the increasing tension (or excitement) surrounding it: who the “players” are, who will be in the audience, and what world events (such as the previously mentioned “Rebellion in the Rain”) are building up to reflect a global battle against the evil Phantom of communism that will culminate in the destruction of two spies. Here Coover hyphenates and extends words like “doo-oom” and “crisi-

hiss” and includes rhyme (“doo-oom” and “noon”), turning the words of the review into lyrics of a song (237). Later in the same chapter, Coover inserts lyrics of an actual song featured in *High Noon*. This comparison gives the impression that *Time*’s review is actually a part of the film itself. Like *High Noon*, *Time* also becomes an example of the exaggerated spectacles presented to the American public.

This irrational obsession with impending doom, reflected in the hysteria that consumes Times Square, can be traced back to political rhetoric. Film is exposed as a potential instrument of national rhetoric that can contribute to the excessive emotionality of American patriotism. Gary Cooper as the order-restoring marshal is worthy of Uncle Sam’s approval. This dynamic works both ways; the President Eisenhower of *The Public Burning* strives to project the public image of a folk hero comparable to Cooper. Films such as *High Noon* can help to construct representations of both national ideals and “real” external threats such as the Rosenbergs. Media in *The Public Burning* reflects and reinforces the mentality of an oversimplified “us vs. them” dichotomy and a mass fear of the “other.” The power to reinforce political ideology, both directly and indirectly, rests in the hands of *Time*; in this case it chooses to promote a film that embodies the American ideals of individualism and law and order. On one hand, *High Noon* can be co-opted to serve as part of the attack on designated enemies like the Rosenbergs.¹⁵ However, if the Rosenbergs are likened to Cooper’s marshal rather than the menacing outlaw, then they become the heroes of *The Public Burning*, albeit tragic ones. Just as the marshal is deserted by his fellow townspeople, the Rosenbergs are abandoned by their friends and separated from their family and literally forced to face their impending demise virtually alone. Another similarity lies in the fact that Frank James Cooper (the actor’s given name) is overshadowed by Gary Cooper

¹⁵ For more information on present cooptation of the film, specifically President Bush’s screening of the film post 9/11 and pre-invasion of Iraq, see Steven Weisenburger’s article “Faulkner in Baghdad, Bush in Hadleyburg: Race, Nation, and Sovereign Violence.” <http://alh.oxfordjournals.org/content/18/4/739.full>

the celebrity, who is imbued with many of the fictional marshal's characteristics. Likewise, Julius and Ethel Rosenberg are overshadowed by their public images as infamous conspirators or innocent victims. In *The Public Burning*, Ethel slips into the role of victim most easily, as she is more than willing to put on a performance onstage the day of her execution. Like the controversy surrounding *High Noon*, the true story of the Rosenbergs lies somewhere in between the two extremes. In this sense, Coover's inclusion of marginalized voices and perspectives of history produces a degree of truth absent from history textbooks, news articles, and contemporary popular culture. Specifically, Coover reveals the way in which the media defines threats to the nation and in some ways caused the hysteria that led to the Rosenbergs' deaths.

The postmodern characteristic of intertextuality moves beyond mere replication. It effectively pulls the past into the present, showing both how the present is affected by the past, and how the past is affected by the present interpretation of it. The postmodern novel does not simply reorder facts and opinions to tell a separate story of an event or person. Instead it illustrates that all accounts of the same event are tied together not by the facts they share but by the effect each past account has in the writing of a subsequent account. *The Public Burning* challenges the superficial objectivity and essential truth of news staples such as *Time* and *Life*. What some critics view as excess for the sake of parody is actually something more meaningful. Coover replicates the excess that he sees inherent in everyday life, whether it is in *Time* magazine, film, or politics. The way in which he presents excess in the novel elicits a comedic response, but the American public's response to magazines like *Time*, movies like *High Noon*, and acts of political grandstanding is largely serious. If Coover is right, these narratives make executions like the Rosenbergs' possible. Despite the attempts of conventional historical accounts to negate emotion in the retelling of history, Coover insists that objectivity is

impossible. This is especially true when dealing with texts that rely on their classification under a certain genre in order to prime the reader's response. Furthermore, *Time* and other news sources have strong ideological ties to forms of entertainment like film, as well as American politics. Coover implies that the closest we can get to an understanding of the past must come through re-experiencing emotion, engaging with history, and critically examining the societal institutions we take for granted. *The Public Burning's* manipulation of form provides the reader with the agency to do just that.

The Third Line: Inventing History

While Coover brings attention to the myopic master narratives of newspapers and magazines through directly changing the emphasis and meaning of source material, DeLillo presents his novel as an alternative to the one-dimensional accounts of Lee Harvey Oswald perpetuated by mass media. Both Julius and Ethel Rosenberg and Lee Harvey Oswald were demonized by the media; the Rosenbergs become the scapegoats of anti-communist sentiment, and Oswald was unavoidably defined by one act: the assassination of President John F. Kennedy. While Oswald was guilty of shooting the president, hegemonic narratives construct him as nothing more than a deranged lunatic or a devious conspirator of an elaborate assassination plot. Both *The Public Burning* and *Libra* challenge these dehumanizing discourses through form, although in somewhat different ways. While Coover uses parody to illustrate the ridiculousness of the media's treatment of Ethel Rosenberg as a crazy, evil communist, DeLillo takes the opposite approach, giving Lee Harvey Oswald a complexity and depth of character absent from conventional historical accounts of "the man who shot JFK". The discourses perpetuated by dominating texts negate the significance of any and all other aspects of Oswald's life. This

prevents an examination of a nuanced yet flawed human being who readers can relate to and possibly learn from. Whereas newspapers and magazines are the main targets of Coover's critique, DeLillo questions the effects of historical biographies, which provide equally totalizing accounts of people and events. The typical biography of Oswald centers on one singular event that arguably defines his whole life, but DeLillo designates less than one chapter of his novel to the assassination. Rejecting the popular construction of Lee Harvey Oswald, assassin, *Libra* chronicles the life of Lee Oswald, idealist and pro-Castro activist, loving father and abusive husband, skilled orator and failed autobiographer. *Libra* fleshes out a three-dimensional human being and provides a degree of truth absent from historical textbooks and biographies, showing how the revelation of marginalized voices and political beliefs allows for critique and a more well-rounded understanding of history.

Both Coover and DeLillo deal with excess; Coover saturates his novel with references to pop culture and mass media, and DeLillo addresses the seemingly infinite amount of data surrounding the assassination and the American public's obsession with conspiracy theories. Conventional historical texts, already packed with facts and figures in support of a singular narrative, cite myriad footnotes in reference to additional sources of information, something DeLillo mimics in *Libra*. As inexplicable as events like JFK's assassination may be, historians and the general American public are compelled to organize the plethora of facts into some version of a linear narrative that effectively explains anything and everything surrounding the event. In this way, *Libra* provides the American public with what it wants in that DeLillo plots out a convincing conspiracy theory through the interweaving of fact and fiction. The novel explores the various false leads, red herrings, and contradictory data generated by countless investigations of the incident, appearing to be the same as the aforementioned texts. While

DeLillo does explore the various conspiracy theories surrounding Oswald's assassination of Kennedy, he confronts these theories for their omission of Oswald's inner struggles, political thinking, and idealism. In the following analysis, I will compare one example of a conventional historical account, Edward Jay Epstein's *Legend: The Secret World of Lee Harvey Oswald*, which subscribes to the Oswald-as-conspirator theory, to DeLillo's novel. By no means does DeLillo present Oswald as innocent or a role model; rather, he offers a more comprehensive view of the assassin that is absent from texts such as Epstein's.

Whereas I will focus on DeLillo's complex characterization of Oswald as a way to enhance historical knowledge, critics of *Libra* focus on the attainability of absolute knowledge. Glen Thomas commends *Libra* for revealing that "there cannot be a definitive master text of the assassination, as all texts produced are imbricated within other texts. . . . Control over and knowledge of events is never absolute" (124-25). There is always a multiplicity of stories that interact and combine with each other to determine meaning. All texts are interpreted within the context of previous texts, but I argue that they can choose to perpetuate those constructions or subvert them and change them.¹⁶ Thomas Carmichael takes this a step further when he claims, "Knowledge of a world beyond marginalization . . . that would be immune to the play of signification is undermined in DeLillo's novel through its emphasis upon the self-reflexive event and the dispersed subject" (209). I would amend this statement to say that while DeLillo shows that absolute knowledge is neither attainable nor essential, he does bring to light previously marginalized voices that cause the reader to develop more complex and potentially productive views of history and politics.

While some critics of postmodernism are concerned with paratextuality as simulacra, I argue that DeLillo's work does not repeat the countless copies of Oswald-the-psychopath or

¹⁶ This is in contrast to Anderson's argument in *Origins of Postmodernity* that pastiche is no more than blind parody.

Oswald-the-mastermind already in existence. In this way I counter the critics who lament that the real is lost forever.¹⁷ As discussed in the introduction, Baudrillard's *Simulation and Simulacra* declares that everything is always already a copy of a copy; there is neither meaning nor an original. According to Baudrillard, postmodern fiction perpetuates these copies through intertextuality. Rather than acknowledging the power of intertextuality to progressively reinterpret the past, Baudrillard believes that paratextual references are not references at all in that they do not *refer* to a "real" object or idea; rather, they are truly empty or blank parody, also known as pastiche. This "denatures a profound reality" and parodies the *idea* of the real, the true, and the natural (6). Baudrillard's argument is literally far removed from reality in that, for him, the true real has disappeared. Therefore, his argument only allows for a reading of paratextual references as copies that mask both the absence of reality and their own simulation of a reality. This incredibly limiting theory would interpret the ability of multiple characters in the novel to construct various versions of Oswald cover up the very absence of an original human being. However, I will argue that the character of Lee Harvey Oswald in *Libra* is not a meaningless simulation.

DeLillo's Oswald is defined by his idealism, a quality left out of almost all dominant narratives on this subject. *Libra*'s epigraph comes directly from Oswald's Historic Diary, the journal he kept from the time he arrived in Moscow until the time he left to return back to the United States: "Happiness is not based on oneself, it does not consist of a small home, of taking and getting. . . . Happiness is taking part in the struggle, where there is no borderline between one's own personal world and the world in general" (1).¹⁸ If this is Oswald's view of the world and his own life, it would follow that a thorough biography of Oswald should include *his*

¹⁷ See Jameson's discussion of empty nostalgia in *The Cultural Turn*.

¹⁸ Oswald wrote this in a letter to his brother Robert, identified as Warren Commission Exhibit 295.

personal world, the inner workings of his own mind, and the ideals that motivated his actions. Rather than portraying Oswald as merely a cog in the wheel of a conspiracy, DeLillo paints a picture of Oswald as insightful, driven by a sense of purpose, and committed to changing the world. DeLillo chooses to preface the entire novel with this quotation in order to highlight his intentions to make personal and relatable the man who has been cast as a villain by so many authoritative historical texts.

DeLillo traces the development of Oswald's mindset, entertaining the possibility that Oswald was a political thinker. In America, Oswald feels oppressed by capitalism and searches for an alternative form of social structure. Oswald's initial idealism upon his arrival in Russia progresses to disillusionment as the people to whom he looks for guidance seem neither to know nor care who he is. Oswald goes on a search for meaning and purpose, but he finds out that the Soviet Union fails to live up to his preconceived notions of what life would be like there; in some aspects it is contradictory to his beliefs about utopian socialism. Oswald is shown to be ethically conscious and politically engaged; after researching Marxist theory, he travels to the Soviet Union intending to be a productive member of that society. However, his struggle through a critique of the Soviet Union as an impure form of socialism that has misinterpreted its ideals causes him to reject the nation that once gave him hope for a better way of life. Once Oswald realizes that the nation holds little value to him in terms of politics and lifestyle, he decides to leave. Oswald was no hero, but many contemporary accounts either omit Oswald's political ideals or misinterpret him as sympathetic to the Soviet cause. Just as the Rosenbergs are automatically deemed Soviet spies based on a possible link to communism, Oswald also exemplifies the danger of ostracism faced by anyone who seriously contemplates the merits of a different type of socioeconomic structure apart from capitalism.

Aside from the postcards from Oswald's travels through Russia and letters sent to family and friends, the Historic Diary is the main source of Oswald's direct voice. It is the only account of Oswald's life during this time period and relates his arrival in Russia, attempted suicide, marriage to Marina, and eventual disillusionment with Soviet Union as what he saw as a corrupt bureaucracy. In addition to ascribing a sense of idealism to Oswald, another way DeLillo attempts to give Oswald some sort of integrity is by preserving the Historic Diary entries as originally written. When DeLillo quotes from the Diary in *Libra*, he purposely leaves intact the numerous spelling and grammatical errors—arguably a result of Oswald's dyslexia—in Oswald's manuscript. DeLillo describes the visual image of the diary: "The lines, mainly in block letters, wander and slant across the page. The page is crowded with words, top to bottom, out to either edge, crossed-out words, smudged words, words that run together, attempted corrections and additions, lapses into script, a sense of breathlessness, with odd calm fragments" (149). *Libra*, as a work of fiction, does provide its own context through which to view Oswald's writings. However, DeLillo frames the diary entries in such a way that he fleshes out a complex character, and Oswald comes across as having a depth and humanity notably absent from conventional accounts.

Another way in which DeLillo complicates Oswald's character is through his examination of Oswald's dyslexia, highlighting his failure to dominate future discourses of himself through his Historic Diary. Essentially, Oswald's own attempt to convey his personality and character through his diary is completely overshadowed by the media's portrayal of him as the man who shot Kennedy. Oswald's intelligence and oral prowess are evident; he has a confident command of spoken Russian language after a relatively short period of self-study. Yet

he fails to communicate effectively with the written word and is therefore incapable of constructing a powerful identity through the diary:

Even as he printed the words, he imagined people reading them, people moved by his loneliness and disappointment, even by his wretched spelling, the childish mess of composition. Let them see the struggle and humiliation, the effort he had to exert to write a simple sentence. The pages were crowded, smudged, urgent, a true picture of his state of mind, of his rage and frustration, knowing a thing but not able to record it properly. (211)

Oswald's act of writing is performative; he intends to construct a view of himself that will captivate other people. He is looking for recognition and sympathy; he not only wants to secure a place for himself in history but also overcome his feelings of loneliness. The humiliation brought about by Oswald's struggle to communicate through the written word elicits more than detached pity. Here DeLillo humanizes Oswald, as his personality rises up from the frantically-written pages of a deeply frustrated human being. *Libra* continually forces the reader to move beyond one-dimensional readings of Oswald as a soulless or insane assassin.

In regards to historians' concerns about the diary's lack of consistency, DeLillo writes, "Yes, the diary was self-serving to a degree but still the basic truth, he believed. The panic was real, the voice of disappointment and loss. He knew there were discrepancies, messed-up dates. No one could expect him to get the dates right after all this time, no one cared about the dates, no one is reading this for names and dates and spellings" (212). The "basic truth" is found not in details and facts that have no meaning in and of themselves, but in the way the facts are selectively ordered to convey meaning and emotion. I would also read this passage as DeLillo's asserting that "no one *should* care about names, dates, and spellings," as they are not the sources of meaning. As Hutcheon argues, it is the way in which we tell stories that generates meaning. Hutcheon also stresses the ability of historiographic metafiction to question "*whose* truth gets told?" (123). Oswald's own voice is clearly marginalized by conventional accounts, where he is

analyzed and picked apart as the subject of a scientific study.¹⁹ These texts focus on the inaccurate dates and misspellings as a way to discredit Oswald as an evil, psychotic assassin, rather than portray him as a relatable though tragically flawed human being. *Libra* reveals the power of narrative to create an individual's personality and history and uses this knowledge to put Oswald's character together rather than break it down.

Oswald himself seems to lend credence to Baudrillard's theme of constructing the "real" through his Historic Diary. The diary goes beyond conveying Oswald's thoughts and feelings to actually constructing a specific "self-serving" version of an Oswald worthy of a place in history (212). Baudrillard would see Oswald's failure to create a whole, stable identity as evidence for the lack of an original self. Thomas claims, "The identity [Oswald] seeks to create, however, is one that is mass produced by media outlets such as Time. Oswald's final, real identity would thus be transmitted everywhere at once, so that the authentic Oswald would be the media-created Oswald" (114). This echoes Baudrillard's belief that the simulation is the only form of the real, and that works like *Libra* are merely creating additional simulations or copies of copies from which no original can be derived. Whereas Baudrillard maintains that DeLillo's Oswald and *Libra* are mere simulations, I would argue that DeLillo's portrayal of Oswald as a complex human being is both more real and more meaningful. While the countless interpretations and revisions of historical events make it increasingly harder to uncover the true Oswald, I believe that some of these repetitions are more useful than others. Novels like *Libra* politicize previously muted figures and allow the reader to explore the idealism and political thought of a character like Oswald.

¹⁹ See *Oswald's Game* by Jean Davison, who subscribes to the Warren Commission's report that Oswald acted alone but portrays him as a psychologically unstable.

Ironically, Oswald's inability to express himself through the written word is one of the main ways in which DeLillo enables the reader to relate to Oswald. One of his main motives for writing the diary is that "he wanted to explain himself to posterity. People would read these words someday and understand the fears and aspirations of a man who only wanted to see for myself what socialism was like" (211). Oswald has a strong desire for recognition from other people as he moves along in his life as well as in the future. He wants a place in history, and in order to validate himself as a human being—and to validate his ultimately disappointing experiences in Russia—he attempts to consciously construct his "self" through his diary. Here DeLillo breaks the novel's third-person point of view with the word "myself". Oswald's voice seeps through into the narrator's, blurring the line between the two. In this way the character of Oswald seems to move beyond the fictional confines of the novel into the "real." This is not the first occurrence of DeLillo's conflating the voice of the narrator and that of Oswald. Earlier in the novel, Oswald visits David Ferrie, a pilot who at one point belonged to the same Civil Air Patrol squadron as he did. Their entire conversation follows the third-person point of view of an omniscient narrator but for one instance where, in between Ferrie's quoted dialogue, DeLillo inserts the phrase, "He forgets I'm here" (45). This sentence appears to stem from Oswald's point of view but is not framed by quotation marks. The reader is jarred by a sudden break in form and does not quite know where to place the ownership of this sentence; it floats uncomfortably in between Oswald and the narrator. Here the reader, previously identifying with the narrator, is placed directly in Oswald's shoes and forced to connect with him. This submersion of the reader into Oswald's inner thoughts paves the way for a deeper understanding of the troubled man as the novel progresses, something that many historians have neither the ability nor the intention to do.

One example of such a historian is Epstein, as his book *Legend* is most concerned with defining Oswald as conspirator and marginalizing his voice. Oswald's life becomes a "secret world" as the events of his life are all interpreted within the frame of a larger conspiracy. This leaves little room for Oswald the human being. As previously quoted, Oswald once wrote, "Happiness is not based on oneself, it does not consist of a small home, of taking and getting. . . . Happiness is taking part in the struggle, where there is no borderline between one's own personal world and the world in general" (1). Whereas DeLillo chooses to highlight and set apart this insight of the personal as political, Epstein's book glosses over this revelation. In *Legend*, the end of this quotation marks the end of the paragraph, and the next paragraph describes Marina's first haircut in the United States. By framing the quotation in this way, Epstein diminishes its importance to that of other random, trivial facts that are unnecessary in understanding Oswald as a person but are included nevertheless to live up to the text's claims of being comprehensive and all-knowing. Here a lack of meaning is ascribed to Oswald's quotation by the context in which it appears, and Epstein avoids getting too personal in his descriptions of Oswald as a human being.

In *Legend*, Epstein always keeps Oswald at arm's length, allowing the reader to uncover the events of his life from a safe distance and leaving the reader detached and disconnected. Epstein literally removes Oswald one step further by altering one of the few direct sources of Oswald's voice, his Historic Diary. Epstein prefaces his account of the assassin by saying, "Lee Harvey Oswald was an erratic speller. I have, for the convenience of the reader, corrected the spelling and grammatical errors in all direct quotations from material written by Oswald, except as noted." Not only does this arguably objective historical text take the liberty of "correcting" Oswald's "errors," but it also effectively distorts his voice as it comes through in the text. It is not merely that certain words are changed or reordered, but the very effect of the quotations as a

whole is drastically different compared to the source material. *Legend*, while presenting itself as “objective truth,” similarly falls into the category of simulation for Baudrillard. In this case I would be inclined to agree because *Legend* casts Oswald as a one-dimensional player in an overriding conspiracy.

Due to the multiple and often contradictory data surrounding Oswald’s life, *Legend* is forced to extrapolate as to certain facts and events. The way in which Epstein chooses to interpret this data highlights the power of narrative, regardless of genre, to literally rewrite a person’s life. For example, Epstein analyzes a statement that Oswald wrote in preparation of questions he would be asked upon his return to the States. He specifically comments on Oswald’s writing style, which was often times sloppy and lacking in grammar, which most historians attribute to his dyslexia. Epstein declares, “The way that the word are phonetically scribbled down without regard for spelling suggests that [Oswald] was using words that were unfamiliar to him and hearing them rather than copying them from a book or prepared text” (154). Epstein claims that the evidence points to Oswald’s writing under the influence of another person, literally taking away Oswald’s agency and voice. Rather than attribute the misspellings to Oswald’s dyslexia, Epstein chooses to believe that Oswald was in fact a puppet under the control of Soviet forces. Regardless of whether or not Oswald was dyslexic, he was a complex human being who chose to travel to Russia in pursuit of his political beliefs and campaign in the United States to support Cuban revolutionaries. One could argue that it would be suspicious if the diary had *not* contained any mistakes. Epstein makes excuses for revising the diary’s spelling errors—“for the convenience of the reader”—giving him a license to manipulate the diary and also the reader’s interpretation of it. The effect is his discrediting the diary and, by extension, Oswald for having the audacity to pass it off as his own writing. *Legend* omits the

possibility that Oswald had dyslexia and that it affected his ability to write the Historic Diary, let alone any chance that he was politically conscious. For Epstein, whether or not Oswald had dyslexia is irrelevant to *Legend's* discussion of Oswald as conspirator or assassin.

Epstein completely changes the stakes of reading the Historic Diary when he claims that it was fabricated.²⁰ *Legend* cites the misdating of events, along with a handwriting analysis suggesting the diary was written a year after the events described, as evidence that the diary was not written by Oswald. Epstein argues, “Such anachronisms strongly suggest that the entire diary was prepared . . . not for propaganda purposes, but to provide Oswald with a consistent cover story accounting for his decision to leave the USSR” (110). Preoccupied with resolving discrepancies between conflicting data, Epstein is only able to make sense of inconsistent facts by declaring they are not facts at all. This approach has the effect of silencing Oswald; the less his voice comes through the text to the reader, the easier it is to view him as either a cold, calculating assassin or a dupe used by the Soviet government. The liberties that *Legend* is able to take in recounting Oswald’s life are astonishing considering its classification as nonfiction. Epstein is able to extrapolate in developing his conspiracy theory, which frames Oswald’s overall characterization. Furthermore, when faced with hospital records contradicting what is written in the diary, Epstein posits that Oswald’s suicide attempt never even happened.²¹ Whether or not Oswald attempted suicide has a huge impact on his development as a person. Furthermore, this perpetuates the reader’s distrust of Oswald—for lying about such a serious matter as suicide—and better enables Epstein to cast him as conspirator.

²⁰ See *Case Closed: Lee Harvey Oswald and the Assassination of JFK* by Gerald Posner. Posner preserves the diary as originally written and cites the Warren Commission and the House Select Committee as evidence that the diary was written by Oswald.

⁶ Davis views the suicide as a willful manipulation on Oswald’s part in order to avoid being sent out of Russia. Posner neglects to comment on whether or not the suicide attempt was genuine. Norman Mailer, in *Oswald’s Tale: An American Mystery*, concedes that Oswald may not have fully intended to commit suicide, but denies it was a part of any conspiracy plan.

The most glaring example of the difference between Epstein's and DeLillo's depictions of Oswald is their treatment of his attempted suicide as recounted in the Historic Diary. In *Libra*, DeLillo highlights certain sentences or phrases by setting them apart from the text of the novel. DeLillo sets up the diary entry through the fictional Oswald's dejection upon being denied a new visa. All of his lofty plans and desperate entreaties to the Soviet officials had come to naught. "It was this blankness that caused his terror," DeLillo writes. "No one could distinguish him from anyone else" (151). The diary excerpt follows:

I am shocked!! My dreams!

The next paragraph describes Oswald's bitterness and internal struggle.

7:00 p.m. I decide to end it. Soak rist in cold water to numb the pain. (151)

DeLillo further develops the scene with Oswald's selecting a blade and listening to the sound of water running. A television advertisement flickers in the background. The section continues in this vein, with sections of the diary being interspersed as the events progress:

*My fondes dreams are shattered
Then slash my left wrist
somewhere, a violin plays, as I watch my life whirl away.
I think to myself, "How easy to die
and "A sweet death, (to violins) (152-53)*

DeLillo concludes the section by illustrating Oswald's consciousness slipping away, "Felt a sleepiness. . . . Felt like a child. . . . Felt time close down. Felt something mocking in the air as he slipped off the edge of the only known surface we can speak of, as ordinary men, bleeding, in warm water" (153). Here Oswald's utter despair comes through to the reader. His misspelling of "wrist" could suggest his preoccupation with his decision to commit suicide; he is wrapped up in his thoughts and is incapable of accurately expressing his emotions through words. On the contrary, I would argue that his emotions do come through in these errors and that his dyslexia is

a central part of his personality.²² His inability to finish the word “fondest” could reflect his feelings of unfinished business in Russia or his hurry to “end it.” On the other hand, DeLillo slows down and elongates the effect of the Diary by interspersing it with his own fiction and developing the context of the novel (and therefore Oswald as a character) after each excerpt. Oswald’s “sweet death, (to violins)” exudes maudlin sentimentality and reflects his desire for a type of pathetic fallacy—in his eyes, someone “somewhere” knows about his life and reacts with a musical compliment to his sad state of affairs. As DeLillo explains, Oswald longs for recognition from the larger public as an individual, as his experience in Russia has thus far been characterized by his inability to make others “distinguish him from anyone else.” This passage harkens back to Coover’s treatment of newspaper and magazine articles in that DeLillo also manipulates the form (but not content) of the source material in such a way that the larger text of *Libra* effectively frames Oswald’s Historic Diary. The two texts seem to merge and flow together aside from the physical break in paragraph and line spacing, appearing to naturally enhance Oswald’s character as it comes across in the original source text. Here DeLillo presents a multi-faceted characterization of Oswald, which forces the reader to think critically about his motivations. DeLillo makes it impossible for the reader to passively accept a one-dimensional reading of Oswald as either psychotic or masterfully manipulative.

As opposed to DeLillo’s fictional account, which utilizes the Historic Diary in a more authentic way, Epstein’s grammatically revised version is as follows: “I am shocked. . . . My fondest dreams are shattered. . . . 7 p.m. I decide to end it. Soak wrists in cold water to numb the pain. Then slash my left wrist. . . . Somewhere, a violin plays, as I watch my life whirl away. I think to myself ‘how easy to die’ and ‘a sweet death’ (to violins)” (106). This rendition is clear,

²² See Mailer’s *Oswald’s Tale*, which argues that showing Oswald “constantly in the toils of his dyslexia is to do no more than repeat society’s low estimate of him, whereas to correct his spelling and punctuation brings us closer to his psychological reality” (ii).

concise and neat. It is matter-of-fact. There is a loss of the emotion, the inner struggle, and the pain evident in DeLillo's rendition. It is certainly more detached, as Epstein has altered the source material, thereby removing Oswald one step further away from the reader. Whereas in DeLillo's version Oswald's voice appears true and genuine, Epstein's version gives the impression of being read by an actor. There is a sense of pretending, of inauthenticity. After juxtaposing these two radically different treatments of the same source material, the reader gets the feeling that he or she is reading the words of two completely different people. DeLillo more thoroughly explores Oswald's personality and motivations, while Epstein's treatment of each event in Oswald's life is carefully constructed to support his conspiracy theory. Parrish maintains that DeLillo "suggests that history in effect invents the historian. The history one tells is always a form of self-invention. Thus, concealing this relationship from one's narrative perspective is what makes one's historical narrative suspect" (4). Oswald's recognition of the act of writing his diary makes the reader more inclined to question and analyze the text, thereby opening it up to multiple readings that when taken together can offer more than one totalizing account. On the other hand, conventions of historical writing require the author to remove himself or herself from the work in an attempt to preserve a sense of authoritative objectivity, preventing the detached reader from forming his or her own interpretations.

Libra highlights the way in which Oswald is reconstructed by the media to serve various agendas. Ferrie expresses his concerns to a fellow conspirator, private investigator Guy Banister, asking "What if Oswald doesn't cooperate?" Banister responds, "We create our own Oswald. A second, a third, a fourth" (354). The ease with which characters like Banister and former Central Intelligence Agent Win Everett create versions of Oswald sharply contrasts Oswald's own struggle to write his *Historic Diary*. Years later, Nicholas Branch is hired by the CIA to write a

secret history of the assassination. His investigation is a never-ending stream of data, and he reviews over 125,000 pages of FBI documents. DeLillo comments, “The past is changing as he writes” (201). This raises the issue of how one is supposed to synthesize an outrageous number of sources surrounding a single event. Forming one linear narrative requires conscious selection of certain data, but that automatically results in a subjective text. On the other hand, to attempt to include all the data would likewise result in a failure of sorts in that it would be just as incoherent and lacking in structure as the mass of data itself. Branch is overwhelmed by the conflicting reports. DeLillo writes, “How can Branch forget the contradictions and discrepancies? These are the soul of the wayward tale. . . . The Oswald shadings, the multiple images, the split perceptions—eye color, weapons caliber” (300). The only way to resolve the competing images and perceptions of Oswald is to include some and eliminate others. In this case, not even the basic facts can be taken for granted, as blatantly objective pieces of information such as eye color and weapons caliber are not consistent from one source to another. What Branch fails to realize is that these “facts” have no meaning outside of a constructed narrative. He ultimately rejects the only option for producing a singular, linear narrative because it would require the dismissal of certain facts.

While Epstein carefully selects and interprets data to construct a conspiracy theory, DeLillo’s Branch is overwhelmed by the sheer mass of data and concludes that it is impossible to make sense of it all. As a part of his investigation, he is sent photos of a dead goat that has been shot in the head for test purposes. These images speak to him in a way that none of the documents can. DeLillo writes, “They are saying, ‘Look, touch, this is the true nature of the event. Not your beautiful ambiguities, your lives of the major players, your compassions and sadnesses. Not your roomful of theories, your museum of contradictory facts. There are no

contradictions here. Your history is simple” (299-300). Through Branch, DeLillo concludes that truth of violent events does not lie in any one conspiracy theory or compilation of conflicting data. Rather, truth is more closely revealed by a person’s instinctive reaction to violent images and sensations. Branch’s ever-increasing pile of documents only serves to further detach him from and desensitize him to the raw violence of the act, thereby moving him one step further away from the truth. Oswald did not kill President Kennedy because he spent hours analyzing the future of the country and concluded that all data pointed to assassination as the answer. His motive lies in his deeply personal beliefs and complex character, issues less thoroughly explored in *Legend* as compared to *Libra*. In *Legend*, almost all the questions surrounding the assassination are answered, and those that are not are just as obsessively footnoted. The text purports to be a definitive source of the truth, yet Epstein’s conscious selection and ordering of facts constructs a singular narrative that is neither comprehensive nor absolute truth. Only when taken in the context of numerous texts with varying viewpoints can *Legend* contribute to uncovering Oswald’s complex humanity and defining, yet contradictory, motivations.

Libra and *Legend* are similar in the fact that they both follow a conspiracy theory. However, while Epstein is more concerned with proving his conspiracy as truth, DeLillo has the freedom provided by fiction to include commentary on the nature of conspiracy theories in general. Parrish explains, “DeLillo concedes the probability of conspiracy theories as a way of imagining a more complete history than conventional narratives with their emphasis on a single thesis can allow” (10). The search for meaning generates the creation of multiple narratives, some arguably more true than others. *Libra*’s Ferrie discusses how conspiracy theories bridge the gap between truth and fiction:

Think of two parallel lines. One is the life of Lee H. Oswald. One is the conspiracy to kill the President. What bridges the space between them? What makes a connection

inevitable? There is a third line. It comes out of dreams, visions, intuitions, prayers, out of the deepest levels of the self. It's not generated by cause and effect like the other two lines. It's a line that cuts across causality, cuts across time. It has no history that we can recognize or understand. But it forces a connection. (339)

Here Ferrie highlights the difference between objective facts, which hold no inherent meaning, and the innately subjective narratives used to make sense of those facts. The truth of history is not linear, like the relationship between cause and effect, and it exists outside of time. It is shaped by unconscious dreams and intuitions, not obsessive analysis of data. This quotation also serves as a description for the novel itself. Writing a novel as fiction gives DeLillo the license to bridge the gap between truth and conspiracy. Connection between Lee Harvey Oswald, the conspiratorial assassin of *Legend*, and Lee Oswald, the father and idealistic activist, is made possible by novels like *Libra*. Through techniques of form, DeLillo fosters a personal, human connection between the reader and the character of Oswald, preventing the reader from demonizing him in the way that many historical texts seem to do.

While DeLillo was able to take some liberties in writing a fiction novel, he certainly must have had to sift through a substantial amount of these documents, and *Libra* reflects thorough research. On one hand, DeLillo mimics the surplus of data that any biographer or historian is met with and shows how impossible it is to sift through and combine these sources in a singular cohesive account. He embraces the barrage of information and accepts it as a part of the phenomena surrounding pivotal historical events. He also shows that even if it is possible to synthesize these pieces of the puzzle into one linear narrative, it would be neither completely accurate nor complete. DeLillo accepts the paradox he presents to the reader, choosing instead to develop Oswald's character as someone that people can relate to and therefore learn something about Oswald or even themselves. Yet DeLillo does not agree with Branch that it is impossible to know anything of the truth as a result of this, and according to Parrish, *Libra*

succeeds where texts like *Legend* fail: “*Libra*, however, is perhaps most powerful of those representations—not for being final, but for inserting itself into the history that made it and then claiming that history as its own invention. . . . In writing a novel about this seemingly never-ending historical moment, DeLillo takes possession of the historical narrative that escaped Oswald’s control” (10). DeLillo’s humanization of Oswald subverts the currently dominant image of the crazy assassin, perpetuated through the media and historical texts such as *Legend*. In this sense, DeLillo succeeds where neither Oswald nor Epstein can. Through the manipulation of form, DeLillo forces the reader to relate to Oswald on a personal level. While at first this is jarring and somewhat disturbing, by the end of the novel the reader gains an understanding of Oswald as a multifaceted, albeit flawed, human being.

At the end of the novel, Marguerite Oswald pleads to the judge to listen to her entreaties about her recently murdered son. Once again, DeLillo changes the point of view of the paragraphs back and forth from a third person narrator describing Oswald’s burial to Marguerite’s appeal to the judge in first person:

Marguerite Oswald stood outside the chapel. . . . Somebody canceled the service. Somebody ordered the body removed from the chapel. Because the chapel was empty. The body was not there.

They called many ministers, Lutheran men of God, but no one wanted to pray over *Lee Harvey Oswald*. . . . They were in such a hurry to bury Lee Harvey Oswald they forgot to notify the men who carry the coffin to the graveside, so news reporters teamed up to move the body. I have many stories, your honor. I have stories I am sure you do not know. I am the mother in the case. (448-49)

This passage shows how people attempt to construct themselves through narrative; just like her son, Marguerite fails to create a story of Oswald’s life capable of overcoming those produced by contemporary mass media. Marguerite appropriately asks, “Who arranged the life of Lee Harvey Oswald?” (455). This idea of the arranging of facts and data into a coherent order reflects the way in which all texts operate. Reporters at the time wrote articles about Oswald the assassin.

Epstein arranges Oswald's life in a certain way in order to fit it onto his conspiracy theory. In *Libra*, Everett both creates and arranges evidence of a particular version of Oswald. Branch is left picking up the pieces and despairs at the impossibility of arranging all of the facts into one comprehensive story. Oswald himself felt that his Historic Diary "validated the experience, as the writing of any history brings a persuasion and form to events" (211). *Libra's* plot is quite plausible, and *Legend* is determined to persuade the reader that there was a conspiracy behind President Kennedy's assassination. Marguerite is also trying to persuade the judge in her entreaties, "Listen to me. . . . I have to tell a story. . . . I am reciting a life and I need time" (455). Whereas the judge is looking for a simple, clear-cut, definitive account of the events, Marguerite explains that those facts in and of themselves are not indicative of Oswald's life as a whole; meaning is derived only through her narrativization of those facts.

DeLillo's decision to end the novel with Marguerite is powerful in that he not only gives her not only a voice, but also the *final* voice on the matter. Outside of the novel, contemporary mass media accounts of Oswald's life continue to subvert Oswald's attempts at self-construction; years after the assassination of the president, the Zapruder film—as well as television footage of Oswald's death at the hands of Jack Ruby—is obsessively replayed and re-edited. Oswald's own attempt to construct his identity through the Historic Diary is ultimately overshadowed by the mass media's representations and, in *Libra*, by conspiracy authors such as Everett and Banister. But *Libra's* Marguerite insists, "The point is what about the boy in the casket?" (451). Here DeLillo reveals the effects of texts like Epstein's: preoccupied with the belief that socialism is inherently evil and a threat to the American capitalism, these texts erase the humanity of Oswald and disallow for political thinking on his part as well as the reader's. DeLillo addresses the power of narrative form to continually revise history and the subject in such a way that

humanizes Oswald and gives him a voice absent from conventional texts. *Libra* is another example of postmodern fiction that offers different ways for readers to relate to previously demonized human beings beyond polarizing accounts provided by hegemonic narratives.

Works of historiographic metafiction rewrite history in such a way that does not simply repeat the demonizing treatment of the Rosenbergs and Oswald by the news media and historical texts. I disagree with critics who argue that these novels only further mistreat and abuse historical figures for cheap laughs and entertainment. I have shown that authors like Coover and DeLillo are in fact holding up a mirror to American society, forcing the reader to confront these problems as they move through the novels. *The Public Burning* mimics the absurd treatment of the Rosenbergs by the mass media, using parody to force the reader the point of disgust. Amusement turns to discomfort as Coover highlights the stark contrast of the execution and Ethel's operatic plea for justice, and the reader realizes the appalling way in which the mass media tends to make spectacles out of serious events. Beyond the novel, readers take away the critical eye they have developed for reading conventional texts. The next time readers pick up a copy of *Time*, they will notice whose point of view dominates the article, what facts may have been omitted, whose voices are left out. Despite attempts by news sources to mask the gaps in their stories, which they have consciously filled with carefully chosen language in order to create a certain impression, readers will be able to detect how the text attempts to mask its own subjectivity and bias. This type of critical engagement with hegemonic narratives, enabled by novels like *The Public Burning* and *Libra*, will prevent the reader from accepting the texts' perpetuation of those narratives.

Coover and DeLillo force us to recognize the limits of both narrative form and historical knowledge. Still, I argue that works of historiographic metafiction provide a view of history that

is both true and real in ways that other conventional historical texts cannot offer. They present more meaningful narratives by adding layers of nuance and interwoven histories left out of conventional historical accounts. *The Public Burning* and *Libra* are just two examples of this genre that do not simply repeat the demonizing treatment of figures like the Rosenbergs and Oswald by the news media and historical texts. They disrupt master narratives and subvert conventional sources of history such as news magazines and historical biographies. The reader is forced to confront the appalling way in which the mass media tends to make spectacles out of serious events. These novels also expose the dangers of narrow-minded nationalism, which serves to distort the meaning of events and to prevent critique of the system. The power of novels like *The Public Burning* and *Libra* lies in their ability to critically engage with hegemonic narratives and to create new ways of viewing the past and the meaning it holds for the present.

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